

Building Community across Language Barriers

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Quotes and sayings that reference the importance of non-verbal communications are common, i.e., *actions speak louder than words*. However, **in communities where large numbers of people speak different languages, finding solutions for communicating effectively across language barriers is important.**

East Durham Children's Initiative (EDCI), Old East Durham Communities in Partnership (CIP) and other East Durham-focused groups are working toward building community among and English- and Spanish-speaking children and families.

One of East Durham's elementary schools, Y.E. Smith, has a large number of Spanish-speaking kindergarteners enter school each year. In the 2014-2015 school year, just under half of the enrolled kindergarteners spoke Spanish at home. In the four years that I have been working in East

Durham, access to services for non-native English speakers seems to be improving; more documents and signs are available in English and Spanish, and organizations have hired more staff to manage services for Spanish speakers in particular.

However, despite these improvements in access to services and information for speakers of languages other than English, some would argue that we've only just begun to address language barriers' effects on engagement.

Schools, nonprofits, community groups and neighbors working and living in areas with similarly large numbers of non-native English speakers are grappling with the best ways to help residents build community with each other, regardless of language. When resources are scarce, and funds are limited for interpretation equipment and paid interpretation, there seem to be few options for bridging these barriers and supporting the communication required to help citizens engage effectively with institutions, and with each other.

Viewpoints from Spanish and English Speakers: Choices for Cross-language Understanding

The East Durham Children's Initiative's (EDCI) has a **Parent and Community Advisory Council** that provides ideas and feedback to EDCI about current and potential programming, and about community strengths, needs and opportunities. The council is made up of residents who speak either English or Spanish; very few speak both. **We typically use consecutive interpretation at these meetings**, which can take a long time and inhibit the flow of conversation. EDCI does use simultaneous interpretation for larger meetings where content is being presented, but we find the use of headphones to be an additional barrier when having smaller meetings where back-and-forth conversation is the primary method of sharing information and problem-solving.

At EDCI's last council meeting, we posed this challenge directly to the members of the council. We asked members if consecutively interpreting the meetings felt manageable, or if they would prefer to have separate meetings where they could freely communicate in their own language without the start-and-stop of consecutive interpretation. A strong majority of both the English and Spanish speakers said that they valued the conversation, and while the consecutive interpretation was tiring and difficult to follow at times, it was better than the alternative of separation. Members also said that they would like even more opportunities to get to know their fellow members, one-on-one or in small groups.

Trying New Methods to Build Community and Share Ideas

Using their enthusiasm (and patience!) as a guide, EDCI has tried the following things to support and improve communication between English and Spanish speakers:

- Breaking up members into groups by language for discussion/brainstorming, and consecutively interpreting the report out and discussion of each groups main ideas

- Using icebreakers that are easy to interpret and allow participants to learn something about each other, like the chair swap game (also called non-music chairs):
 1. Circle chairs equaling the number of people present, minus one
 2. Have one person stand in the middle of the circle, while everyone else is seated around them
 3. The person says something about themselves, like, “I have three children,” and an interpreter repeats that statement in the other language(s) of the group
 4. After the interpreter has repeated the statement, everyone else for whom that fact is true has to get up and swap their chair for a different chair
 5. The person left without a chair after the swap has to stand in the middle and share something about themselves, and the game continues until everyone is out of breath or dissolved in laughter

While these solutions have helped to build community and improve communication among members of the council, EDCI and other local organizations are **actively seeking additional resources to continue addressing the challenge of building community across language barriers.**

Has your organization or community dealt with these challenges? Do you have additional creative solutions or stories to share? Please post them below, and share what you have found to be useful with other bloggers and readers.