

# PROMOTING INVOLVEMENT OF RECENT IMMIGRANT FAMILIES IN THEIR CHILDREN'S EDUCATION

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## PURPOSE

The purpose of this article is to present a conceptual framework and promote promising practices for involving Hispanic, immigrant parents/caregivers of students in their children's education. Toward this end, the article presents a model for how teachers and immigrant parents/families can be trained and encouraged to work as partners to improve student performance. The model was developed in partnership with one community organization providing these services and refined on the basis of a formative evaluation.<sup>1</sup> The formative evaluation identified specific practices that appear to be particularly effective when working with recent immigrants. The impact of these practices on parent attitudes and behaviors, including parent-teacher interactions, and on student performance will be examined through a summative evaluation<sup>2</sup> scheduled to begin in May 2002.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Research over the past 30 years has shown that parents<sup>3</sup> are critical contributors to student achievement (Henderson & Berla, 1994; Thorkildsen & Stein, 1998; U.S. Department of Education, 1994). Federal, state, and local policymakers now encourage parental involvement through program requirements and funding opportunities. However, many barriers arise when families, especially those who are new to this country, try to become more involved in their children's education and with their children's schools. Many parents experience language barriers, miscommunications that arise from different cultural perspectives on parent-teacher involvement and on how students learn, previous negative experiences with schools as students and parents, feelings of intimidation based on limited educational experience, and unfamiliarity with the U.S. school system (Nicolau & Ramos, 1990).

Research also suggests that many low-income Hispanic families find the school system to be impersonal, insensitive to their needs and situations, and often disrespectful (Garcia, 1990). This experience has resulted in deep-seated fears and attitudes among many Hispanic parents toward the school, such as the fear of being put down, either overtly or covertly. In addition, few teachers are explicitly trained in working with families (Chavkin & Williams, 1988) and some may view parents, particularly immigrant and

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<sup>1</sup> Formative evaluation is a type of evaluation that provides information for strengthening a program by assessing the quality of its content and delivery.

<sup>2</sup> Summative evaluation is a type of evaluation used to judge the effectiveness of a program at achieving its intended outcomes.

<sup>3</sup> When we talk about parent or family involvement in education, we mean the involvement of *any* adult family member or guardian in a child's education through home or school activities.

