

HAWTHORNE FAMILY ENGAGEMENT UNIVERSITY

HAWTHORNE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL SEATTLE, WA

At Hawthorne Elementary School, about one third of the students are English Language Learners (ELL) who speak little or no English at home. Many of their parents are unemployed due to lack of English-speaking skills, or are employed in very low-paying jobs. Teachers knew that in order to support their children academically, these parents needed to learn English so that they could find better jobs. Learning English not only would make them more employable, but also would enable them to communicate with their children’s teachers and to encourage their children to do their work in school and complete homework.

To help parents learn English, the school’s Family Engagement Action Team (FEAT) reached out to Seattle Community College, which agreed to offer free ESL classes to parents twice a week. The partnership team advertised this opportunity to parents using flyers and automated phone calls translated in multiple languages. They also posted announcements about the classes on the school website and Facebook. Parents signed up quickly, filling the 25-student class to capacity. In this way, the Family Engagement University program was born.

The classes were very effective. “The English classes are helping me to be able to communicate and understand other people,” said one parent. “I can also help my son with his homework. I really want to learn English.”

A few weeks after classes started, the school’s ELL leader noticed that parents in the program had initiated more conversations with school staff. She explained, “In the past, they would have first approached a translator, now they were feeling more confident about their communication skills and were developing better relationships with their children’s teachers.”

Children of the participants talked about how their parents went to class every week. They learned from their parents’ example that education is a lifelong endeavor. Teachers reported that these children seemed more motivated in class about their own studies.

The program cost \$1,600 to run and was funded by the Hawthorne Parent Teacher Association. While the ESL classes were free, the ATP hired someone to provide childcare while class was in session. Finding funds for supervising about a dozen young children twice a week was the program’s biggest challenge, and determined the number of participants admitted to the classes. It may be that with one paid supervisor, high school students might volunteer or earn service learning credits by assisting this program. Or, a co-op system might be designed in which the participating parents skip a class on a rotating schedule to work in the childcare room.

At Hawthorne, the Family Engagement University has a waiting list of interested parents. This is a good problem. The program is a great example of how a partnership school can tailor its plans to meet specific needs of its students’ families. This service translates directly to help parents feel more confident about supporting themselves and their children.

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