ENGAGING ENGLISH LEARNER FAMILIES

TO ACHIEVE EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS

In the Palm Beach County School District there are 145 native languages and dialects spoken among the students. When Nadilia Charles became an ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages) counselor there, she saw a need to support these students and help them earn their high school diplomas. Many of the ELL students had never before been in a structured school environment, so expecting them to excel without knowing the language was unreasonable.

Today, Nadilia oversees a team of bilingual, bicultural counselors who work with schools in the district. They support ELL students with everything from social and emotional skills, to attendance and academics.

"I think it's very important that we enlighten not only the students but the parents as well," said Nadilia. "We want to make sure that they understand that there are people in place to walk them through the entire process."

Every year, the Multicultural Department of the Palm Beach County School District hosts six Family Engagement Nights across the district. These events provide parents with information about how to get their students through high school and achieve college and career success.

Event materials are distributed in all native languages and details are announced on local Spanish and Haitian Creole language radio stations to ensure all parents have the opportunity to attend. The Multicultural Department even provides childcare at the event to ensure parents can give their undivided attention.

"I've always had a love for ACT."

-Nadilia Charles
Specialist Instructional
Department of Multicultural Education

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Beginning with introductions and refreshments, parents are sent to breakout sessions based on language. Presentations cover:

- How to use the parent portal to monitor student grades, attendance, and test scores
- Study tips
- Online learning resources
- Social and emotional learning skills
- The ACT® test, when students take it, what the test is for, why it's important, and how to practice

At the end of every Family Engagement Night parents are given a backpack filled with resources like dictionaries, novels in English and native languages, and lists of learning resources for at-home use.

"You get those 'Aha!' moments from the parents quite often because they base everything on what they're hearing from the community, and we know that the information they get is not always the correct information," said Nadilia.

Family Engagement Nights have been a major success. Last year at Lake Worth Community High School, which has the highest population with about 700 ELL students, Family Engagement Night had more than 500 parents attend.

The Multicultural Department has implemented additional events to meet the needs of students and parents, including:

- **Financial Aid Nights**—where they partner with the federal TRIO program to sit with parents and help them complete financial aid applications
- **Parent Leadership Councils**—every school gives two presentations a year using slides provided by the Multicultural Department
- **College Tours**—for Spring Break more than 100 juniors will visit six colleges and attend presentations on college planning, financial aid, and test taking tips
- **College and Career Fairs**—where they set up a table to hand out info on the department's activity and role
- **ACT Tutoring**—Nadilia volunteers to tutor students every other Saturday and provides testing strategies to help students improve their scores

With these strategies in place, Palm Beach County School District is overcoming the challenges underrepresented students face. Their students are achieving success: making the honor roll, passing state exams, tutoring fellow students, volunteering hundreds of hours in the community, and enrolling in college.

"However it is that we can assist them, that's what we're trying to do," said Nadilia.

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