

Amy Shillady

Engaging Families in Diverse Communities: Strategies From Elementary School Principals

HAD THE PLEASURE OF INTERVIEWING TWO elementary school principals, Peter Moran of Glenallan Elementary School, in Silver Spring, Maryland, and Katie Charner-Laird of Cambridgeport School, in Cambridge, Massachusetts. They shared their experiences engaging families—including challenges and successes. Both work in diverse communities, serving children and families from many cultures who speak different languages and have a wide range of life experiences.

Amy Shillady: Tell me a little about Glenallan Elementary and its surrounding community.

Peter O. Moran: Glenallan is part of Montgomery County Public Schools, and is located in a very diverse Maryland community. We serve kindergarten through fifth grade students. Of the 570 children who attend, 40 percent are Latino, 30 percent are African American, 12 percent are Caucasian, 10 percent are Asian, and the remainder are multiracial. There are 31 different languages spoken by children and their families, and 160 children are dual language learners. In addition, 70 percent of children are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches.

Amy: What is the school's overall approach to respecting this diversity?

Peter: At Glenallan, we value children and families' different cultures and experiences. We focus on culturally responsive instruction. In the beginning of each school year, one way teachers learn about children and families is through surveys they give them. Families can share about their

cultures, home languages, and how their children learn best. This helps families feel invested in their children's education from the start. And this helps teachers learn about children and families' unique strengths and needs, which shapes how they approach children's instruction.

Amy: Can you share some strategies teachers use to engage families?

Peter: Of course. First of all, Glenallan has a bilingual parent–community coordinator. He coordinates parent involvement meetings, facilitates and helps plan family events, establishes links with community services and resources to help meet families' needs, and more. He is a great asset.

In terms of specific examples of schoolwide efforts, teachers encourage families to visit the classroom and school throughout the year. Teachers from each grade level work together to host family partnership events at least twice a year, usually one event at the beginning of the year and one at the end. For example, first grade teachers invited children's families with Salvadoran roots to share their tradition of preparing and cooking pupusas with other first graders and their families. This was a fun event and children and teachers learned more about the families' culture.

We also host themed family events, such as family math night and STEM night. We provide materials for families to take with them to extend their children's learning at home. We try to ensure these events are fun and interactive. For example, we hosted a staff-versus-family basketball game, which was well attended.

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In addition, we've structured our PTA meetings differently. We view these meetings as opportunities to build relationships with families. Teachers attend, and meetings always begin with a dinner. The PTA president and I speak briefly at the beginning, and then families take the lead. Children are welcome so that families don't need to arrange child care. We also hold monthly parent involvement meetings. We host these meetings in the mornings for those who may work nights and are not able to attend evening events.

Amy: Can you tell me a bit about the impact of these engagement strategies? For example, how have they benefitted children?

Peter: These strategies have a positive impact on children as well as families. When we show children that we value their families, we build their trust in their teachers and the school. Children feel empowered. They are proud to introduce their parents to their teachers and friends. As far as benefits to families, they feel accepted and valued. They also help families better understand and support their children's learning.

Amy: Let's get back to the school's diversity for a moment. How do you think the community's population has an impact on the ways Glenallan engages families? What are some specific ways the school promotes children and families' different cultures, languages, and experiences?

Peter: First and foremost, we convey to children and families the value of our differences. We want to get children and families excited to learn about different languages and cultures.

In terms of specific strategies, we honor families' cultures by hosting events such as international nights. Children and families bring in traditional dishes to share, and they wear traditional clothing. Everyone eats together, and then families talk about their cultures.

Throughout the year, teachers invite families to visit the classroom and share their cultures and experiences.

Amy: Tell me about the staff at Glenallan. In what ways do you and others support teachers in their efforts to engage families? How does the school help new teachers, especially those who may not have experience working



with diverse children and families, learn about and come to value these approaches?

Peter: I think it's really important—and I emphasize this to all staff—that we get out of our comfort zones and explore and become part of the local community. I help set an example by walking around neighborhoods regularly as well as visiting families in times of need. This helps families see that the principal cares and takes the time to be part of their lives. I also encourage teachers to conduct home visits to get to know children, their families, and the community.

