



Bridging Refugee Youth & Children's Services

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## Fostering a Positive Climate in Our Schools

Maya Vengadasalam

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1-888-572-6500/ [info@brycs.org](mailto:info@brycs.org)/ [www.brycs.org](http://www.brycs.org)

## Fostering a Positive Climate in Our Schools *by Maya Vengadasalam*

The African proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child," is an oft-mentioned phrase when addressing our education problems in the U.S. The phrase becomes even more critical to students and families of foreign descent where success is predicated on understanding cultural nuances. The Grand Rapids Public Education Fund in its Grand Rapids Strategic Plan has stated the *elimination of discrimination* as one of the 25 indicators of "progress and success" for schools and communities.<sup>1</sup>

At the Kent School District in Kent, Washington, a committee called the Alliance for Diversity and Equity (ADE) has been formed to address curriculum, student learning, staff development, and disproportionality issues by unveiling a model results-based accountability plan. The plan, among other objectives, organizes parent/family/community groups, school administrators, and students of diverse ethnic backgrounds to focus on studying issues of concern to the community and schools, particularly of students who are economically poor, have experienced discrimination, or have performed poorly in the achievement tests.

Many of us recognize that lack of education often subverts understanding. At its core, such endeavors as the ADE aim to raise awareness, increase understanding, and support the traditions of various cultures. But what has confounded many in our South Asian community is a growing disconnect in how students, parents and the schools view accountability in the well being and educational achievement of students.

### South Asian Parent-Guardian Perspectives

In the education circles, there exists a general misconception that South Asian parents/guardians do not care about their children's schooling. Interestingly, many South Asian parents/guardians believe that educators will proactively communicate when a problem exists and therefore it is unnecessary to intercede in school events.

These family members trust the school as the authority figure in building their child's future and do not feel they have the right to question the authority of educators. An example is the gifted/honors process in U.S. schools.

While the schools rely heavily on parental consent and nomination, most SA parents defer to the teacher to place a child in the appropriate program as there is a general understanding that teachers know best of the child's ability. This misunderstanding, among others, exists because families and educators do not have a forum to meet and work together on common concerns.

Studies have shown that involvement by parents demonstrate to the youth a strong desire to see the children succeed at any attempt – be it sports or academic excellence. However, many educators – and active South Asian parents - feel that most South Asian parents do not volunteer enough or stay proactively involved in their child's education.

The parents cite job schedules, lack of programs designed for parents with limited English proficiency, and unawareness of school meetings and procedures as reasons for the lack of involvement. A negative consequence is that educators miss the opportunity to hear and understand the historical awareness of certain cultures such as the Punjabi culture and find it difficult to distinguish religious and cultural factors within the Sikh community and the Muslim community as an example.

Appointing community leaders who can liaison between schools and the community mitigates some of these communication concerns. Parents generally find that a face-to-face meeting at a community center or place of worship is most effective as opposed to the common outreach methods of translating flyers and information booklets which significantly reduce the personalized nature of outreach efforts.

Having school officials at the community meetings provide an opportunity for educators to reach out to South Asian parents on a personal level and help parents understand the programs and processes offered to better their child's education. In turn, families build trust and leadership skills by setting the agenda and the discussion priorities. The schools are able to then respond to the family concerns and show support by attending follow up meetings.

In view of the above concerns, the Kent School District's family linkages program attempts to bridge the communication gap between educators, parents/guardians, the community and its young leaders.

<sup>1</sup> *Grand Rapids Strategic Plan. (1992). For the Grand Rapids Strategic Plan: Indicators of progress and success. Grand Rapids, MI: Grand Rapids Public Education Fund.*

## South Asian Student Perspectives

A student climate survey, created in partnership with the Kent School District, was distributed to assess the student's perspectives on their school environment. Below is a sample of the findings from various school districts in Washington State:

**When asked "What is the biggest problem at your school?", here is what the South Asian students had to say:**

- ◇ "Harassment at school. Ex: a girl named Arianaa makes fun of people because of their religion." Grade 4
- ◇ "People say bad words and fight." Grade 2
- ◇ "Diversity acceptance", Grade 10
- ◇ "Biggest problem is bullying and harassment", Grade 6
- ◇ "Fighting", Grade 10
- ◇ "...that teachers and especially principal never equal to students." Grade 11
- ◇ "First one of my friend was called a slave, called all the black including me." Grade 4
- ◇ "The biggest problem is teasing at my school/another problem just as big is the cliques." Grade 9
- ◇ "That during lunch students mostly sit with people that have the same racial backgrounds as them." Grade 11
- ◇ "Some people tease others" Grade 6

