



PARENTS FOR CHANGE

Empowering Ourselves, Empowering Our Children

Burlington New American Parents for Change Research Report

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Background

Immigrant families have been resettling in Burlington throughout our city's history. In the past few years, new refugee families have come to Burlington from Somalia, Burundi, Bhutan, and many other countries in Europe, Asia, the Middle East and Africa. Today, in Burlington Schools the home language of about 20% of our students is not English.

Burlington School District is working to make sure all students have a good education. Over the past two years, Burlington High School, working with Winooski, has formed the Partnership for Change to reshape education to strengthen our communities by preparing all students for the future. The goal is to create a student-centered learning system where all kids thrive. This work is funded by the Nellie Mae Education Foundation. The schools, and many community partners, are just getting started to make this a reality. Our group, Parents for Change, focuses on making sure that parents who have sometimes not had a voice in school, help re-design the system.

As New Americans from a number of different countries, we came together to address an issue that can be improved now. After many separate community meetings, we met last April to figure out where to begin. We picked the issue of student placement. We were concerned that our children were not learning English quickly enough or taking courses that prepared them for college. We experienced some of our students graduating without the skills to get a job or get into a four year college, and students needing to continue to take remedial courses after high school before they could hope to go to college. This was worrisome for our older students who had been in the country for just a few years. One of our most important goals is for our children to be able to go to college, to be able to get good jobs, and to be able to support themselves well and continue to help our communities.

We are here today to advocate for changes in the student placement system for New American youth. We believe that we need to focus on four areas:

1. The "intake" process for new students
2. Orienting families to the American School System
3. Training for multi-lingual liaisons

4. Ongoing communication with families

In an attempt to understand why a number of our students are not graduating from high school ready for college, our team of New American Parents for Change leaders did specific interviews and reviewed information gathered earlier through community meetings. We prepared specific questions to better understand the issue and met with the following people:

- Linda Walsleban, English Language Learner Director for the Burlington School District
- Jill Jacobelli, Fellow at Partnership for Change and ELL teacher at BHS
- Henri Sparks, Director of Equity at Burlington School District
- Patty Wesley, Director of Guidance at BHS

Findings

The age of the student plays a very major role in how the students are placed. When families who are new to this country register a student, they often work with a multi-lingual liaison. Families complete a home language survey. Students are given tests to see how much English and math they know, and to understand their reading and writing abilities in English. At elementary and middle school, students are mostly placed in the grade closest to their age. This is mostly true at high school too, but students are placed in the level of class based on their tests – so a student might be in 11th grade because of their age, but placed in a higher or lower level course within that grade. At the middle and high school, English Language Learner teachers and guidance counselors have a meeting with the new family and a multi-lingual liaison to learn about the student's educational background. Different schools may do this differently. For older students, if they have a record of the courses the student has already taken in another country, the school tries to match that up with courses here.

There are special classes for students who are learning English. At the high school, there are also new bridging and support classes in other subjects, like science, math and social studies, for students who are still learning English. These are taught by subject teachers and English Language Learner teachers. The school also offers extra help from teachers, study halls and supported study, an afterschool homework center, a new writing center, as well as summer school to support students. Some tutoring services are available and there are a number of community-based after school and summer school programs to support students as well.

Once a student is enrolled in school, placement is done from year-to-year based on how well the student has done in their classes and the recommendations of teachers. Teachers play a large role in this decision-making process as they have educational information regarding each student in each subject area.

Placement in classes is also related to how well students do on a test of their English language abilities. Students need to get a certain score to pass. This impacts what level of classes students can take. Whether a student takes and succeeds in a higher level of English, Math and Science classes can affect whether or not a student is prepared for college. The requirements to graduate high school and to enter college are not the same. A student may graduate from high school and may not be ready for college.

To support families whose home language is not English, the school has a number of multi-lingual liaisons. Liaisons help with registering students, the completion of paperwork, school-to-home communications, including translation of information and interpretation. The school provides a handbook with many rules and policies, which is translated into a number of different languages. There is a parent orientation at the middle and high school with interpretation into several languages. The school has begun to offer a number of different small group parent workshops in multiple languages – including explaining the college process and Internet safety. In addition, the English Language Learner Director has begun to host meetings in the native language of families to better explain how the placement process works. The high school is also in the process of creating a video in several languages with a basic introduction to the high school and key staff people. School leaders have also met with leaders from New American communities to hear about our concerns. A multi-lingual liaison coordinator has been hired and new trainings are starting to be offered for liaisons.

