

ESOL program strengthens family-school-child partnership

Deni Barrios recalls the year his family left Guatemala and settled in Allston as a difficult time. A father of five, he felt his tight-knit family growing apart as they struggled to adapt and communicate in a new country.

When his three oldest daughters began attending school at the nearby Thomas Gardner School, Deni recalls watching them: "They were nervous and embarrassed because they did not understand anything. It was a difficult first month for them." Faced with his own challenges in communicating, Deni could not give his daughters the support he felt they needed in school.

His older daughters soon began speaking English and adapting well to their new home. But as the kids learned English at school, they brought home new challenges for Deni and his wife. "I couldn't understand my daughters and I felt very bad," Deni remembers. "It was difficult to support my children. They were suffering. I did not understand and, as a father, I could not help with anything, including homework."

At the children's school, he had difficulty communicating with staff. Jeannie James, kindergarten lead teacher in the afterschool program, remembers how Deni used to say just 'hi' and 'bye' to the teachers when he came to pick up his daughters. Despite the language barrier, she and faculty at the school recognized Deni's dedication to his children and their education. In October 2006, Deni began taking evening English classes offered through the Gardner School's Extended Services Program. The classes provided a convenient location and familiar environment.

According to program staff, Deni quickly showed himself to be an eager learner. Deni's children have been his motivation. With his youngest son and daughter now at the Gardner, his improved English skills have allowed him to become a more supportive and involved parent. At school, Jeannie has noticed the difference when Deni comes to pick

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Deni Barrios reads to his children at the Gardner School in Allston. All five of Deni's children have attended the Gardner school, where he studies ESOL in the evenings.

Thomas Gardner Extended Services School

The Thomas Gardner Extended Services School began its ESOL program after recognizing a need among parents at the elementary school. The school is located in one of the most diverse neighborhoods of Boston and 78% of its 350 K-5 students are English as a second language learners.

As an extended services school, the Gardner is committed to looking at the whole child and ensuring that families have the tools to support their children in the 21st century. The school works not only to address family literacy needs, but also to connect families to health care and other support services.

Its ESOL program is open to the larger Allston-Brighton community and provides a safe and supportive environment to help area families meet their professional, emotional, and academic goals.

ESOL students have reported that classes have helped them to advance in their jobs, gain independence, prepare for GED and TOEFL exams, provide better support to their children, and gain US citizenship.

Since 2003, English for New Bostonians has enabled the Gardner School's program to move from a volunteer-run model with occasional classes to a multi-level program that better serves the needs of Gardner parents and the vibrant Allston-Brighton community.

The Gardner School offers five levels of ESOL and serves 75 students. Childcare is provided for a nominal fee.

Contact the Gardner School:

Valerie Vigoda, Director
30 Athol Street
Allston, MA 02134
617-635-8365

up his children and is able to engage in conversations with teachers and staff.

Deni recounts: "One success for me is that when the school principal tells me about my children, I understand and don't need a translator."

Deni has also become more active within the school through his participation in adult education, helping with school beautification projects and events and becoming a member of the parents' council, which discusses curriculum and other aspects of his children's education.

Gardner Principal Erica Herman says this is why adult education is part of the school's mission and efforts to involve and support parents. "As a school we feel that by improving family literacy skills and engagement in education that the learning of students will be enhanced. I think the Barrios family is an excellent example of how this structure really works for both the parents and students," she says. "Our goal is to serve as a hub of the community, where families feel that they are welcomed and supported."

Deni has found that his new English skills have allowed him to better support his children. "The Thomas Gardner School has helped me a lot, especially with the children. I am now in the second level. Now I understand a lot more because we all speak English." At home, he helps his son with his word problems and other homework and his older daughters with their projects.

Stronger English skills, as well as the process of developing them, have brought Deni closer to his family. While it is difficult to find enough time to study with work and family responsibilities, the children, particularly the youngest ones, help out by practicing with him. "My children ask me, 'Daddy, what is the number of the bus in English, please?' I say, 'Sixty-six.' They say, 'Oooo you speak English!'"

Maintaining a bilingual household is very important to Deni: "As Hispanics, Spanish is very important to us, but English is the language that is spoken here. We want our children to speak both languages."

"The children speak English to him because they know it's important," says Deni's ESOL teacher, Norma Salvucci. "He's proud of his heritage, but he wants the kids to assimilate. He's a good example of being proud

and really wanting to belong to the country."

With two languages, the family has come together in the U.S. "Before we felt separated for a little while, but now that I am learning English and can speak it better, we feel more successful," explains Deni. "Now I communicate with everyone and we understand each other much better. As a family, we feel more unified."

- Deni Barrios

The impact has been felt at school: "All five Barrios children have been a pleasure to watch grow and learn," says Principal Herman. "They are tremendous kids with strong ties to their family and cultural background. They are all amazing English speakers and continue to progress academically."

For little Deni, his father's English has made him feel important and comfortable with his peers. "On Saturdays I play soccer and before my dad used to speak only Spanish," he says. "Some of the kids could not understand, so he told us to tell them." Now, he is a doting son: "After he learned English I am happy for him and my friends now understand what he's saying. He knows a lot of English now and I am very proud of him."

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- Erica Herman, Thomas Gardner School



Deni plays with his children at the Gardner School playground.

English for New Bostonians (ENB) is a public-private-community solution initiated by the Mayor's Office of New Bostonians committed to expanding the city's long-term capacity to meet the demand for English classes. ENB increases seats in ESOL programs across the city, supports innovation in the field to reach learners at home and at work, and helps to heighten awareness about immigrant and language issues among the public, businesses, funders and all levels of government.

Learn more about ENB:

Mayor's Office of New Bostonians: 617-635-2980, cheng.tam@cityofboston.gov

Boston Adult Literacy Fund: 617-482-3336, balf@balf.net

Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy Coalition: 617-350-5480 x 203, cgreen@miracoalition.org