

Introduction:

Host:

Welcome to this podcast hosted by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA). We are here with Maha Abdelkader, an Education Program Specialist from OELA. Joining Maha for the discussion on supporting English learners, their families and communities during distance learning are Gabriela Uro from Council of Great City Schools and Shelly Spiegel-Coleman from Californians Together.

Family and community engagement are essential components to student success. With COVID-19 related school closures and the transition to distance learning, many schools are working to sustain engagement with English learner or EL families and communities, and to build the capacity of schools and communities to foster two-way communication. Our guests will share best practices, recommendations, and examples for continuous EL family and community engagement activities during remote learning.

Let's get the conversation started....

Maha:

I'll turn it over to our panelists. Let's hear from our guest speakers. We know that the processes and activities for engaging the families of English learners should be culturally responsive. Our first question is for Ms. Gabriela Uro from the Council of Great City Schools. Please share some examples of how your network of schools is engaging families in culturally responsive ways.

Gabriela:

Sure. Thank you so much. Good afternoon everybody. First of all I want to thank you for the invitation to participate in this webinar on a very a very important topic. As I think of the efforts under way in many of the school districts we represent at the council, the examples that I will share, Maha, center around two important points. One is that students' success is the desired outcome of family engagement. And two, is that family engagement benefits both, the schools as well as the students. These two points are true under normal school operations when communicating with families is important to engage them as partners and to make them understand how to support their children for school success. But during the pandemic, during the COVID pandemic the significance of these two points has been magnified because of the very access to education now hinges upon robust family engagement. With a flip of a switch we saw that families are being asked to operate devices, follow directions to access instructional learning resources for their children, and even become quasi-teachers in managing our children's learning. During the unprecedented closures of schools, during this health emergency, communicating in culturally respectful ways and in language that our EL families understand has been vital to effectively provide information on all sorts of matters. Our districts right out of the door had to provide information about meal distribution, distribution of devices for learning or learning packets in the case of devices not being able to be provided, sources of support related to housing insecurity, income insecurity and other needs. In addition to learning how to access platforms. So there as an enormity of information that had to be provided to our EL families.

So what we had learned from our council member districts as they have done this work are some important lessons on how they ensured that communicating with EL families was culturally and linguistically responsive. And I'll mention four. One, is know your EL community. For districts that already had a robust family engagement, maybe along the lines of following some of the principles that Supreet outlined in the framework, it might have been relatively easy endeavor to pivot and really provide more information to families and continue that two-way communication. But for those who are still working on building more robust communication with EL families, I think the school closures, while they presented an additional challenge, they afforded new opportunities and I'm glad to hear that districts are stepping up to actually meet the demand with new opportunities. So that we know for many of our member districts they redeployed their staff, general education staff, but also their ELL educators in particular and that might include EL teachers, coaches, instructional assistants, bilingual family liaisons, etc. to conduct check in calls with English learner students and their families, to nurture the existing relationships that already were there, but also to determine what were the needs of families, so that the districts can in turn provide the type of supports that are needed.

Number two, the communication has to be strategic and by strategic we mean armed with the knowledge of your EL community. Districts and schools can curate the information and make it focused and relevant to the needs of English learners and their families. They don't need the kitchen sink of information. They don't need to know now what is going to be relevant a month further down the road. They need to know information that is succinct and relevant for the moment, the next week or two, so they know what to do to support their students. But it also needs to be succinct not only in terms of let's translate a long email, right, but rather, let's create messaging that is clear and that provides parents instructions and information that is important. It might mean having well-designed graphics or videos, many of our districts have relied on using videos, or just simply providing straight forward instructions, not the entire manual on the devices they might be getting. It also has to be provided in a timely manner, as I mentioned, so in anticipating what might be some questions or responding to the questions that might come up, the timeliness can be very important. A couple of examples, and I know that staff will provide links to those if you wish to see them, include for example Palm Beach County in Florida developed videos in four to five different languages that helped parents understand how to access, how to turn on, you know how to access, once they turn on the device, how to access the platform with the learning resources for their students. Similar to this, Minneapolis, Anchorage in Alaska, Jefferson County also provided this type of videos. We also had districts that provided parents with sample schedules. As a parent, we might not know how to even schedule the learning for our students because we are not teachers, and so Fresno created a number of sample schedules for parents, especially for those who might have more than one child at different grade levels. How they can create a calendar and a schedule for the day's activity to make sure their students were engaged, but they also had the required breaks. Another example in this case was Guilford County in North Carolina they established hotlines that operated between 7AM and 7PM because they were familiar with what could be some of the working schedules of EL

families. These hotlines operated in nine different languages. They had interpreters in these nine different languages- they could have three-way phone call conversations to support parents.