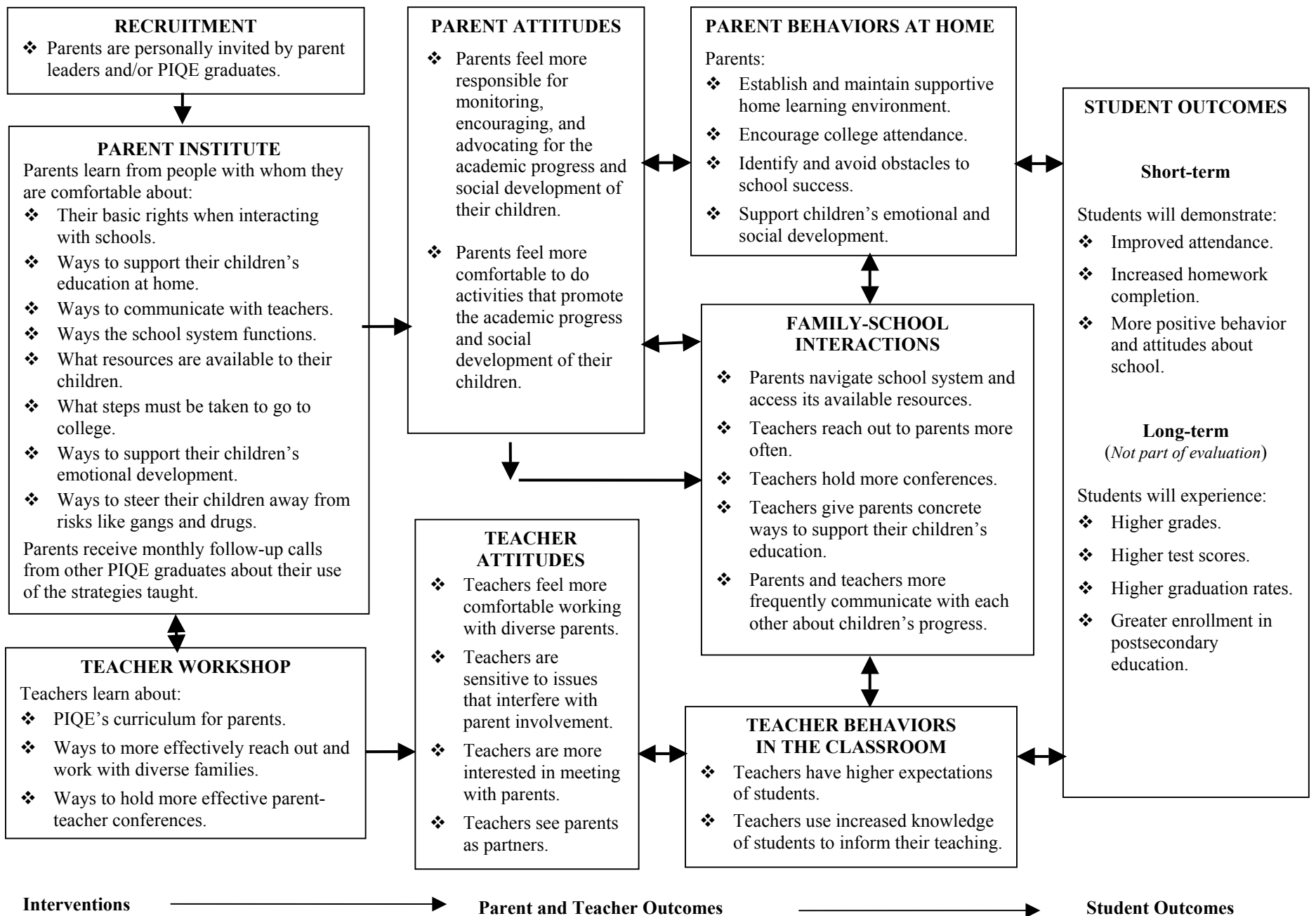
low-income parents, as liabilities rather than assets in children's educational pursuits (Nicolau & Ramos, 1990).

The Parent Institute for Quality Education (PIQE) aims to increase parents' knowledge and skills to support the academic achievement of their children. For 15 years, PIQE has developed and widely implemented a model for increasing parent involvement in K-12 schools where parent participation has been difficult to achieve. PIQE uses informal education techniques that have been promoted by Paulo Freire and others dedicated to promoting social change, such as using dialogue to build community and social capital, situating educational activity in the lived experience of participants, and raising participants' consciousness about their situations and their own power to take informed action.

The program consists of an 8-week course for parents and 4 months of follow-up "coaching" calls after completion of the program. The classes are taught by instructors who reflect the parent community and focus on how to: a) establish and maintain a supportive home learning environment; b) communicate and collaborate with teachers, counselors, and principals; c) navigate the school system and access its resources; d) encourage college attendance; e) identify and avoid obstacles to school success; and f) support children's emotional and social development.

The PIQE program has been found to be effective at increasing parents' behaviors that support their children's education, including the frequency with which parents communicate with their children's teachers, read to their children, praise or recognize their children for doing well in school, and review their children's homework (Golan, 1997). Further, almost all of these positive impacts on parent behavior were sustained five months after parents completed the Institute, although changes tended to be more dramatic immediately following the Institute.

Since August 1999, PIQE has participated in an in-depth formative evaluation of its program in San Jose, California, supported by the Stuart Foundation and conducted by SRI International, to examine and further strengthen the PIQE model and to identify best practices that could be replicated by other programs. Early in the evaluation, SRI International assisted PIQE in articulating a "theory of change" to describe the way in which program components are expected to work to produce desired outcomes. The theory of change model (Figure 1) guided the focus of the formative evaluation and will guide the focus of the summative evaluation. This article focuses on program practices identified in the formative evaluation as being particularly successful with recent immigrant parents. Many of these strategies also have been found to be effective by other programs working with Hispanic parents (Garcia, 1990).



