



## Working with the School to Help Your Child Learn Tips for a Successful School Year

Welcome to this issue of *Parents' PLACE Pointers*! It is full of ideas parents can use to help their children succeed in school. We hope all parents of school-age children find some good ideas they can use to help their

children become happy, successful learners. After all, thirty years of research has proven the point: *All children learn best when their parents are involved in their learning!*



**Y**our child will benefit greatly if the important adults in his or her life—family members and teachers—work together. Following are some suggestions on how to build a good relationship with the school. Here are two important things to remember:

**First, if you need one, use an interpreter!** Please, don't let a language barrier stop you from talking with your child's teachers or other school personnel. *What you have to say is more important than the language you say it in!* If you're not comfortable speaking in English, ask the school to find someone who can interpret for you. There may be a teacher or parent liaison who can help, or you can bring a bilingual friend or adult relative with you.

**Second, you know your child best!** You are an important person in your child's education. You know

and love your child best! You have valuable knowledge about your child's likes, dislikes, and needs. For example, you may know your child learns best when he or she sits close to the teacher. Letting the teacher know these types of things will help your child at school.

### 10 ways to be involved at school

#### 1. Meet your child's teacher.

As soon as the school year starts, find a way to meet your child's teacher. Let the teacher know you want to help your child learn. Make it clear that if the teacher has a concern, you want to hear about it immediately.

#### 2. Attend parent-teacher conferences.

Schools usually have one or two parent-teacher conferences each year. You can bring a friend to

Parents' PLACE thanks WETA for permission to excerpt and adapt information from its Reading Rockets Web site ([www.ReadingRockets.org](http://www.ReadingRockets.org)) for this issue of *Pointers*. WETA is the Public Broadcasting Station in Washington, D.C. WETA and the American Federation of Teachers have created an English/Spanish bilingual Web site to give parents and educators tools and tips for how to help children learn and do well in school. This Web site is called *Colorín Colorado* and its address is [www.ColorinColorado.org](http://www.ColorinColorado.org). The name *Colorín Colorado* refers to the popular ending to Spanish language fairy tales. While there is no literal translation, the phrase *Colorín Colorado* is similar in meaning to "...and they lived happily ever after!"

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# Why not talk with your child's teacher?

Parents sometimes hesitate to talk with their child's teacher. Below are some reasons why parents may not want to talk with their child's teacher. They are very understandable! But they don't have to stop you from talking to your child's teacher about your child's learning. Read below to find out why.



- **I don't know English.**

Some parents are reluctant to talk with teachers if they cannot speak English well. But there is probably someone at the school who can interpret for you. You can also bring a bilingual friend or relative with you. What you have to say is important.

- **I don't have legal immigration status.**

The law in the United States requires public schools to educate all students, no matter what their immigration status. In Massachusetts, children are legally required to attend school beginning at age 6. You don't have to answer questions about your immigration status or your child's. Some school districts will ask for proof of your "residency." A "residence" is the place where a person lives permanently. Schools sometimes ask for documents that prove that you live in the school's district. People who do

not rent or have their own homes may not have the documents, such as a lease or utility bills, they need to prove where they live. These families may be eligible for "homeless" status even if they are not living on the streets or in shelters. Children who are homeless should be admitted to the public school even if they lack appropriate documentation. Talk with other parents to see what their experiences have been like with the school.

- **It feels rude to question a teacher.**

In some countries, parents are not expected to talk with a teacher about their child's learning. As a result, some parents feel it's rude to question a teacher or to suggest something different. In the U.S., however, it is not considered disrespectful. Teachers and schools

expect parents to participate. Your ideas and questions are welcomed and needed.

- **I don't have the time or transportation.**

For some parents, it's hard to find time to meet with teachers or to attend school events, especially during the day. But there are other ways you can communicate with your child's teacher. If you have a concern and can't meet face-to-face, send the teacher a short note or set up a time to talk on the phone. Ask about any concerns or insights that the teacher may have. The teacher might know why your child does not like class, or might have advice on how you can help your child learn at home. Talking with the teacher gives both of you a chance to share information and to work together for the good of your child.

## The United States has strong laws that govern children's education.

The *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB, the main education law in the United States) gives important options and rights to parents. NCLB has a special interest in helping children who are just learning English to succeed. This law says that all children who are learning English must have the oppor-

tunity to study English in school. At the same time, it also says that these students must be given the opportunity to learn the same academic subjects that all other children are learning. NCLB gives two special options to parents whose children are in schools that are "in need of improvement":

- **School Choice Option:** Parents have the right to transfer their children out of schools that have not met state improvement goals (also called "adequate yearly progress") for two years, as long as there is space available in a school that is making adequate progress. Schools that must allow choice must pay the transportation fees for a child to attend another school within the district at the parent's request.

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interpret for you or ask the school to provide an interpreter. Talk with your child before the meeting to see if there's anything he or she wants you to discuss with the teacher. When you meet with the teacher, bring a list of your questions or concerns. You can also ask to meet with your child's teacher any time during the year.



