

# Forging An Alliance In a Multi-Ethnic School Community

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Building a sense of community in any school is a challenge, and building a school community in a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual district has special challenges which require thought, time, compromise, and patience. The Peirce Elementary School is a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual school located in the Edgewater community of Chicago. Peirce has 980 students: 60% of the students are Hispanic, 14% are black, 14% are white, and 12% are Asian.

An example of the challenge in a school with an ethnically diverse population was demonstrated one day when an elderly gentleman came into the school office to ask a simple question. The school secretary recognized that the language was not Vietnamese, French, Chinese, Greek, Assyrian, or Spanish (languages that our faculty members speak), and she was stumped. A quick conference with our Chinese teacher determined that the language was Cambodian. A solution was reached when the Chinese teacher called one of her students to the office. This student was new to our country and did not speak English, but could speak Chinese and Cambodian, so the communication impasse was breached. A human chain was formed. The Cambodian gentleman asked his question to the student, who translated it into Chinese for the Chinese teacher, who translated the question into English for the secretary. "What is required to register a child in school?" the man wanted to know. The question was easily answered by the secretary, her response then translated into Chinese and then Cambodian. With many smiles and nods and a bow, everyone started the day feeling that given enough effort, communication can be achieved.

All school community issues are not as easily resolved. People of different cultures come to school with different cultural expectations and experiences. Some cultures do not require or encourage parent participation in school matters. Parents of some cultures are quick to challenge the policies and actions of school personnel, while parents with yet other cultural backgrounds are horrified that these parents would not defer to the authority of the school. Some groups of parents are inclined to attend and

participate in school meetings, some parents seldom attend meetings or activities, and a third group of parents attends but is uncomfortable sharing their concerns and ideas. Many of these divergent behaviors have their roots in cultural diversity.

One way to find common ground in the midst of cultural diversity is to focus on parents' most fundamental educational desires for their children. That is the approach of the Alliance for Achievement Network, a consortium of schools of which Peirce is a member. In each Alliance school, a School Community Council consisting of the principal, two teachers, and four parents identifies fundamental educational values around which the diverse constituencies of the school can unite.

At Peirce, the School Community Council selected the values of reading, studying, self-esteem and international pride. In our plan for the 1991-92 school year, all four values will be emphasized. Activities have been designed to encourage our students, parents, and faculty to participate in the development of these four qualities in our students. The School Community Council, along with the Multilingual Advisory Council, PTA, and the Local School Council have developed a series of programs to benefit the Peirce Community.

In the area of reading, parents are invited to read stories to our students on Guest Reader Day, the fourth Monday of each month. This activity brings parents and community members into the school to emphasize the pleasure of reading and also provides a boost in the morale of school personnel and students. Students are proud of their parents' efforts, and school personnel appreciate the time, attention, and assistance of community support. Many parents read in their native languages, accentuating the special benefits of a multi-lingual school community. In addition to Guest Reader Day, children at Peirce celebrate the importance of reading with a faculty-sponsored reading poster contest. Parents and other visitors to the school see the display of original posters which stress the value of reading.

For the value of studying, parents at Peirce have participated in the Family Study Institute course, "Studying at Home." Following this course, parents are invited to continue to meet with the members of the school faculty (principal, assistant principal, counselor, reading improvement teacher, and bilingual lead teacher) on alternate Fridays to discuss educational and parenting issues.

To help with studying and with self-esteem, 460 students are participating in the new Peirce-Harris Bank Mathematics Motivation Project. Two of its goals are to increase the amount of homework that the students complete and to help to motivate the students to improve their behavior. A project to have all students use Homework Notebooks will be initiated this year.

To emphasize self-esteem and international pride, a special project of the School Community Council is to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the arrival of Columbus to the New World. This celebration will focus on the bringing together of many cultures to form America. Children will be encouraged to trace their roots and celebrate their own heritage. Another activity celebrating international pride and personal self-esteem is the

school's yearly celebration of the Asian New Year, Black History Month, and International Day.

For International Day in May, Peirce students are asked to share songs, dances and skits representing their heritage. Preparation begins as early as January for the gala evening of entertainment. A food fair is also held and students, teachers and parents enjoy foods from around the world. Attendance has been approximately 550 parents and students each year.

Another program for building self-esteem and international pride at Peirce resulted from the Local School Council's request to have the school included in a Title VII pilot project for a Developmental Bilingual Education program. The program for kindergarten and first grade children includes both English and Spanish classes and teaches children the benefits of developing both languages.

The strength of the Alliance of Achievement program is its ability to focus school leadership, teachers, and parents on educational values. Alliance provides the framework to create a united community with goals agreed upon by its members. It provides a structured forum for discussion and encourages parent participation. Alliance introduces the concept of the school-as-a-community even in a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual school.

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