

Forging a
Multicultural
PTA in Arlington

By
Sarah Markel

Illustration by
Hernan Sosa

Out
with
the
Old

Henry Escalante

stands behind a makeshift omelet station in the staff lounge at Abingdon Elementary as a line of teachers bends around the room. Escalante, 35, has taken the morning off from his job as a chef with Susan Gage Caterers. He has borrowed equipment and spent about \$200 of his own money to make omelets for 80 Abingdon staff members at the PTA breakfast. Yet, Escalante, who emigrated to the United States from Bolivia seven years ago and whose daughter, Emily, is a first-grader at Abingdon, is not a member of the PTA.

¶ In fact, when pressed, PTA president Colleen Weiser, 50, cannot recall Escalante ever having attended a PTA meeting. She should know. Only a handful of regulars typically show up for the meetings and many of them are teachers.

By the Numbers

At Abingdon, where 40 languages are spoken and half the population is Latino, only about 12 percent of parents are members of the PTA, far below the standards of the National Parent Teacher Association. Yet, not reflected in these numbers are parents like Escalante who contribute in ways that can transform the equation for PTAs willing to be flexible. At Abingdon, they are learning to do just that.

Getting immigrant families involved has long been a perceived challenge for PTAs. Some parents lack transportation. Others work nights. Many are not aware of the complexities of the American educational system with its course selections, graduation requirements and reading levels. A few, such as one Abingdon mother who asked through a translator not to be identified, lack any formal education themselves and are still learning how to address teachers as equals.

Meeting in the Middle

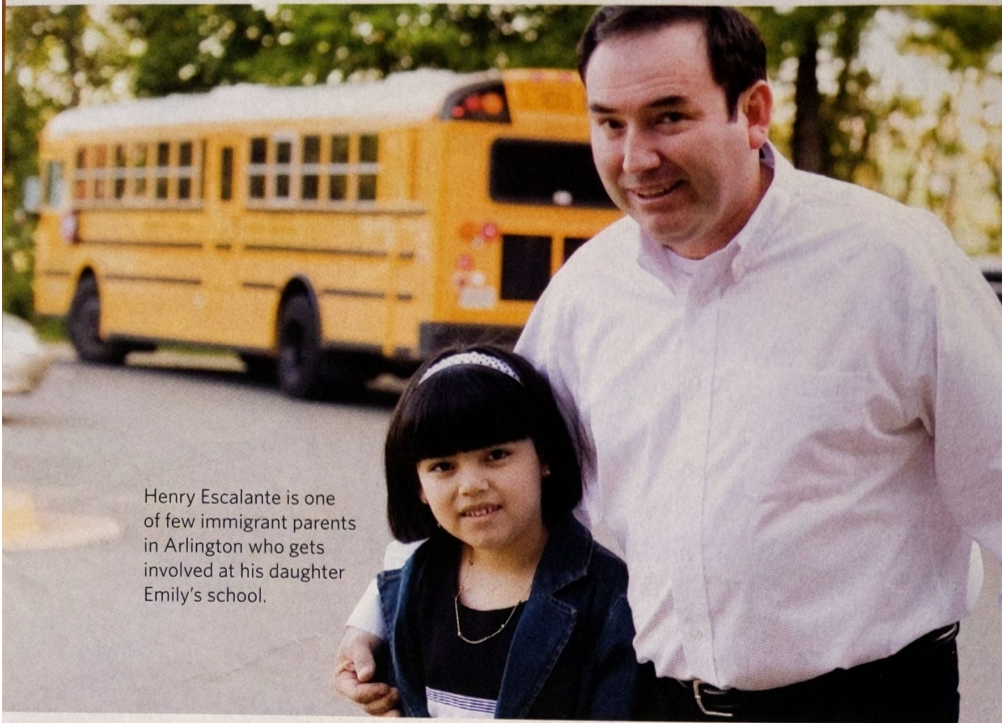
Labeling newcomers still struggling to integrate as disinterested parents, is unfair argues Emma Violand-Sanchez, Ph.D., director of English for Speakers of Other Languages/High Intensity Language Training at Arlington Public Schools. "All parents," she said, "want what is best for their kids." She insists the perception that immigrant parents are not interested in getting involved is just that: "Parents from different cultures come with different expectations about family involvement." For example, in her native Bolivia, she explains (her own parents emigrated when she was in high school), parents get involved by buying uniforms, overseeing homework and organizing enrichment. But not typically by joining a committee.

