

Programs to Engage Parents and Other Family Members

SNAPSHOT

Program:

Climate and Culture Committee

School:

Math and Science Leadership Academy

District:

Denver Public Schools

Location: Denver, Colo.

Grades: K-4

Enrollment: 265

Free/reduced-price lunch:

More than 90%

ELL: 60%

Making family collaboration integral to the school culture

Climate and Culture Committee

Math and Science Leadership Academy

Denver, Colorado

The teacher-led Math and Science Leadership Academy (MSLA) engages all members of the school community, including parents, in all aspects of school life. Founded in 2009, MSLA is a collaboration among teachers, their union (the Denver Classroom Teachers Association), and Denver Public Schools. In addition to traditional academics, students engage in hands-on learning and service-learning projects using knowledge gained in the classroom to conduct real-world, community-based projects. The program develops leadership skills and encourages civic responsibility.

The school's vision includes a culture of deliberate partnerships with parents and community groups. About 90 percent of the students are Latino; 60 percent are English Language Learners; and more than 90 percent are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. The school currently has 16 teachers serving 265 students in K-4. While maintaining small class sizes, the school has been adding one grade per year to reach K-5 in 2012-2013. MSLA's Climate and Culture Committee (CCC) plans activities—in collaboration with the school's Parent Teacher Organization—which are designed to engage families fully in the school culture.

How the program works

Led by a core group of six staff members, the CCC coordinates MSLA's family engagement programs in collaboration with a core group of parents. One program, for example, focuses on the school's constructive discipline program, "Conscious Discipline." CCC members explain the program's philosophy to families to help them adopt the practices at home. CCC co-chair Paty Holt often does home visits to deepen relationships with families.

The evening before school starts in the fall, MSLA has an open house for students and families, with an orientation program and a chance to meet the teacher. Once a month, the school also invites families to an evening of activities for parents and children to do together, which are set up in different stations around the school. Each month has a theme, such as math, science, literacy, or the arts. "The focus is on supporting kids' learning at home," says co-

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lead teacher Lori Nazareno, who notes that a majority of students' family members have been attending the monthly evening events. Each spring, the school invites incoming students for the fall to a barbecue/open house for the whole family.

MSLA has an open door policy that welcomes parents to volunteer in the classroom or simply visit and observe. The CCC is developing a curriculum for training parents as classroom helpers.

The school also has an independent Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) that plans and carries out its own activities in collaboration with the CCC. Last year, PTO leaders included four moms who met regularly with one of the teachers, CCC co-chair Paty Holt. "We planned a very popular Literacy Day and Night with a bunch of fun activities. The moms really wanted the Cat in the Hat to come and read stories to kids, so we were able to convince Lori [co-lead teacher] to dress up as the Cat. The children were so happy, and the event was a huge success," says Holt.

MSLA is funded by the school district through its per-pupil allocation. It also is a Title I school.

Evidence of effectiveness

For the 2010-2011 school year, MSLA expanded to include a third grade, which was the first class subject to state standardized tests. Two years' worth of test scores, beginning at third grade, are required to measure growth. Next year, the school will receive its first rating under the School Performance Framework.

Meanwhile, parents attest to their children's academic growth:

- ▶ One parent of a third grader said of her son, "He's grown a lot—leaps and bounds. His skills have improved all across the board."

- ▶ Another parent talked about her son's reading success: "He's had issues with his reading, and now he's up to grade level. I'm very pleased with the school."

The school has added a fourth grade for the 2011-2012 school year.

Results from the Parent Satisfaction Survey for 2009-2010 show that in nearly every category, more than 90 percent of parents give the school positive ratings, which is well above the district average in all categories. For example, under school culture, 97 percent of families say the school is a place where parents are treated with respect, compared with the district average of 89 percent.

Exemplary practices

Creating a welcoming environment

- ▶ Open door policy: the school welcomes parents to volunteer in the classroom or simply visit and observe.
- ▶ The CCC plans activities designed to fully engage families in the school culture.

Establishing collaborative relationships

- ▶ Teachers as co-leaders: Two teachers take on administrative duties as "lead teachers," performing the traditional role of a principal.
- ▶ Parents as co-leaders: Student recruitment is parent initiated and parent driven. Parents asked the school for fliers, which they use informally to spread information about the school.
- ▶ The CCC is composed of six staff members and meets regularly with the PTO.
- ▶ The CCC is developing a curriculum for training parents as classroom helpers.

Family-School-Community Partnerships 2.0

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Setting high expectations for students and families

- ▶ Faculty and staff attribute the school's growing numbers of students and families to its focus, rigor, high expectations, and inclusive culture.

Outlook

MSLA has been expanding by one grade per year, with the goal of becoming a K-5 school by 2012-2013.

Association perspective

Denver Classroom Teachers Association President Henry Roman summarizes his union's support: "One of the key strategies that makes MSLA work is the mutual agreement of all partners—families, educators, community—to set the bar high for our students. It's worth re-thinking your approach to involving parents, particularly if students aren't working up to their potential. What's even better is if your approach is grounded in what's been shown to work."

Local contact

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Related information

School website: www.msladenver.org

CNN: "Teacher turns 'crazy idea' into new school,"
<http://bit.ly/eMdZjG>

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