

Beacon Hill International Elementary Blooms All Year with Parent Partnership & Pride

Spotlight on School's Family Engagement Model

"It is (the school's) cultural norm that parents are invited and expected to get involved. We value the gifts of everyone here. We ask parents what can you do and what can you do well?" Dr. Susie Murphy, Principal

(Photo: Bi-lingual Instructional Assistant, Chilo Granizo, Dr. Susie Murphy, Principal, and ELL teacher Masako Davison)



The successful School-Family Partnerships model at Beacon Hill International School in Seattle is a remarkable story beginning 12 years ago with the dream of Chilo Granizo, a single parent from Nicaragua whose children attended the school. This dream transformed the school.

Granizo dreamed of involving Latino parents into the Beacon Hill school community, she wanted to make them feel an important part of the school. Her personal story impacted her enthusiasm for this dream. When she immigrated from Nicaragua, she brought the belief that in this country she could make hers and her children's dreams a reality by getting a good education: "school is the place that offers opportunities. Everything is possible in school," she says.

When Dr. Susie Murphy arrived nine years ago as principal, Granizo approached her with her convincing enthusiasm to cultivate this dream. Agreeing with Granizo's vision, Dr. Murphy worked with district family engagement administrators and secured technical assistance and a small School-Family Partnerships grant. She then met with Latino parents to present the academic data on Latino children in public schools. Parents were shocked. Their children were at the lower end of the academic scale.

Listening to Parents

Dr. Murphy and Granizo, along with ELL teacher Masako Davison, dove in to implement their vision of integrating diverse parents into the school. Since then, the trio has devoted long hours to building up a school culture where parents play an important role in school life.

They asked parents what they needed to best participate in the school and parents responded: "training." Undaunted, Murphy, Granizo and Davison brought in a parent

leadership training program and guided the formation of a Latino PTA Committee. This on-going group has changed the school culture through the years as they have taken on responsibilities such as fund-raising with a unique festival called “El Día del Niño” (The Day of the Child).

They listened to parents’ concerns about student academic progress and created a before-school program for families to develop English and Spanish language skills. For several years now, moms and dads have attended the program faithfully as they have been learning alongside their children and helping them read in Spanish. The program is so popular that there are 50 – 60 families spread into three different classrooms in the mornings. Community volunteers, including staff spouses and even the Principal’s mother and husband, have helped with tutoring or other activities and contributed to making this program a success.

"There is a richness of diversity that lies at the core of the Beacon Hill family. PTA meetings are simultaneously translated into Chinese and Spanish. Multiple generations live under the same roof. Grandfathers walk hand in hand with their grandchildren to school. Dragons dance through the halls on Chinese New Year bringing luck and prosperity. Newsletters and parent notices are translated by a hard working bilingual staff, dedicated to reaching out to all members of our community. Beacon Hill's diversity is not a hurdle; it is the heart of our global family."

- From Beacon Hill web site

The Whole School Staff Embraces Family Involvement

Besides support from the central office, Dr. Murphy, Granizo and Davison stress that weaving teacher involvement and buy-in was crucial to the start and survival of a family partnership plan. The cultural shift took some time, but now the whole school embraces the involvement of parents and sees its importance in impacting student learning.

Murphy explains, “Our staff has both professional commitments -- and personal ones-- to this school. That is one of many things that enable us to be so successful with this. The whole school team is critical to the work needed to support families.”

She adds that parents frequently hear the positive messages from staff of: “You can help in so many important ways. Help your children learn to read and write in their native language. Share your knowledge and wisdom about your native culture. This all increases a child’s world knowledge.”

Davison says, “Each [parent] voice is so important no matter what language they speak.”

There are 14 languages represented in the student body and around 65% of the students qualify for the reduced lunch program. Many families have heart-breaking stories about personal circumstances and tough economic times. Murphy adds, “We want to wrap our arms around families and say you are welcome here and we need you. We want parents to feel that their child can thrive in this school and they have an important role in that success. This makes parents feel good about themselves and feel safe.”

Dr. Murphy suggests that parents help their children by showing them they are also learners and teaching them what they know. She explains: “show them your perseverance. We are a culture of immediate gratification and it is important that children know how to keep trying and keep working on things even when it takes awhile. Parents can teach this.”

When families leave Beacon Hill, the parents bring their knowledge with them to their kids’ middle schools. They’re comfortable speaking up, advocating, and asking questions about their child’s education, says Granizo.

With pride Dr. Murphy says, “Parents used to just drop their kids off and leave. Now a number of them stick around after school starts and talk in the hallways. They feel a part of the school community.”

At the end of this school year, Dr. Murphy and Davison will retire. The energy and enthusiasm they devote to Beacon Hill will be missed and they will miss the staff and families but they are enthusiastic about new leadership coming in who will continue what they started.

First as a volunteer, then an Instructional Aide and now as a teacher, Granizo will continue her important work - and story – giving students, teachers and parents a gift as a role model and a leader.