

# Teaching ESL to Immigrant Families in Public Schools

BY RANDY M. WOOD

Immigrant adults often seek key skills, such as speaking English as a second language, and desire a good education for their children. The Learning English Among Friends family literacy program helps public schools welcome immigrants and assist them with their educational goals.

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Public schools across the country today are looking for ways to welcome and assist immigrant families as they move into their communities. In Texas, where sixty-three percent of immigrants are from Mexico,<sup>1</sup> the words of Juan Hernandez, author and advisor to President George W. Bush and President Vicente Fox, ring true:

Most importantly, we must find a way to stop seeing our neighbors to the south as enemies. Mexico is not the enemy. Mexicans are loving, generous people who only need opportunity to receive as much as they contribute. So we must learn to be partners.<sup>2</sup>

Immigrant adults often are seeking key skills, such as speaking English as a second language, that allow them to obtain higher paying jobs and escape the cycle of poverty. They also want a good education for their children. As one recent immigrant says of the way they feel about their families:

As Latino parents we have to help our children in every way possible. Simply because we don't speak English very well doesn't mean that we can't support our children to succeed in school. We value

education, and there is much that we do at home every day. And staying involved in the school to watch over them is an extension of our parental responsibility.<sup>3</sup>

To help the local public schools welcome immigrants to the community and assist them with their educational goals, the Baylor University School of Education began a simple tutoring program in 2001 that has evolved into a family literacy program called Learning English Among Friends (LEAF).

One popular caricature of university professors has us ensconced in an ivory tower, researching important questions and exhorting these findings to students who bow at our feet! However, the Baylor University School of Education has decided that if we are going to make a difference in the education scene, we must move our programs out of that ivory tower and into the community through programs like LEAF. To prepare our students to be excellent teachers, we must model how to be active in the community. This professional change has transformed many lives – not only the lives of university professors and students, but also the lives of public school students and their families whom we serve.

### **LEARNING ENGLISH (AND MORE)**

LEAF started with a simple request to an inner city professional development school principal – “give us fifty of your most academically challenged students who need additional support to be educationally successful.” What evolved from that conversation is an innovative community-based collaboration between Baylor University and César Chávez Middle School in Waco, Texas, that is transforming the community of immigrant families through academic enrichment for students and ESL instruction for their parents.

Over the years we expanded LEAF into a multi-part program for students and their families, because research and experience show that most at-risk students in American public schools come from non-English speaking families. Furthermore, there is a definite relationship between children’s early reading success and their parents’ reading behaviors.

Meeting immigrant students’ needs was the first phase of the program. Baylor University undergraduates began tutoring selected at-risk students in César Chávez Middle School for forty-five minutes per session, twice a week for a year. This helped the students to succeed in the state-mandated exam and their school to become the only “Texas Recognized Secondary School” in the Waco Independent School District in 2007.

In these tutoring sessions we soon discovered that many of the at-risk students came from families that did not read, write, or speak English, and did not understand the goals and methods of public school education. For instance, after about the third week of the program a mother came to the school library where we were tutoring. She ran across the room and gave me a bear hug. Tears flowed down her face as she said, “Thank you for saving my family!” She described how her daughter had been ready to

move to Mexico and live with her grandmother rather than face her friends at school, who thought she was “dumb” because she was struggling with addition, subtraction, and multiplication of fractions. But after being tutored by a Baylor math major, her daughter was working her math problems without help and even tutoring her friends who now came to her for assistance.

Interactions like this led us to develop the second phase of LEAF, which invited immigrant families to be engaged in their children’s school, learn

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the English language, and become familiar with American education and culture. We worked with the César Chávez Middle School teachers, administrators, and Campus Decision Making Committee (CDMC) to conduct a yearlong study of literacy in the South Waco community. It was especially important for the CDMC – a group of business leaders,

community leaders, parents, teachers, and friends of the school, who meet monthly to discuss ways to improve the school and increase parental involvement – to help plan and endorse the LEAF program.