Fortunately, many of our teachers also have a background in supporting dual language learners. We also

offer teachers training in culturally responsive teaching approaches. This training is embedded in our teachers' collaborative planning, discussions with ESOL [English for speakers of other languages] teachers, and monthly staff trainings that focus on enhancing opportunities for children to use their language and cultures in class discussions.

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And it's important to mention that the results often speak for themselves. Teachers witness firsthand how children's learning can improve when they partner with families. When teachers see results, there is immediate buy-in. We have fostered a great team here at Glenallan.

Amy: But I'm sure it hasn't always been easy. What are some challenges you've experienced? And what are some ways you've overcome or addressed these challenges?

Peter: There are real barriers that prevent some families from getting involved. Families have different work schedules, so it's really important to offer a range of times when they can participate. Many families also need transportation and child care, so arranging to have these covered during events is crucial.

Peter O. Moran, MEd, is the principal of Glenallan Elementary School in Silver Spring, Maryland. Peter focuses on teaming with teachers, parents, and students to develop a community school that strengthens relationships by learning about children's cultures, interests, and backgrounds; increasing educational opportunities in science and engineering; and linking character development with academic excellence.

Katie Charner-Laird, MEd, is the principal of the Cambridgeport School (preschool–grade 5) in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Katie works extensively in partnership with families, as the school was founded by parents and they are integral to its success. Cambridgeport was recently identified as the number two Dream School by the *Boston Globe*.

One lesson we learned pretty quickly is that just putting out a flyer inviting families to come isn't enough. We never met attendance goals with this method. Then we realized just how important it is to personally reach out to families. This brings me to my earlier point about being part of the community. Making connections and building relationships is how you get families in the door.

Communicating with a population that speaks so many languages can be challenging. Fortunately our parent–community coordinator provides Spanish interpretation and translation as needed. We also provide both English and Spanish translations of all written communication sent home to families.

Amy: Does Glenallan have an overall philosophy for engaging families?

Peter: Yes, we do. I reiterate this to myself and others. There are no excuses for failing to get families involved. Yes, barriers exist. But we must find ways to overcome these barriers.

Amy: That's a very powerful message—"no excuses." Do you have additional recommendations and words of wisdom for other schools working to strengthen partnerships with families?

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Peter: Overall, I'd say that the first step is to be a learner. Really listen to what families are telling you. This is how you will understand families' real needs. And once you hear about these needs, it's important to do your best to follow through and meet them.

Also, focus on relationships. Capitalize on opportunities to build relationships. Celebrate parents. Highlight the great things their children are doing. Families love to hear positive feedback about their children, and this will increase their desire to become involved.

Amy: It sounds like you've experienced a great deal of success at Glenallan. Can you end with a particular success story that comes to mind?

Peter: I can think of many successes, but I get particularly excited when I think about the field trips the fourth and fifth grade students have taken to the University of Maryland and Georgetown University. For the past three years, we've organized these trips so that children can visit college classrooms and the dorms, and speak to staff about college life. We see how excited they get, and it feels good to plant the seed that higher education is a long-term goal for them. Many children will be the first in their family to attend college. Families get equally excited about the trips. After the trips, we host family nights that focus on ways families can save for college tuition.

I've also had the pleasure of coaching a basketball team made up of 14 fourth and fifth grade boys from the school. It's great to act as a positive role model for these children. I've had the chance to get to know these boys and their families. I've learned so much from them. And I see how these relationships help motivate the children academically. It's been a wonderful experience.



Amy Shillady: Please share with readers a bit about Cambridgeport and its surrounding community.

Katie Charner-Laird: The school was founded by families in the early '90s as an alternative school, so families have played an important role since its inception. Now it is part of Cambridge Public Schools (CPS), and includes prekindergarten through fifth grade students.

In Cambridge, families can select their top three choices for the school they'd like their children to attend. CPS uses a lottery that takes into account families' preferences and socioeconomic status (SES) to determine children's school assignments. Taking into account SES helps ensure each school's population reflects the city's diversity.

In addition, Cambridgeport's student population represents a range of cultures. Approximately 50 percent of students are Caucasian, 20 percent are African American, and the remaining population is a mix of nationalities, including students from Somalia, Haiti, and countries in the Middle East and Central America.

