

**ORGANIZING
PARENT NETWORKS**

V. ORGANIZING PARENT NETWORKS

A. GETTING STARTED

It takes special effort to encourage people to come to their first meeting. Getting involved in difficult discussions on school and education is not a common thing for everyone.



When Latino parents take their children to school, they often believe the system will assign the children to schools and educate them, without the need for any parental involvement. Few school systems ask parents to get involved with their child's education, unless their child gets in trouble.

If parents are asked to get involved, they may not know or understand enough about what is being taught. Therefore, parents cannot be sure if their children are being taught properly. Visiting a school does not always help. Many Latino parents tell us that this is an experience in being burdened and intimidated.

Clearly, many barriers exist to parents getting involved in meetings and school issues. Discuss these with the parents--perhaps by asking them the three most pressing issues that kept them from getting involved. **Examples of issues that can inhibit parent involvement are listed in EXHIBIT #1.**

EXHIBIT #1: THINGS THAT CAN INHIBIT PARENT INVOLVEMENT

- long distance to and from school
- different levels of education
- need to work one job and possibly two
- unfamiliarity with school issues, processes
- deference to authority of educators
- disinterest in parent and student problems by school system, teachers
- intimidation of parents by system
- a closed educational system that makes no room for parents
- language barrier
- differing cultural attitudes, experiences of parents
- Can you think of some others? _____

B. WORKING WITH OTHER INSTITUTIONS

Overcoming these barriers to parent involvement can be quite hard. Parents might not want or find it convenient to go to the schools for meetings.

You will need to work with other institutions to offer meeting sites. Community agencies, churches, and other institutions serving Latinos are examples of groups that might be helpful and from which your first recruitment efforts can be carried out. **A list of places and institutions useful for meeting and recruiting parents is included as EXHIBIT #2.**



EXHIBIT #2: PLACES WHERE YOU CAN RECRUIT PARENTS

- community agencies
- churches
- after-school programs
- informal gatherings of parents (picking up kids after school) in schools
- programs teaching English as a Second Language
- job training programs
- youth groups
- youth recreation programs
- sports clubs

One way to attract parents is to get them involved in issues that matter the most to them right away. It should be something that will spark their interest, or get them concerned enough to become more involved. **(Remember, parents are concerned about their children first and foremost.)**

One possibility is for you, the group facilitator, to become involved in school advisory councils, and to encourage parents to join you at those meetings so they can see what is and what is not being done. **A list of some other possibilities is included as EXHIBIT #3.**

**EXHIBIT #3:
PARENT GROUPS CAN TAKE MANY FORMS**

- parent-teacher organizations and associations--groups of parents and teachers working with the school administration on projects that support the current work of the school.
- school advisory councils and school councils--groups of parents, teachers, and administrators set up by the school. They may give advice to the school officials on specific programs, or they may have the power to make decisions about running the school.
- school foundations--groups of parents who raise money for the school, especially for new equipment or building maintenance.
- school boards--each school or school district has an elected board that makes decisions. If you feel that your community is not represented on the board, a group of parents working together may be able to help one or more of their members get elected.
- parent advocacy groups--groups of parents organizing to change certain policies of the schools or improve the school overall. Advocacy groups do not have to have the approval of the school to operate.

A working relationship should be established with the schools. This will make it easier to give information about school issues to the parents.

Hopefully, your efforts with different community organizations and institutions will quickly result in a group of interested parents. A list of institutions which might offer you places where you can have your meetings is included in EXHIBIT #4.

**EXHIBIT #4:
PLACES TO HAVE MEETINGS**

- community agencies
- after-school programs
- churches
- schools
- any place with large meeting rooms
- non-institutional settings, such as private homes, apartments (if the group is not too large)

Once parents start to volunteer to attend meetings, you should get their names, addresses, and phone numbers.

If you and the parents have the time, you should get more information from them, such as the best time and date that they can attend meetings.

A sample form showing what information might be best to gather is included in the appendix at the back of this manual in **WORKSHEET #3: PARENT INVOLVEMENT NEEDS ASSESSMENT**.

With luck and hard work, you will develop a core group of active parents. You can then begin to work with them to help solve some serious problems they have identified in your community.