### 3. Ask questions.

If something concerns you about your child's learning or behavior, ask the teacher or principal about it and seek their advice. Your questions might be like these—How is my child doing in reading? What can I do to help my child at home? Which reading group is my child in? Do you have any specific concerns?

### 4. Find out how your child is doing compared to other students.

Ask the teacher how well your child is doing in class compared to other students. If your child is not keeping up, especially when it comes to reading, ask what you or the school can do to help. Children learn differently and at different rates. Some kids need extra time, especially if they're also learning a second language. It's important, though, that a child not get too far behind, especially in learning how to read. Most children should know how to read by the end of third grade.

### 5. Join your school's parent-teacher group or other group or council.

At most schools, a group of parents meets regularly to talk about the school. This group is usually called the Parent Teacher Association or the Parent Teacher Organization (PTA/PTO). The meetings give you a good chance to talk with other parents and to work together to improve the school.

There are also other opportunities for parents to be involved with the schools. For example, each public school in Massachusetts must have a School Council. The Councils were created by the Education Reform Act of 1993 to give parents, teachers, and community members



an opportunity to share ideas and influence decisions about their local schools. Parents are important members of these Councils. The number of parents on the Council must be equal to the number of teachers, including the principal. As a parent of an English language learner, you bring an important voice to the discussions.

Many schools also have School Parent Councils (SPC). Boston, for example, asks each school to have an SPC and a School Site (Governing) Council with parent representation. All parents are SPC members, and only parents can be members. All school districts must also have a Parent Advisory Council for parents of students who are in special education. Call your child's school to find out about its groups, committees, or councils.

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- **Supplemental Educational Services (SES) Option:** Schools that have not met state improvement goals for three years must provide free tutoring services that take place outside of school time. A student may be eligible for SES if he or she qualifies for free and/or reduced-price lunch, and is behind other students academically. Students who are English language learners can be eligible for SES.

- Another law, the **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)**, ensures that your child will receive special school services (for free) if he or she is found to have a disability that affects learning. For more information about IDEA, go to [www.fcsn.org/parent/guide/pgintro.html](http://www.fcsn.org/parent/guide/pgintro.html)

Please contact Parents' PLACE for free *Pointers* on **Public School Choice** and **Supplemental Educational Services** under NCLB, and for information on special education in Massachusetts.

**Parents' PLACE:**  
on the web: [www.pplace.org](http://www.pplace.org)  
toll free: (877) 471-0980

# Major Changes in Bilingual Education

Parents of English language learners (bilingual students) need to be aware of major changes in bilingual education in Massachusetts since the passage of Question 2. Beginning in the fall of 2003, most students who had been enrolled in bilingual education classes were moved into regular education classes or English immersion classes. For example, of the 9,800 students in Boston who were in bilingual education, 4,000 were placed in regular education classes and 5,000 were put in temporary English immersion classes. How are these previously bilingual students doing, either in learning English or in learning their academic

subjects? Parents should ask their children's teachers how well their children are learning.

## **Immersion Waiver**

Parents of bilingual students anywhere in Massachusetts should be aware that they have a right to request a "waiver" so that their children who are 10 years or older can continue to receive instruction in bilingual education classes. This is particularly important for parents of high school students, because many high schools are being reorganized into small schools that will have less capacity to support bilingual students.



Parents who want their children to receive bilingual education should ask the school Principal for the waiver form that they need to fill out.

If you have questions, please call Samuel Hurtado, Latino Education Action Network coordinator, at Massachusetts Advocates for Children at (617) 357-8431, ext. 232.

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### **6. Help out at your child's school.**

Teachers appreciate it when parents help out at the school! There are many ways you can contribute. You can volunteer in your child's class or in the school library. You can make food for a school event. If you work during the day, you can attend "parents' night" activities or your child's performances.

### **7. Make sure your child does homework and keep track of progress.**

Ask your child each day what he or she did at school. Make sure your child studies and finishes assignments. Read your child's report cards. In American schools, parents receive reports from their children's teachers three or four times a year. These "report cards" are a way to let parents know how their children are doing in their studies and at school in general.


### **8. Find homework help for your child.**

If it is difficult for you to help your child with homework or school projects, see if you can find someone else who can help. Contact the school, tutoring groups, after-school programs, churches, and libraries. Ask the teacher or principal if your child is eligible for Supplemental Education Services under NCLB. Or, see if an older student, neighbor, or friend can help.

### **9. Learn what the school offers.**

Read the information the school sends home. Ask to receive the information translated into your language. Talk to other parents to find out what programs the school offers. Maybe there's a music program, after-school activity, sports team, or tutoring program your child would enjoy.

**10. Apply for special services if you think your child may need it.** Trust your instincts! You know your child best. If you are concerned about your child's learning, you may want to have your child evaluated for possible learning or reading disabilities. To learn more about how special education works in Massachusetts, call the Federation for Children with Special Needs: (800) 331-0688 (toll free in MA). The Information Specialists can help you over the telephone, and can send you written information in English, Spanish, or Portuguese.



**PARENTS' PLACE**  
**PARENTS LEARNING ABOUT CHILDREN'S EDUCATION**

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