We take a progressive approach to education at Cambridgeport. One of our core beliefs is the value of child-centered learning.

Amy: What are some successful strategies Cambridgeport has used to engage families?

Katie: Cambridgeport has a family liaison whose main role is to be accessible to all families in ways that support children's academic achievement and help to foster communication and a welcoming school climate for all families. She supports family participation and involvement in activities that further the mission of the school. This support takes many forms, and can vary from one relationship to the next within the school community.

We use lots of specific schoolwide strategies. One successful method has been to deliberately link family and community events to student learning. We typically have a theme tied to events. For example, we host Spaghetti Dinner and Literacy Night. These events have two main goals: bringing our community together and cultivating a love of reading. Families and children attend, we eat together, and then we provide fun activities that promote children's literacy skills.

We also share great ideas with each other. At staff meetings, teachers talk about effective ways they partner with families. For example, recently one teacher shared how she sends out a short email to families every Friday that high-

lights what children learned that week. She explained that many families really value this communication. The other teachers liked the idea, and it caught on. A lot of teachers now use this strategy and find it to be a successful way of communicating with families.

Amy: I can imagine that receiving a short email is great for busy families. What are some other ways to involve families, given all the demands of modern life?

Katie: Our school has a strong philosophy about honoring and celebrating all the ways families are involved in their children's education. We recognize and respect that parents are their children's first teachers. Some families want to be involved in the life of the school—attending school events, volunteering for different roles, or running for the school council. Others are engaged in their child's learning. This means transporting their children to and from school and other activities, helping them with homework, and getting them to bed on time. We value all the different ways there are to be a part of children's education.

Amy: Let's talk a little more about your school community. Cambridge is of course the location of the leading universities—Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Harvard University, and Lesley University. How does this backdrop influence the school's family engagement strategies?

Katie: Yes, our location does make our community unique. We have parents who attend or work at these prestigious schools, so there is a huge difference in the life experiences of these parents and other families. One of the challenges we have faced in terms of family engagement has been creating events where all families from different walks of life feel comfortable and welcome. To do this, we really try to get to know families to meet their specific needs. One simple way has been to offer events at different times of day to accommodate families' different schedules.

Amy: And how has the school engaged families from so many cultures and who speak different languages?

Katie: Many of the children and families we serve speak English and their home languages, so this makes communicating less of an issue. For those who do not speak English, we provide translators at certain events, such as family nights and parent conferences.

Amy: You mentioned earlier that teachers share good ideas with each other. What are some additional ways you and others encourage teachers to promote family engagement in their individual classrooms?

Katie: I try to draw on the power of teamwork. Teachers share good ideas and work together to plan engaging



events. For example, if I hear one kindergarten teacher is planning an event, I may encourage the other kindergarten teachers to get involved in helping to organize and host the event. This helps ensure a consistent opportunity for engagement across classrooms. And after encouraging teamwork, I find it now happens naturally among the teachers.

Amy: It sounds like you've helped create a culture of teamwork at Cambridgeport. Would you like to share a particular success story? Or a challenge the school's recently overcome?

Katie: As I mentioned earlier, it has sometimes been challenging to meet the different needs of families—given the wide range of their life experiences.

However, we recently started a summer reading program to help struggling readers. Although not a large number of children and families are invited to the program, there is a high rate of involvement, even from those families who don't come to other school events. For this reason I consider the program a big achievement. I think one contributing factor to its success is that families receive a personalized invitation. And despite their differences, all families want to see their children succeed.

It's really important to celebrate the various ways families are involved—both big and small.

Amy: What additional recommendations do you have for other schools that are trying to increase their family engagement efforts?

Katie: It's really important to celebrate the various ways families *are* involved—both big and small. We need to stop focusing on parents' deficits, on how families don't participate or get involved when we ask them to.

Although the stories from these two principals are unique to their settings, particular themes emerged from both interviews: the importance of commitment and perseverance, personal connections, teamwork, and deep respect for children and their families. These are strategies that can be replicated in other settings, without the need for additional staff or resources. And the benefits for children's learning can be huge.

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