

## SchoolBook

### Two Mothers Say They Crave More School Contact

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By Vera Haller and Yasmeen Khan



*Maria Frias and Yolanda Rosas talk about staying engaged with their children's school.*

Maria Frias speaks with frustration known to many a parent who has tried to juggle getting to work on time with needing to stop off at school for information related to a child's education.

The office of her son's school opens at 9 a.m. She has to be at her job by 9:30 a.m. When she gets to the school to sign in for an appointment, four parents have already done so ahead of her. Her choice is to wait and be late for work, or leave and call from the office, which might not get her a call back from the school.

"They don't cater to working parents," said Frias, who is employed by the city Department of Housing and Preservation. Her son Malik Schoffner, 12, is a seventh grader at P.S./I.S. 218 Rafael Hernandez Dual Language Magnet School, just off the Grand Concourse in the south Bronx.

Frias and another parent at the school, Yolanda Rosas, spoke to Schoolbook about how they interact with the school system. The interviews coincided with the Department of Education's Parents as Partners Week, when the DOE holds events to inform parents about resources available to them and their children. It is a time when parental engagement with the schools gets a closer look.

The DOE has taken other steps to improve communication between schools and parents. Elementary and middle schools are required to have parent coordinators who act as liaisons between families and school officials. The department also launched a new service at the start of this school year in which texts containing school information are sent out to parents who sign up to receive them.

Despite these efforts, Frias and Rosas said they felt they did not have as much access to the school as they would like. “I need to be involved,” Frias said.

Rosas – who has four children aged 5, 8, 12 and 14 – has the added hurdle of speaking only Spanish. While she receives communications from the school in Spanish, she said through a translator that she felt she does not get enough information to navigate the complicated public school system, especially at key points in her children’s education such as the application process for high school.

In her case, an after-school program operated by the nonprofit [Women’s Housing and Economic Development Corporation](#), or WHEDCo, has filled the gap. The agency runs a special program to help students at the school get through the high school transition process – holding a high school fair with public, parochial and private schools, and offering tutoring for the specialized high school admission test among other services.

Davon Russell, WHEDCo’s executive vice president, said the program is helping both students and parents understand how to do the research and ultimately find a high school that would be the right fit.

“It was already a little nuts for parents just even understanding that the high school, if not the elementary and middle school, is the gateway to the rest of your life,” he said.

Rosas’ oldest son went through the program last year and is now going to public high school in Madison, Ct., while boarding with a family there through a program, A Better Chance, which matches minority students with educational opportunities.

Ms. Rogas, who is unemployed, is now guiding her second oldest son, an 8th grader at I.S. 218, through the high school search and said she planned to hold off looking for a job so she could devote all of her time to the task. And that, she said, involves going to the school in person.

“For me, it’s easier to come to the office to talk,” she said through the translator, otherwise she said it was hard for her to have a sense of what was going on.

Russell agreed that one of the best ways to engage parents is to provide them access to the school and a chance to see their children at work.

“I’ve seen parents come to an event where their kid is being showcased in a performance of some sort and their whole view of that kid changes completely,” he said. “You have to offer parents an opportunity to come in and be a part of what school is about.”

He added that parents, then, can learn from their child’s teacher as well. “They’ll see practices that the teachers are doing that they may not have thought of; they’ll understand the teacher’s job, maybe a little bit better. And they’ll be part of the learning.”

Rosas and Frias see room to improve the way the school interacts with parents. For Frias, it's all about scheduling. She said she was unable to attend a series of parent workshops at the school because they were held at 9 a.m. She suggested holding an occasional workshop in the evening for working parents like herself.

She had not heard of the DOE's texting program but said she would be interested in participating. She also noted that some of the teachers had provided emails to the parents and that she would be open to communicating with them that way though she had not done so yet this school year.

For Rosas, the key was getting as much information as she could about her children's schooling. She would like to get a monthly academic update for each of them.

"I always want to know how my children are doing," she said through the translator. "I want to know what I can do to help them."