**When asked "what makes you feel safe and welcome at schools?" – students replied:**

- ◇ "My friends because they talk to me" Grade 4
- ◇ "It makes me feel safe if teachers are like my parents to me and also loving to everyone." Grade 11
- ◇ "I feel comfortable because that were the teacher. So no harassment teasing or anything." Grade 4
- ◇ "...when I know that I'm accepted like a family member. In other words I feel totally comfortable." Grade 9.
- ◇ "It helps when kids and teachers try to make you feel as if you belong." Grade 11
- ◇ "Knowing that I have friends and I'm not in any sort of danger." Grade 6

In addition to the above, general observations at schools included:

- ◇ Lack of a formal complaint reporting process or lack of awareness on a reporting system
- ◇ Feelings that the reporting of conflicts will not be kept confidential
- ◇ Parents do not stay actively involved in child's education
- ◇ Students do not feel comfortable asking for help; teachers should proactively offer emotional or academic help.
- ◇ Students stay within their own circle groups; there should be more awareness of other cultures.
- ◇ Cultural event flyers should be distributed to all students and their parents, particularly to the Caucasian teachers and families in order to educate and increase awareness of other cultures.
- ◇ Sufficient books and other materials regarding each ethnic group should be available in libraries and classes, e.g. books on Sikhism.

Harman Dhaliwal is a 11<sup>th</sup> grader at Kent-Meridian High School who feels that while her school offers a positive learning environment, the effects of cultural nuances are not felt within the educational circles: "if there are problems, most kids feel it is something they have to live with." This concern is exacerbated by the fact that many of the South Asian youth feel uncomfortable in speaking to their parents about problems at school.

In addition, South Asian youth feel that many schools do not challenge students of color. An immediate dismissal tactic is at work when students are not encouraged to take advanced math or science courses. This is especially the case for students who are in ESL programs. Studies show that there is success in using standards to reshape curriculum and instruction – clear standards should be established for what all students should learn at different grade levels and the expectations should apply to all students. <sup>2</sup>

A growing trend is that it is the youth, sometimes the only English speakers in the household, who are managing the important decisions facing their education. How do the students find meaningful ways to dialogue when an added concern is the parent's inability to converse with school officials in the English language?

<sup>2</sup> "Dealing with Diversity – Closing the Gap" by Kati Haycock and Craig Jerald, *Principal Magazine of the National Association of Elementary School Principals*, November/December 2002 Edition

South Asian students generally feel there is comfort in forming school multicultural/diversity clubs where a sense of community is encapsulated - camaraderie builds and concerns are shared with peers. In addition, they find solace in forming peer groups at places of worship, community centers and at youth camps.

Students stress the need for ESL teachers and counselors to play a key role in intervening and understanding any problem area with youth. This information needs to be communicated to parents immediately to avoid further breakdown in communication.

In summary, to facilitate better communication between all parties, youth recommendations to school officials include:

- ◇ Support literacy, ESL adult education programs, and other basic skills programs for parents/guardians.
- ◇ Encourage student tutoring and mentorship programs
- ◇ Provide --and define clearly-- confidential methods for students to report teasing, harassment and bullying and then disseminate this information to all parents/students. Use translation services as necessary.
- ◇ Support the formation of student leadership groups dealing with issues of racism, religious and ethnic harassment; allow for and encourage self expression and group reflection on individual issues of concern.
- ◇ Have high expectations for ALL students; don't dismiss students' learning ability due to language, race, religious and ethnic factors.
- ◇ Allow struggling and/or minority students to participate in the School Improvement processes. Get the students' input on how best to teach them and help them understand the subject matter, thereby allowing the students to showcase their analytical ability.
- ◇ Have counselors and ESL teachers interact more with school improvement processes
- ◇ In addition, encourage all students to ask questions and follow through with answers.
- ◇ Promote "cultural days" where classrooms allow individual students to foster pride and knowledge of their culture.
- ◇ Offer trainings to teachers, counselors, principals and vice principals specifically addressing current issues for targeted communities. In addition, disseminate materials on teaching to reduce hate to all educators and use tools provided to assist in creating a healthy learning environment for ALL.