As we launched the expanded program, twelve Baylor student teachers and a university professor waited patiently at the door of the school wondering if any parents would come. More than twenty adults came that first day, and most of them were accompanied by children who introduced them and said they were excited that their mothers and fathers wanted to learn English.

Over the next five weeks the number of parents steadily grew. Some of us worried that the constant afternoon rain storms might hurt attendance, but we were told that rainy weather was beneficial and not a hindrance. Many of the men attending LEAF were day laborers who would not be off work if it were not raining. So, the weather “problem” was really a “blessing,” enabling many more adult students to come for English instruction.

Today the LEAF program includes more than three hundred adults meeting each week in six public schools across Waco and adjacent Bellmead, Texas.<sup>4</sup> As a spinoff, in January, 2005, we launched the LEAF @ BU program to provide literacy training for more than forty housekeepers at Baylor University who cannot read, write, or speak English.

Two other programs have grown from the LEAF initiative. In the spring semester each year, Baylor University School of Education novices (first-year education majors) are matched with pairs of César Chávez Middle School students for tutoring twice a week. This enrichment program has helped the

school achieve the “Outstanding” marks, with nearly 88% of students passing the state assessment tests. In another initiative, the Cool Literacy Math program, fifty middle school students who have never passed the state assessment in mathematics receive math-specific tutorial help.<sup>5</sup>

## LEARNING AMONG FRIENDS

LEAF is built on collaboration between the University, the parents’ workplaces, and local public schools. The program emphasizes friendship – the “F” in its title – as the true basis for learning. These immigrant parents not only learn ESL, they become more comfortable with American public education, learn about current community events, and enjoy new relationships with neighbors they meet through small group instruction. As the parents attend weekly LEAF sessions at their local school, they see the warm and caring environment where their children study during the week. They get to know community leaders who visit periodically to inform the parents about what is happening in the neighborhood and encourage them to become more involved. They share their educational success with their families as they gain the ability to read in English to their children at home. Finally, they develop positive parenting skills related to American public education with which they can assist their children’s classroom performance.<sup>6</sup> Originally thought of as the “crowning project” of César Chávez Middle School, LEAF is now recognized as the strong foundation for “Strengthening Families, Building Communities” in South Waco.

The family is the most influential context for learning, followed by the school and the wider community. By enriching classroom curriculum and providing after-school tutoring for new immigrant students, and teaching English and parenting skills to their parents, LEAF supports the fundamental environment in which new immigrant students live and learn, and empowers their families to take advantage of their educational opportunities. Helping these families to support their children in education strengthens the entire family and helps to end the cycle of poverty through education.

## NOTES

1 U.S. Census Bureau, *2005-2007 American Community Survey 3-Year Estimates*, GCT0505: Percent of [Foreign-born] People Born in Mexico.

2 Juan Hernandez, *The New American Pioneers: Why Are We Afraid of Mexican Immigrants?* (Lanham, MD: Pneuma Life Publishing, 2006), 51.

3 Concha Delgado Gaitan, *Involving Latino Families in Schools* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2004), vii.

4 Currently LEAF provides programs at J. W. Carver Academy (a Waco Independent School District magnet school that is also a professional development school, or teacher-training location, for Baylor University), Lake Air Middle School, Tennyson Middle School, University Middle School, and the LaVega Junior High, Dixon Campus.

5 The expansion of LEAF and its associated programs to other schools has been made possible through the financial support of GEAR UP Waco (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs), which received an \$11.3 million, six-year grant from the U.S. Department of Education in 2006. GEAR UP Waco is a partnership among

Baylor University, Texas State Technical College-Waco, Making Connections with Youth Count Inc., City of Waco Academy for Educational Development, and the Waco Independent School District that prepares at-risk students academically and socially for college.

6 Because many family members do not understand how they can help their children in school, in LEAF we discuss questions to ask children when they come home from school, such as “Do you have any homework?” and “Do you have your books?” One example of this confusion is the story of a mother who thought her son was the “Number One” student in his class because he brought home a paper for her to sign every nine weeks. Only later, as we read the paper together, did she understand it was a deficiency slip.

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