

# Engaging parents, community to map student success in South King County

1 July 2014, by Doree Armstrong

If we had a road map to what parental involvement in schools should be, what would it look like? Would it be a straight line, or a complicated maze of cross streets going in every direction?

University of Washington researchers studied The Road Map Project, a collaborative effort to dramatically improve [student achievement](#) in seven [school](#) districts in South Seattle and South King County. In their [report](#) after a yearlong study of the initiative, they found that students were most successful when schools and communities found creative and culturally responsive ways of engaging parents.

"The Road Map Project was very clear that parent-community engagement was one of the key mechanisms for achieving its 2020 goal, to double the number of young people who are on track to college and career and to close the opportunity gap," said Ann Ishimaru, assistant professor in the UW College of Education and co-author of the report.

The UW is also one of many community partners of the project.

The idea of The Road Map Project is to go beyond traditional involvement such as parent-teacher conferences and associations and school open houses to offer parents more relevant ways to help their children succeed.

"We know from decades of research that it makes a difference when parents are involved in their child's education," Ishimaru said. "It helps not only students' test scores, but also their behavior in school, attendance, the coursework they take. They are involved in higher-level programs and they're more likely to graduate. Our study suggests promising ways to create more meaningful opportunities for family participation, especially in a region of such dramatic cultural and linguistic diversity."

Districts in the project are Auburn, Federal Way, Highline, Kent, Renton, Seattle (only South Seattle schools) and Tukwila. Of the 119,000 students in that region, 66 percent are students of color, 58 percent come from low-income families and 167 different primary languages are spoken. Ishimaru and colleagues studied two of those districts – Federal Way and Kent – plus a community effort called White Center Promise Initiative.

Each Road Map Project entity is engaging parents in different ways. Federal Way uses family liaisons to help parents cultivate good relationships with school staff, and parents are given a "menu" of choices about how to be involved, from using specific tutorials at home to observing school board meetings or participating in leadership training.

Kent uses parent facilitators in different languages to teach a nine-week evening Parent Academy for Student Achievement, which helps parents learn how to best advocate for their child and create educational partnerships with teachers and staff.

White Center Promise is a long-term effort to eradicate poverty by involving families in the services and support they need through schools and community organizations, and to help students graduate and go on to living-wage careers.

The UW report shows one of the most effective strategies across [school districts](#) is to listen to parents to find out their concerns, priorities and expertise, and to do it in their own language. For instance, Federal Way Schools hosts workshops that allow parents to speak in their native language while the director of the district's Family and Community Partnerships Office hears real-time translation through a headset. Those workshops, part of the district's Parent Leadership Institute, also allow parents to share concerns and ideas with each other.

"Sometimes parents can't speak English and

schools don't even think to plan for that," Ishimaru said. "But more broadly, the problem is whether parents feel like they belong or are welcome. When schools only have traditional activities, like joining the PTA or giving money to a fundraiser, that's telling parents there's only one way to interact with the school."

Ishimaru said it's important for schools to be culturally responsive and use "cultural brokers." Those are parents or others in the community who are usually bicultural and bilingual, and can guide immigrant and other non-English-speaking parents through the world of American public schools. They also can help educators better understand multi-cultural families and communities.

"These cultural brokers exist in every school and every community," Ishimaru said. "At one school we found it was the woman who worked in the cafeteria. There was no family liaison at the school but everyone knew to just walk into the lunchroom and she would tell them what was going on."

Ishimaru said the three sites they studied continue to refine their approaches to parent engagement. The Kent School District is now moving beyond the copyrighted California parent-engagement curriculum it bought to engage [parents](#) in developing its own curriculum, which adds components to help students develop a positive racial identity and better deal with bullying. Kent would then be able to share its curriculum with the rest of The Road Map region.

Provided by University of Washington

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