The third set of examples or mentions that I want to focus on here is the collaboration among multiple offices. We know there is a lot of information that needs to be communicated, but we worry that when it comes to EL families having different communications that come from varied sources within the school district can be very confusing. It might also even be repetitive, right? Or it can actually be contradictory, which we really don't wanna do. So, there is a need to have collaboration and coordination of the messaging so it's consistent and if possible, to have a predictable set of communications. Now this collaboration with, for example the EL office that tends to know the EL community the best, brings the strengths of the EL office to work with other departments in the district to communicate what needs to be provided to EL families so they know how to engage under a hybrid situation or even if we have to go back to distance learning to know how they can do that and support their children. The collaboration finally allows for translation and interpretation to be done in a timely manner. If the offices that are responsible for doing translation and interpretation are only given one day notice it's gonna go out, it's problematic. It's better to create a cadence in a streamlined manner in which those responsible for interpretations and translations will have the adequate time to actually carry out that work, so when the message goes out to all the community it also goes out to the ELL families.

And finally, an asset-based approach is very important for engaging in this. Districts and schools need to recognize the assets their ELL families bring. And these are assets our districts have built on in a few ways. Just two examples. One is for example, understanding the organizational aspects or assets of our English learner communities. And these are comprised by various groups and some might rely on their community-based organizations, some might look up to leaders in their faith based organizations, and these are important partners for school districts and schools. If there is a need to communicate something to the EL families of a given community, districts and schools might want to reach out to these faith-based organizations and community-based organizations to help amplify the message, but also to allay any of the fears that parents might have or any questions about, well, I don't know about having some people come to my house to give me Internet, right? So, those are the type of things that parents might be worried about and having partners helps consistent messaging about even what's going on with the district.

The final thing is linguistic assets. As we ask more of our parents and families to do for our learners, we need to recognize that learning takes place in any number of languages. In school districts where they are not using the native language as the medium of instruction, there is an asset that we need to recognize that families bring. They speak other languages at home and learning can take place in those languages. So, for example Boston, what they did is they created online access to six or seven languages, and these are books that are available, downloadable. Some of them are read-alouds in various languages that are the top languages of their ELL

families. This allowed and empowered families to jump right into the literacy development with their native language, which helps sustain them in their work throughout the school.

Those are just some of the examples and I will be happy to clarify them in further discussion.

Maha:

Thank you. You raised some very important points. When instruction shifts to remote format and home environment becomes part of the learning environment it's really critical to engage families and EL families in a very proactive and culturally responsive way. Knowing the EL community well is definitely critical in being culturally responsive. Know their needs, know their circumstances, know their assets. Being strategic, and as you mentioned being succinct and curating information so that we are not overwhelming families with too much and that requires follow up and on-going connection and that two-way communication. The point you brought up about the funds of knowledge within the EL community at large is very helpful for schools to be able to tap into the already existing relationships of trust while they are building capacity of their student services team and their staff to connect and engage families.

I'd like to pose the next question to our guest speaker Ms. Shelly Spiegel-Coleman, the strategic advisor from Californians Together. What expectations are being set for parents as instruction shifts to remote format?

Shelly:

Teacher is not one that we should expect of our parents, especially during remote learning. Parents across our state struggle with keeping up with keeping up with the assignments, often having to teach the content using multiple apps and programs with instructions almost totally in English. When over 1400 parents Spanish-speaking parents in California were surveyed by P-K, the Parent Institute for Quality Education, 93% indicated that directions were sent home by teachers, but one third of them did not understand the directions. In addition 45% of these parents said that their students were not getting the help they needed, and lastly, which was very important was that a third of the parents did not have an email address, informing us about how and which ways might be most effective to communicate. For us it is important to hear the voices of our parents and that we assist them to feel confident to help and support their children. The call for a competent communication plan with multilingual capabilities is very important. Several apps provide reciprocal translations for parents and teachers. The app allows teachers to text in English and the app translates to designated language of a parent. The parent can respond in their home language and then it translated back into English for the teacher. This helps to reduce the incredible array and time needed of our parents to feel comfortable with the multiple apps and the programs available to deliver distance learning. All teachers at a given district and school should be using the same apps to minimize the learning curve for parents with multiple school-aged children. We heard from many parents that having two or three children and each school, or teacher, using different apps and different programs was overwhelming. To assist parents with the apps, some teachers and educators, as you heard from Gabriela, have introduced one app at a