People on the outside, said Sanchez, need help learning about the system; and "if you want parents at the highest levels of decision making, you have to change the process." At Abingdon, Weiser and co-president Tina Masciangoli acknowledge this, but to get there, they still have to help people feel comfortable just coming into the school.

That task was made difficult by a dormant PTA, which had lost its nucleus of active parents when the Spanish Immersion program was moved to another school. (Other PTAs with strong core groups have had an easier time). In 2002, when Weiser and Masciangoli took over, the organization was a shambles. They started out in the red, but without any financial records. Just paying the national dues was a stretch.

Yet both were committed to turning the Abingdon PTA around. They recognized that if they were going to engage with their immigrant families, they would need to move beyond the PTAs of their middle-class childhoods.

“ Parents from different cultures come with different expectations about family involvement.”



Henry Escalante is one of few immigrant parents in Arlington who gets involved at his daughter Emily's school.

“ The school is becoming a community center for families in need.”

What's Lost in Translation

At first they tried the usual lures of offering language interpretation, babysitting and bus transportation to and from PTA meetings. They translated fliers using volunteers found on Craigslist.org. They tried holding the meetings out in the community at various times of the day.

None of the outreach really made much of a difference.

Violand-Sanchez said this is because “translation is not enough. You have to have a previous understanding.” She pointed out that the procedural knowledge required to take part in formal decision making is largely cultural and even with translation, it isn't always comprehensible.

Weiser and Masciangoli returned to their research. They knew they needed “a hook to draw parents in,” said Weiser. They reasoned that if their goal was merely to get parents to show up, maybe the hook should be the kids.

When the school's Cardinal Net-

work News (CNN) broadcast a special evening edition of their morning show, parents showed up. “It was the first time many working parents had the opportunity to see their sons or daughters ... work with audio equipment, teleprompters and cameras,” Weiser said in an email. “The looks of pride on their faces said it all. They were seeing their American dream of more opportunities for their children come true.”

A Little of that Human Touch

For social events, the breakthrough was a school picnic. A bilingual parent approached various immigrant families with specific requests. Can you make a salad? Can you organize games? The level of attendance was unprecedented. Weiser and Masciangoli credit the personal aspect. Parents who had never responded to a translated flyer were happy to bring a dish when they felt their contributions were valued.

Since then, the PTA has worked closely with the school to organize events that are anxiety-free for their immigrant families. Together they hold coffees, nature presentations, concerts, a Winter Craft Night. Sometimes they sponsor multicultural nights, such as Salsa N' Chips,

which featured Spanish, Mexican and South American dancers. But by and large most events are designed to transcend the barriers of culture and language. The hope is that along the way, these immigrant families will make friends and feel relaxed enough in the school environment that one day they will join in on the decision making process.

It's starting to work.

Principal Joanne Uyeda said that demand for translation at conferences has increased because more parents are attending. Families are also coming to the school when they need help. The school is becoming a community center for families in need. “We have been making referrals to support families in crisis,” she said. When one family was recently displaced by fire, they came to the school for help first.

Volunteerism and fundraising are up, too. The catalog sale, which featured gift items with a multicultural flair, raised thousands of dollars, mostly in crumpled bills and pocket change. For Weiser this is an example of how parents will help in ways they are already comfortably familiar. “Volunteering comes in many forms,” she shrugged. “I don't get discouraged if I can't get 100-percent membership.”

Back in Bolivia, Henry Escalante would have feted his daughter's teachers on June 6. But upon learning that Teacher Appreciation Week takes place here in May, he was eager to adapt his customs and pitch in.

He refused an offer of funding from the PTA. “I'm doing this because I would like to [show my] appreciation of the teachers,” he said. Last year when Emily, now 7, began kindergarten she cried a lot. The school worked with her parents to help her adjust. “I am so glad my daughter has made the assimilation at school.”

As Escalante tips an omelet onto the plate of a smiling teacher, her colleagues tease him about the early start to his day. “It's no problem,” he grins. “It makes me happy.”

Afterward, he takes Weiser aside for a quick conference.

Turns out, he wants to do this again next year. ▲