



Why do I love my children's elementary school? Besides the passionate teachers and high standards for learning... I love the astounding cultural diversity of our families. We live in the most ethnically diverse county in the United States (according to [one study from Rice University](#)) and our school's population reflects our multicultural community. While the different perspectives and cultural traditions infinitely enrich our students' experiences, it also brings unique challenges.

As a volunteer in our school's PTO, I hear the plea of our committee chairs:

- How do we bridge the language gap to include parents whose first language is not English?
- How can we integrate our PTO and include parents from all of the backgrounds represented at our school?
- How do we reach parents from other cultures where volunteering at school is not a normal custom?
- How do we help families- especially those new to the US- acclimate to the school system, understand our PTO's role, and feel welcome as a volunteer?

For three years I have been coordinating our International Club. Initially, this included setting up a display at the beginning of the year and holding a small international week. Every year we've expanded our reach; we've developed several displays for the school, organized a world traveling photo mascot, have an 8 week Geography Stars quiz program, we've skyped with kids around the world, held an awesome fashion show parade of national costumes, a delicious international bread day, and this year held an international talent show during our weeklong celebration of cultures (and much more!).

I am delighted with what we've been able to accomplish through our PTO: getting kids excited to learn about world cultures and eagerly sharing their own culture with their peers and teachers. Nonetheless, my proudest achievement has been the growth of our International Club: the PTO committee of parents who organize such events. We've branded ourselves as the place to go for newcomers- almost a support group for parents who are blindly navigating a new school environment, with new expectations, new opportunities, and new rules of engagement. For many new moms and dads (and grandparents), we are the gateway, the entry point to volunteering in our school.

At our "Meet the Teacher" day, I have a booth with a large sign "Do you know how to say friend in another language?" The first time we set up clipboards and pencils we had over 150 entries of "friend" (and collected a LOT of emails of parents interested in International Club!). In my initial email to interested members I repeated that we need people who speak

another language to help set up our “Friend” bulletin board, and that everyone is welcome. I encourage members to spread the word and invite friends from their particular ethnic community, because their networks have a farther reach than a flyer or email, and word of mouth is a warmer invitation. We allow small children to accompany moms who might not have family nearby or a trusted babysitter. Perhaps most importantly, our meetings never go straight to the point, but meander through conversations about US customs, how to contact their child’s teacher, how to report an absence, and explanations of “100 Day” celebrations.

What I have learned in return from our cross-cultural conversations might change the perspectives of PTO coordinators, who sometimes mention that certain parents are not interested in volunteering. First off, it is very intimidating to even enter the school if you are not comfortable yet in English. Our International Club served as the gateway into the school for many parents as there were often people who could help translate, or at least were sympathetic to the feelings of newness. Because many of the families were immigrants to the US, our International Club meetings became one of their first experiences at school.

Furthermore, in many countries of the world, educators are held in high regard; questioning them could demonstrate that you doubt their abilities, and disrespect the job they are doing. In addition, the concept of volunteering could be completely new. Parents coming into school and offering “help” is seen in some countries as insulting to the school because it is insinuating that that school isn’t doing a good enough job. Yet, in schools across the US, volunteers are welcomed with open arms. In fact, at some of the highest functioning schools, parents put in hundreds of volunteer hours a year.

In many cases, working parents or parents from other countries are unsure of how to get involved- or feel that they are unwanted or redundant to existing efforts. Organizers need to work consciously to figure out ways that all parents have the opportunity to support the school; parent volunteers are a key resource that schools can tap into to get cultural and global experience, fill in human resource shortages, or add expertise where it might not even have been planned.

Here are some ways different schools have used to communicate to a diverse group of parents:

- Printed flyers
- E-mail
- Facebook group for parents
- Twitter list
- E-newsletter
- Yahoo groups, Google groups
- Phone chain
- Voice (or text) message broadcasts

Successful volunteer programs have people who start off doing what they love and events that they are most interested in. This way the initiative feels less like homework and more like friend-making: mutually beneficial, joyful, and involving authentic growth and discovery.

And this is one reason why I love to volunteer at my children's school: not only to I get to contribute to my children's education, and see their happy smiles as I work, but I also get to make friends from around the world. In International Club, I get to work with an amazing group of parents, whose differing perspectives offer endless creative solutions- and we have fun doing it.

If you are interested in reading more about my experiences, don't miss our new book, [*The Global Education Toolkit for Elementary Learners*](#). This handbook is packed with 100s of ideas for parents and teachers to implement multicultural learning in and out of the classroom: even more ideas to involve parents and community partners, to start an International Week, and even using educational technology and service learning as global awareness experiences.

Recently named "Volunteer of the Year" at her school, Becky Morales is the mom of 4 active kids ages 6-9. She is the founder of KidWorldCitizen.org, offering parents and educators activities that help young minds go global. She is also the co-author of [*The Global Education Toolkit for Elementary Learners*](#), an ESL teacher, and works with schools as a consultant and diversity trainer to increase global learning at all levels. Becky loves to connect with parents and teachers on [facebook](#) and [twitter](#).