time. With directions and tutorials sent via Facebook with directions spoke in a language of the parents, and those short videos were posted on the school websites. As an additional part of the communications system some teachers have established check in times, or office hours, for parents and students to get additional help with technology issues, assignments, or just sharing some of the physical needs of the family. One good byproduct of being at home with parents is that dual language English learners have the opportunity of building and sustaining home language proficiency while conversing with their parents about what they are learning. Districts and schools who have been sending home directions and assignments in a language of the parents are honoring the home language and supporting the development of bilingualism and biliteracy. In California districts and schools are required to have an English learner advisory committee at the district level and at the school site level and that they must meet several times a year.

During school closure many districts pivoted to virtual meetings and in many instances found increased attendance. Parents did not have to leave their homes, worry about childcare, and the meetings were scheduled at time parents were available. Making use of translation capabilities in Zoom allowed for simultaneous translation in multiple languages. Districts assigned a translator for each language and parents could participate without any language barriers. This is where the parent leaders gave voice to the issues that needed to be addressed during these three months of school closure. Digital Zoom meetings with translation capabilities also allowed districts to target groups of parents with common needs, such as Glendale School District in Southern California. They conducted specific session for newcomer parents with over one hundred parents attending. Parents new to the schools and district got the information they needed and the district was able to determine the needs of families and students. Parents learned that they were not alone and were a part of a larger community of concerned and supportive parents. Besides the communication plan attending to social-emotional needs of students, parents and teachers were critical during these last three months.

Essential to the first phase of distance learning was maintaining relationships and connections developed before school closures. Many teachers took time not only to deliver grade-level content instruction, but to check on how their students were doing at home and to see what was needed. A middle school teacher who was worried about her student who was not attending any of the online sessions decided to go to their home and speak to the parents and students through the window. What she learned upon the home visit is that there were seven people living in a one-room trailer. She immediately understood that attending online classes and completing assignments was out of reach for her student and their family. Working parents, crowded home, basic needs for safety and food, old and older siblings supervising younger children all took priority. Teachers and school staff reaching out to families and students is critical before making decisions on why some students have a hard time connecting. Additionally the content of lessons can tell the teachers a lot about how their students and families are doing. A high school English language development teacher had the students draw a full-body picture of themselves and then

write on that diagram close to their eyes – what could they see about the effects of the virus, at their heat – how did they feel at this time of school closure, and so on. Then the students asked their parents how they felt and what they saw in their communities. The students made presentations on Zoom to their class and they were posted to share to develop a community sense of concerns, learning, and healing. This assignment brought parent and student voice into the digital classroom. These types of lessons require live instruction and strong class community building.

One of the key equity issues that has arisen from the past three months of distance learning was the variability of in-person instruction with students. Some students received no live instruction, while others received three to four hours a day of direct contact with their teachers. In a recent survey we conducted in California with approximately 600 educators of English learners, 78% of them reported that teachers provided face-to-face instruction for three or less hours a week, with 34% indicating zero to one hour weekly. This is not enough to allow teachers to develop a community and a relationship with their students, to motivate them, to attend and engage in their learning and assignments. One ELD teacher told us that they were only required to teach one hour a week during school closure and only two to three students attended. She was asked to teach summer school and only agreed if she could teach the students live daily. After one week of summer school, 15 to 16 out of the 20 students enrolled are reporting to class every day. Parents and students need regular and routine contact with schools and teachers. Parents play a key role in the education of their children whether in brick and mortar schools or in distance learning, but our expectations and support need to respect the circumstances of the family and provide support and outreach in a language that they understand.

Maha:

Thank you. You brought up a very critical point that once families developed capacity around using specific tools, they will be more confident in supporting their children's learning at home if we are consistent with those tools and resources, instead of having to learn a variety of different technologies and tools. That's especially helpful for parents who have multiple children across the system and in a variety of grades. Of course, it is also important to follow up and make sure that families have not only received resources but are actually able to use them and if not, provide that very specific, individualized support.

As we are wrapping up here, what additional advice do you have for educators, leaders, and coordinators, program directors, as they prepare for the opening of school.