Student progress is communicated to families in a number of different ways – students and families receive progress reports or report cards four times a year. Parent-teacher conferences are offered twice a year. Parents can also receive weekly emails, texts or log onto a computer-based grade book to see how their student is doing at school. A standardized test report is also sent home to parents for students from grades 3 through 8 and then in 11th grade. The standardized test report includes information about the student's level in Reading, Writing, Math and Science. Students may get a grade of an "A" or a "B" in an English Language Learner class or a lower level class and this does not mean that the student has reached the grade skill level. For example, a student may get a good grade in all of his or her 9th grade classes, be promoted to 10th grade, but still have a skill level in English that is lower than the grade level. A grade of an "A" may mean that a student is working hard and making good progress, but it does not necessarily mean that the student is achieving at grade level. This may affect a student's readiness for college. The English Language Learning department has started trying some new reports to show the student and family where the current skill level of the student and the goal in reading and math. This is only for students receiving English Language Learning services. Our research suggested that there are a number of students, especially those who come to this country when they are older, who need more years of high school than match their age in order to reach college-readiness. New this year, it is possible for students to stay in high school for an extra year.

If a student is having trouble in school, with their studies or behavior, the school notifies the parent. If it is a behavior or attendance issue, the school calls home. The call is often made by a machine, and is often in English. A multi-lingual liaison may be asked to call a parent and set-up a meeting. If a student is having trouble with their school work, it is up to the teacher to decide when to communicate with the family. The high school started calling families last year in October, if a student is doing very poorly in class. The goal is to work with the family to create a plan to support the student.

Challenges for New American Students and Families

We recognize that the school is making many efforts to serve English Language Learners. And we are also aware there are some real challenges for students and families that can be improved by working together.

The challenges related to student placement and communication with families include:

- A student placement process that is not well understood by students and families and a need to gather more information from students and families in different ways.
- A lack of clear and accessible information in the native language about how the American School system works. The handbook has many complicated policies, but not the basics. School orientations also assume that families have an understanding of how the system works.
- A need for assistance and recommendations to families, in their home language, about course offerings, support services, student clubs and activities.
- Confusion about grades, student promotion, graduation and how that relates to the student skill level and college-readiness. While there are many tools to find out a student's grades, these are not helpful if it is not clear what the grade means, if a family does not understand the language of the report, or if a family does not have access to a computer.
- A lack of understanding or awareness for families about student problems at school – academic or behavior-related. Families want to find out about a problem very quickly, and may need messages or communication in their native language, to be able to work with the school and student to resolve it.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Our research has convinced us that Burlington Schools have strong resources to support students and partner with families. The schools have many caring and committed teachers, staff and administrators. The schools have been responding to

concerns raised by New American families by adding new types of classes and meeting with New American parents. Every school leader and teacher we interviewed in our research expressed an interest and willingness to work together to make improvements.

To address the specific gaps that we have identified as they relate to student placement and communication with families, we recommend that we work together with school leaders, teachers, and staff, to take these action steps:

1. Re-design the student placement process to include gathering more information about student goals and interests, an explanation of the process in the home language of the family, as well as a questionnaire that multi-lingual liaisons can review with families and students prior to meeting with the school staff.
2. Development of an Introduction to American Schools, through workshops and written and video materials and resources that can be delivered to families through a number of different organizations and community partners as well as schools.
3. Creation of a comprehensive training program for multi-lingual liaisons to assist families and students with understanding course offerings, support services, student clubs and activities. This training could also be provided to multi-lingual student and parent volunteers as well as multi-lingual community organization staff to be able to assist more families.
4. Development of new communication tools to:
 - better communicate how a student's progress and grades relate to their skill-level and readiness for college
 - communicate more quickly and clearly if a student is having problems with school studies or behavior
5. An ongoing group of Burlington New American Parents for Change Leaders working with the schools, and meeting together with school leaders to review our progress toward these goals.

We ask everyone present, and especially our special guests, to support these recommendations. While the language barriers and differences in prior education settings provide unique challenges, we believe implementing our recommendations will mean real progress. Working together to improve placement for New American students and communication with families is an important step to improve educational opportunities and college-readiness. It is also an important step in the development of a student-centered learning system that has benefits for all students.