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LEGACY

TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION

Ari Gerzon-Kessler

ADVOCACY

A More Robust Welcome is Needed for our Immigrant Students and their Families

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A More Robust Welcome is Needed for our Immigrant Students and their Families

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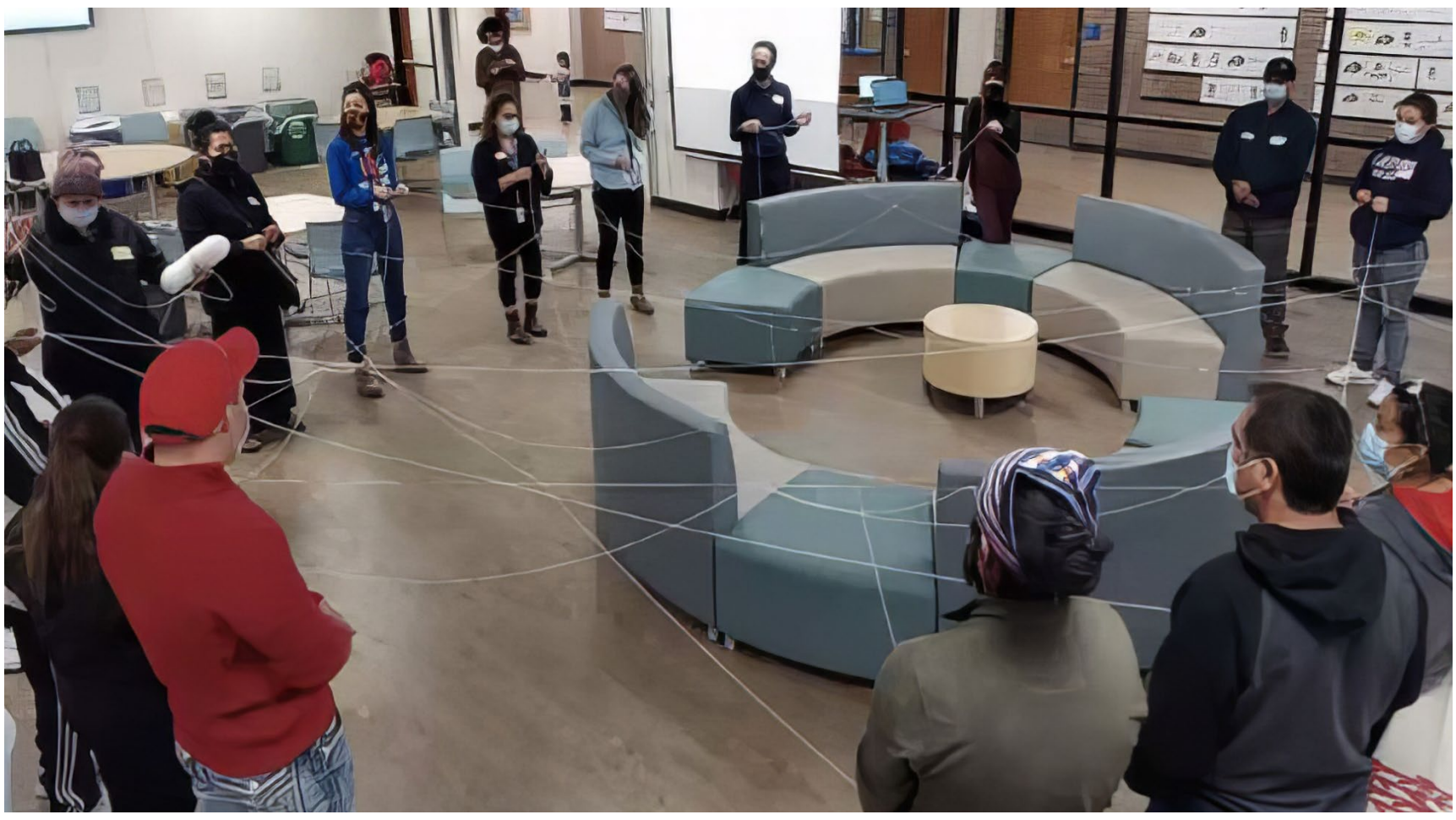
We were a nation of immigrants long before the recent surge of migrants. As of two years ago, one in four children in U.S. schools was born in another country or had at least one parent who was. Approximately twenty million children in the United States have an immigrant parent, comprising 27 percent of the child population.

Just this past year, thousands of new students have entered public schools in small towns and major cities around the country. Yet schools across the country have not revamped their approaches to engaging with families quickly enough to meet the shifting demographics, with educators too often relying on outdated school-centric models.

Despite our deep differences about immigration policy, it's in everyone's interest to make sure that those who do become our fellow citizens do well. So the question is: *how do we make sure they and their children don't become disconnected or alienated in our nation's schools but instead become successfully woven into these communities?*



A Family-Centered Approach

I've worked with hundreds of teachers, parents, and school leaders over the last seven years to develop a structure that centers the voices of immigrant families in a way that strengthens the entire school community. As I outline in my book, *On The Same Team*, our Families and Educators Together (FET) teams at 28 local schools bring together immigrant families with teachers and school leaders for a collaborative gathering once per month, where immigrant families and school staff connect over dinner, engage in team-building activities, share information that helps families navigate our intricate systems, and engage in candid dialogue that forges trust, sparks mutual learning, and leads to collaborative action.