## METHODS AND DATA SOURCES

**Observations.** Researchers observed a complete set of PIQE courses (8 weeks each) at six schools (48 observations total) in 2000. Seven additional observations of PIQE classes were conducted a year later. In addition, recruitment and follow-up coaching phone calls were observed.

**Interviews.** Researchers interviewed 24 parents, 6 instructors, 6 school principals, and 18 teachers across the 6 schools. All parents were Spanish speaking, and the majority were recent immigrants.

All observations and interviews were guided by semistructured protocols based on PIQE's theory of change model and were conducted by Spanish-speaking researchers.

## RESULTS

Several organizational and instructional practices were identified that led to more successful engagement of parents and more informative and useful classes than when these practices were absent. These practices fell into eight major categories, which are described briefly below.

1. *Address parents' direct needs.* Common barriers to parent participation in school programs include not offering programs in the parents' primary language, not having child care available, and offering programs at inconvenient times (e.g., immediately after work, not allowing parents to eat dinner). To overcome some of these barriers, PIQE requires that host schools provide child care and refreshments or dinner, and it organizes classes by language.

2. *Make personal connections.* PIQE is particularly effective in recruiting and retaining parents who have previously felt unwelcome or insecure in their children's schools because of education, language, cultural, or economic concerns. Its success in these areas is in large part due to the ability of its recruiters and instructors to form personal connections with parents.

In the classes observed, such practices included extending personal invitations to parents to attend, having warm and individualized communication with parents, showing respect for parents' feelings and concerns, paying attention to parents' personal situations (e.g., remembering specific information about the parents' children or own educational experiences), learning parents' names, showing appreciation for parents' contributions and participation, greeting parents as they came and left the class, and inviting open communication by the instructor's giving some personal information about him or herself and providing parents with a way to contact him or her outside of the class.

Confirming our observations, other researchers also have found that strong personal outreach, warm and nonjudgmental communication, and the ability to convey respect for parents' feelings and concerns are essential for successful involvement of Hispanic parents in their children's education (Garcia, 1990).

3. *Raise awareness and concern around student achievement and the need for parent involvement.* PIQE recognizes that parental involvement is not commonly sought in school systems in other countries, and highlights the difference between those countries and the United States. PIQE uses some practices that may be more common to community organizing efforts than to parent education to raise parent awareness of their rights to be involved in their children's education, the potential problems that may arise if they are not involved, and the potential benefits if they become involved. The PIQE instructors speak with a sense of urgency and use language such as, "We are here on a special mission. We are an emergency team to help you support your kids and help them get a better education."

PIQE also raises awareness and concern by using case studies, other in-class exercises, and parents' comments to remind parents that they need to get involved in their children's education and know how their schools work. For example, when reviewing a case study, the instructor may say, "You find out a child is not doing her math homework because she does not understand it. This is an emergency. What are you going to do? We must contact the school immediately." PIQE channels the concern of parents into commitment and action by letting parents know they are assets and are critical to the success of their children.

4. *Establish a clear and common goal.* Another effective strategy that PIQE uses is emphasizing a shared goal of having parents' children go to college. PIQE repeatedly reminds parents that their children can go to college if they start working toward that goal now. The instructor tells parents, "It is not impossible to get your kids into college. We can make it a reality. We are going to dream, and it is going to come true." At the end of the first session, parents are asked to raise their hands and repeat the following: "I promise to help direct my children and to do all that is possible that they will go to college. I promise to come to all the PIQE classes, and I will tell my child that, together, we will make sure s/he goes to college." This shared goal is very effective at establishing parent commitment to the program and the strategies taught in the program.

5. *Demystify how the school system works by providing basic information on school programs, policies, and staff and on how to advocate effectively for one's child.* Several of the PIQE parents expressed being too nervous to get involved in school activities or communicate with their children's teachers or principals because they did not understand the American school system and did not know what the school expected of them. Through discussions and small-group exercises, key topics were addressed, including grading and testing systems, school policies (e.g., grade promotion/retention, graduation, parent conferences), school and district resources (e.g., programs and personnel), parent involvement opportunities, and questions to ask teachers and counselors about their children's academic progress and about suggestions for ways to support their children's learning at home.

