EDUCATION WEEK

Schools Lean on Staff Who Speak Students' Language to Keep English-Learners Connected

By Corey Mitchell
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For weeks, Alicia Araje-Van Dyk, a multilingual liaison in the Burlington, Vt., schools, has juggled late-night check-ins and predawn wakeup calls.

There are the 1 a.m. calls with Swahili-speaking parents—many of them fresh off 4 p.m. to midnight shifts as essential workers—struggling to use internet hot spots and access online classes for their children in English, a language they barely understand.

Hours later, Van Dyk is often back at it again, stirring pre-teens and teenagers out of bed for their morning classes with early morning texts and phone calls.

During the day, she fields calls from teachers concerned about students who are not logging into class, tracks down tutors for those who are, and counsels her caseload of 43 African refugee families on how they can curb the spread of the novel coronavirus.

“This has been a difficult time,” said Van Dyk, a Burundian refugee who has worked for the school system since 2013. “I cannot imagine the adjustment for families who are new to this country.”

Distance learning has posed a significant challenge for families who are not fluent in English and the teachers who educate them and will continue to be in the months ahead.

Nearly 5 million U.S. schoolchildren are classified as English-language learners and millions more come from homes where their parents speak a different language: About 1 in 4 children, roughly 18 million, in the nation’s K-12 schools live with immigrant parents.

As they struggle to keep instruction going for this vulnerable group of students, school districts around the country are leaning heavily on multilingual staff—employees that have become more of a necessity than a luxury during the nation’s widespread school closures—to connect with these English-learner and immigrant families.

The stakes are high: Among advocates and researchers, there is concern that the extended school closures happening across the nation could exacerbate the struggles of a student population that already faces a high risk of experiencing homelessness, hunger, and academic struggle.

“As [schools] pivoted to virtual or online education, it really [showed] in very concrete ways the impact of language barriers and what their consequences are,” said Gabriela Uro, the director for English-language-learner policy and a researcher for the Council of the Great City Schools, an organization of the nation’s largest urban school systems.

Valuing Connections

Van Dyk is among 11 members of the Burlington school system’s multilingual team who have abandoned their 9-to-5 schedules to work round-the-clock to help non-English-speaking families navigate everything from computers to American culture.

Before online instruction began, the liaisons reached out to determine if families had access to technology, food, and support from social service agencies. They’re also dispatched to soccer fields to break up pick-up games that violate social distancing guidelines.

For some staff, especially those who are immigrants or refugees themselves, helping parents understand the nuances of the U.S. education system can be difficult, because they did not attend schools here either. They’re serving as navigators and cultural connectors in places they do not fully understand themselves.

“The [families] need someone to guide them through all this stuff because of the language, because of the culture,” said Ahmed Jasim, an Iraqi immigrant who works for the Portland, Maine, schools as a parent community specialist for Arabic-speaking students and families. “But sometimes we get lost honestly.”

Schools had trouble connecting with English-learner families long before the coronavirus shut schools.

Federal studies have shown that English-learner families are far less likely to serve on school committees, attend parent-teacher conferences, or go to school or class events, all important opportunities to communicate about students’ academic progress.

“Parents are feeling overwhelmed,” said Celina Moreno, the president and CEO of the Intercultural Development Research Association, a nonprofit focused on ensuring equal educational opportunity. “Without family engagement, all the educational gaps are widening.”

The association is among 40 education and civil rights groups that have asked Congress for a $1 billion infusion to states and school districts to support English-learner students and bolster family engagement.

When schools shut in Vermont in mid-March, Burlington parent Dahn Tamung needed help getting Chromebooks for her three children, one each in elementary, middle, and high school, and technical support for their transition to online learning. Schools there are now closed for the academic year.

Schools liaison Krishna Bharandi, who worked as a teacher for 10 years in India before coming to the United States, did not have all the answers, but knew people who did.

Using their shared language of Nepali, he helped Tamung communicate with her children's teachers and found staff who could help her find her youngest child's homework assignments online. Tamung speaks with liaisons at least once per week.

"I do not know much about the U.S. school system," Tamung said through her translator, her 8th grade daughter Shusanti. "But me and my community are valued here."

'It's a Struggle'

In states such as Vermont and Maine, refugee resettlement has enjoyed widespread support. State and local political leaders view immigrants as a welcome answer to their struggles to lure younger people to live and work there. But the infusion of new immigrants can pose challenges for schools that need to connect with families in their home languages.

Thirty-one percent of English-learners in Maine speak Somali. Roughly 24 percent of English-learners in Vermont speak Nepali.

In Portland, the parent community specialists serve crucial roles: interpreting for parents of students with disabilities during individualized education program meetings and explaining to parents that they must now serve as co-teachers for their children during distance learning.

"There's a difference now because they have to work with the teachers," said Monique Mutumwinka, a parent community special with the Portland schools who works with families in five languages. "The computer, it's an issue for them, the language is an issue. It's a struggle, especially in this crisis of remote learning, to just learn to use the devices."

To foster communication with families, some districts use software that can send text messages and place phone calls in multiple languages. In Burlington, all recorded phone calls are sent out in nine languages.

"We still struggle with basic ways to connect with families," said Miriam Ehtesham-Cating, the director of English-learner programs for the Burlington schools. "Then all of a sudden, we were not together."

Given just a two-day notice that schools were shutting down and faced with the reality that many families, especially those new to the country, did not have email accounts, the liaisons launched a phone campaign to connect with at least one parent in every household.

The task was daunting: The Burlington schools have about 550 students who are eligible for English-learner support services. At least double that amount have parents who do not speak English at home.

Those learning challenges were already significant for English-learners because of challenges inside and outside of school.

A December 2019 report from the U.S. Department of Education found that few teachers reported assigning English-learners to use digital learning resources outside of class, in part because of concerns about students' lack of access to technology at home.

Now that those same students have been thrust into online learning the odds are stacked against them. Nearly a quarter of immigrants and their U.S.-born children live in poverty. A recent report from the U.S. Department of Education found that while English-learners are only 10 percent of the student population, they represent 16 percent of the homeless student population. In urban districts, English-learners account for nearly 20 percent of student homelessness.

The challenges that English-learners face are why Van Dyk does not mind the middle-of-the-night phone calls from concerned parents or the early morning pep talks for students.

“I understand their struggles,” said Van Dyk, who worked as a paralegal and studied law before fleeing her native Burundi. She worked in school cafeterias before taking her current district job.

“Education is the one ticket that everybody is given in life,” she said. “I don’t want them to fail because they’re at home.”