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Breaking down new barriers

By Kristin E. Holmes
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The picture of a neighborhood school as the cozy and familiar home to generations of kids next door is often a mirage for immigrant parents such as Leonila Piñon.

The school building where their children are becoming a blend of old and new can be just another strange place in a long line of the unfamiliar.

But a new program in the Bristol Township School District aims to make Piñon and other immigrant families feel more at home. The initiative chips away at the barriers that keep immigrant parents at arm's length by offering a blend of English classes and family activity nights.

"It has helped a lot," Piñon said in Spanish through a translator. "Before, I was shy about everything. I didn't feel comfortable participating or doing anything at school."

Piñon and 11 other mothers are participating in the program, called the Liberty Learning Center. In addition to learning the language, mothers and their children play educational games and collaborate on their children's homework. They also learn about their neighborhood through presentations by local organizations such as the Levittown Regional Library.

"This is a real need in our district because we have a large population of English-language learners, and in a lot of cases, they are falling behind" academically, said Tina Ruckh, program manager. "One of the causes is that parents aren't involved in school in a big way."

Language, lack of transportation and babysitting, and basic unfamiliarity with school operations create barriers to family participation, Ruckh said.

English-language learners make up about 9 percent of the student population in the Bristol Township School District - and the number is growing, said Eileen Kelliher, the district's director of public relations and outreach.

Four years ago, Theresa Giardine, principal of Abraham Lincoln Elementary School, was the district's volunteer coordinator of ESL (English as a second language) services. ESL classes were offered to students in four of the district's 12 schools, Giardine said. Now, all schools offer programming, and a staffer is paid to supervise the ESL curriculum.

The Liberty Learning Center targets mothers with children in kindergarten through sixth grade. Sessions started in the summer of 2008, and include two 26-week semesters. Funding is provided through a two-year \$350,000

grant by the state Department of Education. The district plans to apply for a two-year extension. Ten families are on a waiting list.

Twice weekly, mothers attend English classes taught by teachers from Vita Education Services. The mothers, from countries including Turkey, Mexico, and Costa Rica, as well as Puerto Rico, attend the classes at the Lower Bucks Family YMCA in Fairless Hills.

Every Thursday, their children participate in an after-school tutoring hour at Abraham Lincoln Elementary. After the tutoring, the mothers join their children for a light dinner and a family activity session, which could include educational games or a presentation by a community service group or local business. Presenters have included Head Start, CareerLink, and Sesame Place.

The district also provides transportation and babysitting, Ruckh said.

Before the program, Piñon, who is from Mexico, couldn't help 9-year-old daughter Sandra with school questions. Now, she can help - although Piñon sometimes asks her older children for tips.

At a family activity night last week, ESL teachers Kathy Jackson and Cheryl Travagline used a Halloween game of "Who am I?" for education and fun.

Each mother wore a sign taped to her back designating a holiday item such as a pumpkin, spider, or skeleton.

The mothers guessed who they were by asking questions.

"Am I human?" asked Fatma Akkoc, whose 10-year-old daughter, Merve, is a fourth grader. No, the group of mothers and students said in unison.

Akkoc emigrated from Turkey four years ago, and for a time worked in fear at a local factory because she couldn't understand the supervisor.

"Am I big?" Akkoc said in English, continuing the game.

No, the crowd replied.

Eventually, Akkoc realized she was an owl.

So far, the program appears to have contributed to an uptick in student achievement, Giardine said.

Math test scores for the district's ESL students increased by 10 percent between the 2007-08 and 2008-09 school years, Giardine said; reading scores were up by 20 percent.

"When we conceived this program, we expected parents and children who came to benefit," Giardine said. "But even other parents and ESL families are more involved. The families in the program go home to their community and teach each other. All of us have benefitted."

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