The parking lot was overflowing. Standing room only in the gym. Families of various cultures wearing headphones in anticipation of the translated presentation, while interpreters wearing neon yellow signs reading “Yo Hablo Espanol” or “Tôi nói tiếng Việt” greeted parents at the door. The positive energy of a packed house seeped into atmosphere for the past two years at Shuksan Middle School’s Back to School Night. If you had walked into this same event in years past, you would have seen empty chairs and predominately white faces.

The Back to School Night transformation that occurred was sparked by the creation of ELL Family Meetings. These evening meetings are geared toward all families who speak a language other than English. When I started my position as ELL Specialist, my vision was to ensure that all families felt welcome at our school and informed about their child’s education. These family meetings have helped me develop trusting relationships with parents and engage our community partners to better support students. When we think about supporting exceptional learners, we must never forget the critical role that parents, families, and our community play.

It was very important that the same interpreter attend every meeting and make every phone call. This consistency allowed the interpreters to get to know each family personally and, in turn, communicate more effectively with them. Some lessons we learned were 1) knowing the best time of day to call home, 2) getting to talk to the right person, and 3) understanding barriers faced by family members preventing them from being involved. We also learned to take time for questions, address concerns, and help with particular needs. Theses efforts have paid off. Our interpreters are now seen as an extension of our Shuksan family and our school community. Interpreters are valued members that parents can trust. I personally consider them my dearest colleagues and without them, I would be unable to fully engage families who speak English as a second language.

A second critical element to the success of our ELL Family Meetings is the use of digital transmitters, which allow us to hold our meetings in real time. As I present information, the interpreters translate simultaneously into different languages (see Figure 2). Each language is tuned into a specific channel and parents hear what I am saying, as well as the questions and comments of others, through their headsets in their native language. One mom laughed as she put on her headset and looked around the room, “We look like a mini United Nations!” There is a lot of truth to this statement. This technology allows families to sit anywhere in the room during the meetings since they do not have to sit in proximity to their interpreter.

Access related resources at www.mycoachkatie.com
lending to an inclusive atmosphere rich in cultural diversity.

A third essential component is to engage parents as learners and elicit ideas for meetings based on their needs (Ferlazzo & Hammond, 2009, p. 6). Many parents who attend our ELL Family Meetings want to be informed about the Shuksan calendar and “what was happening at school this month,” but they want to learn about much more. I always start our first ELL Family Meeting of the year by providing parents with a list of potential topics, including

- School events and activities
- How to contact teachers
- Shuksan PRIDE citizenship program
- How to keep track of my child’s grades and assignments
- Standards-based grading and what it means for me and my child
- Study skills for my child
- School sports, clubs, and registration
- How to talk to my child about books
- How to talk to my child about homework
- ELL proficiency levels and what they mean for my child
- The Common Core Standards and what they mean for my child
- English classes for parents
- Computer classes for parents
- Job training courses
- Community resources for my family
- Benefits of being bilingual
- Parenting tips when you have a pre-teen

Parents have shown an interest in these topics, and all of them provide structure for meaningful support. Each topic meets some need, but sometimes new interests arise and flexibility is required to create a system that supports students effectively. For example, last year eighty percent of parents requested information about our standards-based grading system. For the following meeting, I created a visual presentation to explain standards-based grading and how to read student progress reports. Using our school laptops, parents got hands-on practice accessing grades and feedback online (see Figure 3). I also created a handout, translated into various languages, which showed login information and the steps needed for accessing their child’s grades and assignments online. I heard one parent comment, “I finally know how to talk to my kids about their grades.” Then she chuckled, “My kid is going to love this.”

The information we provided met the need for most parents, but at the same time we also observed some gaps. For example, some parents did not have convenient access to a computer. Still others were missing basic computer skills necessary for monitoring their child’s progress using online tools. As a result, we set up a workstation for parents in our front office with our student information system preloaded and nearby staff available to assist. Although we rely on computer technology to facilitate communication, we also send paper copies of progress reports home every month and provide time at ELL Family Meetings for parents to inquire about their child’s progress.

In addition to grading concerns, parents also requested opportunities to enroll in English and computer classes. In response, I invited our local library to a meeting to share information about free courses offered in our community. We signed up 18 families for library cards that night and 8 families enrolled in a course.

One of the most inspiring moments of the year was when we presented information to parents about the benefits of being bilingual compiled by the Administration for Children and Families (2013). Our discussion surrounded the emotional, social, cognitive, and academic benefits of knowing two or more languages as well as how parents can support first language development at home. We wanted parents to hear Shuksan faculty and staff believe that being bilingual, multilingual, and multicultural are assets, not obstacles. In addition, we wanted parents to know that speaking and reading to children in their first language does not hinder student learning, but enhances it (Páez & Rinaldi, 2006). Our meeting ended at 7:30 that night, but the room was buzzing with conversation until well after 8:00.

### Overview of Shuksan’s ELL Family Support model at goo.gl/Vem6sn

Our ELL Family Meetings continue to grow in attendance and diversity. At our first meeting in 2011, 10 families attended and almost all were Spanish-speaking. At our last meeting in 2013, 38 families attended, and six languages were represented (Spanish, Vietnamese, Russian, Punjabi, Farsi, and Chinese). As a result of our efforts to build trusting relationships and provide relevant information in first languages, parents feel welcome and valued, and recognize Shuksan as a vital community resource. In turn, we recognize parents as a resource for the success of our students. Overall, we have found that if we communicate effectively with families and engage parents as learners, we can meet the needs of our diverse and exceptional student population.

### References


Katie Brown is an ELL Specialist, Instructional Coach, and the 2014 Washington State Teacher of the Year. She currently works at Shuksan Middle School in Bellingham where she supports students and families who speak English as a second language. She also leads professional development for her staff and is best known for her ability to help teachers learn how to teach content and language simultaneously to meet the needs of language learners. You can access more resources from Katie and other Shuksan teachers at www.mycoachkatie.com.