Shelly:

So, we think if distance learning is in some form to continue or a hybrid model is implemented, there needs to be guidelines and standards that teachers will follow. When and how to use digital devices and apps and what percentage of time should be developed by our teachers. In addition, to make families feel comfortable and knowledgeable about the reopening of school, schools should start working early, before school opens, to communicate with students and parents and to

be paid for this time. If health and safety allow, elementary school teachers should make home visits to meet their new students and families, to describe what the school year will be like and how they can work together. Secondary teachers should prioritize communicating with students and families that did not significantly engage with distance learning in the spring, and if visits are not possible, then phone or digital connection should be made. Bilingual personnel should support teachers in their efforts to communicate in the language spoken by the parents. These outreach and engagement efforts should continue throughout the year. Beyond the need of every child to have a digital device and not just every household. It's important to make sure that students have the supplies they need for the assignments to be completed at home – paper, pencils, markers, notebook, etc. Many districts created supply packages that were distributed with food pick-ups and teachers themselves supplied students with materials when they were needed. These are the kinds of things and kind of planning that I think we need to begin right now, when school starts.

Maha:

Thank you. Ms. Uro, how about on your end? What advice to you have for educators, leaders, and directors as they prepare for reopening of schools?

Gabriella:

Thank you! Yes, I agree that many recommendations that Shelly is making make a lot of sense. I do know that from hearing what our school districts are grappling with right now in terms of operations, all this has to be folded into the numerous other operations that are under way. Just like we expected with a flip of a switch for parents to be engaged in the ways that are new to them, teachers are in the same predicament. So, a lot of what's going to be happening before the school opens, is providing teachers with the tools, and then the familiarity with the tools so they can really use these in the case of hybrid learning, or in the case of alternate schedules. How is that going to work. So, all of these considerations have to happen, right? What I would say in terms of some advice that would be important is going back to two-way communication. And I'd like to sort of drill down a little bit more about two-way communication. Two-way communication has to be about what is the best way to one: get the message out to our families, right? We can't just assume that if you send an email blast that everybody, and I think Shelly even mentioned that a lot of our families don't have emails. They are not going to be comfortable going to a website. So, sending an email blast with a link to a website to go to something, sign up, or provide answers to a survey is not going to get to our EL families. So, districts need to be clear about what is the best way to get to our families. It might be a link, an easy link that is sent via text message, to get it that way. It also might mean that you partner with your local media, whether it be PSA announcement on your local TV, radio, or on the mass transit, you know? Other ways of really getting messages out. And then there needs to be a real focus on how do you get the message back in, right? One way is how EL families might hear what's going on. A lot of it is also learning how to set the privacy setting, the no comments, etc., to protect anybody using Facebook, and there could be a Facebook page that pushes out information. I know

Richmond Public schools just started a Facebook page in Spanish this year and they sent out tons of information. So, that would be one way to maybe send things out, but then consider how do parents then send information back? Where do they go ask questions? Are they going to feel comfortable texting something, and if they do, then who is going to be on the receiving end? The district has to be ready to receive these messages whether it's a text, whether it's a posting on Facebook, whether its WhatsApp, which is what I use with my group of Spanish-speaking families, and that needs to be determined by the EL community themselves.

The other piece about two-way communication is that something needs to happen with that information. We need to build the trust in our EL community, so if parents do take the time and if they are typically not used to sending messages to the school or the school system and they drum up that courage to do so, the school district and the school need to be responsive, because if not, I'm going to stop sending messages, right? If I raised an issue time again, look I can't meet this time because of work, and I don't get a positive response, I might just stop being engaged. And so schools need to be responsive, and I will give you one example. In the case of Dallas, as they distributed devices, then they had to figure out how to make sure that families had Internet. So they school said we are going to pay for the Internet, we are going to send technicians out to families' homes to sign them up. Well, guess what? The families were not opening the doors and they had to hear back, well no, we are concerned because we don't know who these people are, why are we going to let a stranger into our home? So, then the school said – OK, understood, so then they sent out school staff along with the technicians because they knew that the school staff were individuals families trusted. And now they were like, OK, now I can open my door because I understand, and I trust who you are with and what you are going to be doing in setting up Internet. So, there has to be the two-way communication but with meaningful action on behalf of the EL Families.

Maha:

Thank you! Thank you both for sharing your expertise with us today. I now our audience appreciate the resources that you provide for the EL community.

## **Closing**

Host:

Thank you, Gabriela, Shelly, and Maha for discussing EL family and community engagement during distance learning. The information, examples, and recommendations that shared with us today will certainly help schools and EL communities support English learners during distance learning. You have given us many useful ideas to think about as we continue to serve English learners in classrooms across the country. As this podcast comes to a close, I encourage all of you to visit the NCELA website at [www.ncela.ed.gov](http://www.ncela.ed.gov) and check out the many educator resources available there.