6. *Suggest concrete behaviors that parents can use to support their children's academic success.* PIQE classes suggest several behaviors that parents can practice to support their children's education. Each lesson includes a handout with a list of ideas that parents can put into practice. For example, to create a more supportive home learning environment, PIQE recommends that parents establish a regular time and space for doing homework, have their children read at least

20 minutes a day, limit television viewing, have the necessary supplies (pencils, paper, books) available at home, and model frequent reading.

To support children's academic progress at school, PIQE recommends that: parents visit their children's teachers at least once a month; ask their children's teachers at what level their children are performing in math, reading, and writing and what they can do at home to help them meet grade-level expectations; show their children the high priority they place on doing well in school by frequently asking them about school and praising them when they do well in school; request that the school let them review their children's cum files<sup>4</sup> or permanent student records so they can become more informed about their children's performance and can identify information that should be removed from the files; be aware of their children's performance on standardized tests; and become informed about special and extracurricular programs and activities offered at their children's schools that may benefit their children. PIQE also strongly recommends that parents talk early and often to their children about going to college. Finally, PIQE strongly recommends that parents establish good and regular communication with their children.

*7. Use methods that have been proven to support learning and increase the likelihood that new behaviors will be adopted.* Some of the strategies used by PIQE (such as modeling, scaffolding, role playing, and visual aids) reflect the literature on effective instruction and learning.

a) *Model information-gathering and problem-solving strategies.* Many PIQE participants did not know how to obtain information about their children or their schools and what to do if they perceived a problem. Rather than providing answers or solutions, instructors involved parents in this process. Instructors shared—and had parents share—how they obtained information or solved specific problems. Instructors had parents solve problems (e.g., how to approach a teacher) together through small-group work, role plays, and large-group discussions.

b) *Support and track the use of new behaviors.* PIQE emphasizes the importance of regular communication with the teachers and counselors of one's children. To help parents engage in such communication, PIQE instructors provided sample scripts and opportunities to practice, gave the homework assignment of setting up and holding a conference with their children's teachers, gave the name of someone who could help schedule conferences and provide translation, and followed up with parents on their experiences. After completion of the PIQE course, parents received monthly calls from "coaches," a cadre of parent graduates who are trained by PIQE to encourage other parent graduates to continue to use newly learned behaviors.

c) *Use visual aids.* Overheads, flip charts, and handouts were used effectively to give explicit step-by-step instructions for group activities, summarize or interpret the information being presented, or generate conversation.

*8. Create a sense of community and a peer support network that will continue beyond the term of the class.* PIQE graduates have organized around various issues because of peer networks that

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<sup>4</sup> A cum file includes a student's course of study, grades, attendance, testing results, disciplinary actions, other information submitted by faculty, and sometimes additional information such as an Individualized Education Plan.

were developed through the Institute. Peer support also was important to encourage parents to try new behaviors and question certain school policies. PIQE instructors promoted the networking of parents by encouraging parents to meet each other, learn each other's names and stories, and establish friendships.

## CONCLUSION

Many researchers have found that parent involvement in schools is an effective strategy for promoting student achievement. Yet schools struggle with ways to recruit and involve parents, especially recent immigrant parents. The barriers that discourage immigrant parents from participating in schools are not insurmountable. This article presents specific practices that are effective at recruiting and working with typically hard-to-involve parents. Although the needs of immigrant parents are similar to those of U.S.-born parents (e.g., both desire information about school policies, school programs, and their children's academic and social progress, access to support services, and meaningful opportunities to participate in their children's education), the ways to meet these parents' needs effectively differ. The PIQE program offers a model for meeting some of the key needs of Hispanic immigrant parents, the fastest-growing community in the United States, according to the 2000 Census.

PIQE recognizes that changing parents' attitudes and behaviors will have only a limited effect if the attitudes and behaviors of school staff remain the same. Therefore, PIQE recently has added a teacher education component to its model to expand the program's impact. The conceptual framework will guide the examination of whether and how parents and teachers work together to support greater student learning and how much the PIQE program affects their interactions.

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