Here are four core reasons why this family-centered approach is so important:

1. Our schools have many unwritten rules that unintentionally leave underrepresented families on the margins. When we equip families with information about how our schools work, their children are more likely to thrive and the school community feels more cohesive.

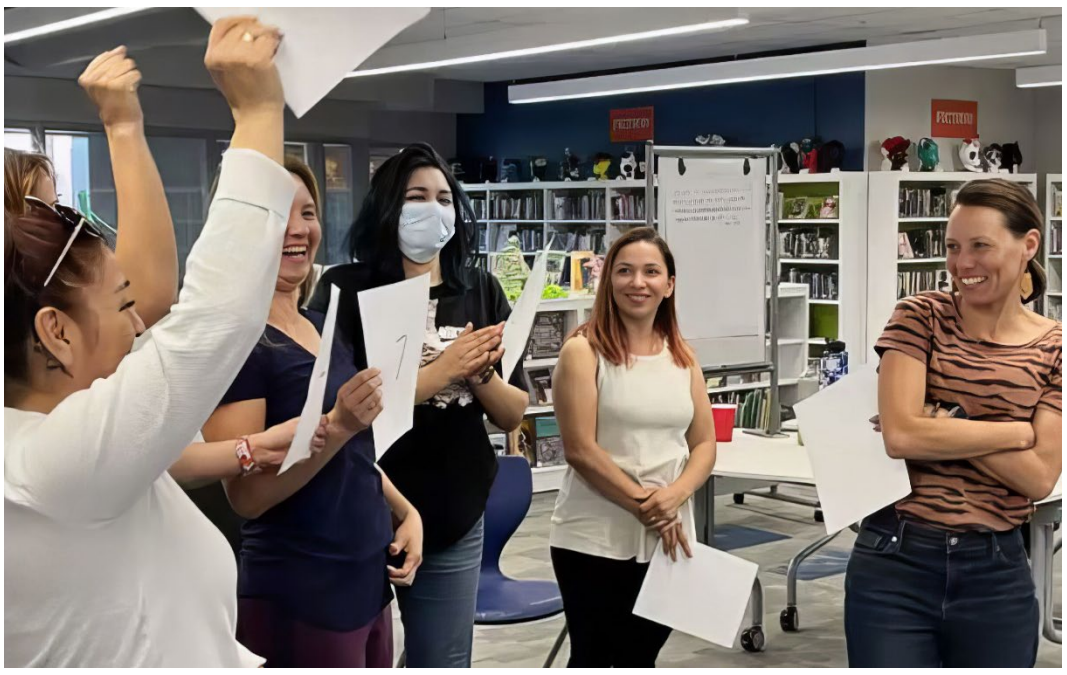
2. We need to create spaces for a mostly white workforce that was born in the U.S. to learn how to more effectively collaborate with immigrant and other underrepresented families. When we solicit their input, we're then able to shift those systems to be more "user-friendly." For instance, during our FET gatherings, we have learned that many of our immigrant families do not often read the emails sent, but will respond when we send more text messages.

3. Our nation's schools are a pivotal entry point for immigrant families to access community resources. At each FET meeting, we embed "family learning time," which informs families around topics such as how to navigate the tech tools for parents, what afterschool clubs are available, and the role that the school counselor plays in supporting students and families' well-being.

4. There is tremendous value in creating connections between families and a network of support for them that extends beyond the assistance of overstretched educators. At a recent FET gathering, a mother shared that weeks earlier she had crossed the border with her youngest children and felt lost. A mother who shared her background said, "I've been at this school for four years. Here's my number. Call me whenever you have questions!"

We stand at a crossroads, a moment of truth for education. Are we willing to move beyond the types of school-family approaches that we are familiar with? Or do we have the foresight and determination to make this "moment of disruption…a moment of reinvention," as David Brooks writes.

Partnering more effectively with families through structures like FET teams is one of the keys to addressing many of these challenges and charting a more human-centered approach to improving our education system.



Our schools are the gateway to helping these new students and families become a part of our broader communities and creating an inclusive and just society where we can all thrive.

THE FAMILIES AND EDUCATORS TOGETHER PROJECT

Ari Gerzon-Kessler is author of On The Same Team: Bringing Educators and Underrepresented Families Together (Solution Tree, 2024), which won the gold medal for the Best Education Book of 2024. He is an author, speaker, and trainer supporting schools and districts committed to strengthening ties with all families. You can contact Ari using these icon links:

Legacy is the official journal of The Worthy Educator, elevating the good work being done by leaders in education who are working to change the narrative on the profession and actively plan for impact that transforms its future to serve the needs of a diverse, decentralized, global society that is inclusive, equitable and open to all people as next generations adapt, evolve and contribute by solving problems and creating solutions that meet the needs of a world we have yet to envision.

Submissions are accepted on a rolling basis from educators who are implementing new and innovative approaches in the classroom and at the building and district levels. Information on specifications and instructions to submit can be found online at theworhtyeducator.com/journal.