Key messages to empower families of English language learners to have genuine communication in schools

"Education is at the core of our nation's effort to achieve economic and social progress. In recognition of the fundamental importance of education, the Government sets the following goals for the education system of New Zealand." These goals are the National Educational Goals (NEGs) and of particular relevance to English language learners and their parents is NEG 2: Equality of educational opportunity for all New Zealanders, by identifying and removing barriers to achievement (http://www.education.govt.nz/ministry-of-education/legislation/negs/).

An empowerment model

Dr Hassan Haji Ibrahim (Ministry of Education Refugee and Migrant Coordinator) proposes an empowerment model of parent-school collaboration in his Ph.D thesis. The model suggests the following dimensions:
- Developing a shared vision and goal between parents and teachers.
- Removing barriers to two-way communication and collaboration.
- Linking school-based and home-based learning so they can complement each other.
- Encouraging parents to participate in school decision-making.
- Encouraging parental involvement in school-based activities.
- Empowering teachers and parents to increase their skills to carry out mutual communication and collaboration.

Some of the conditions for empowerment proposed by Ibrahim are
- The principal’s committed leadership and support.
- On-going meetings with families after enrolment.
- The development of structures, policies and guidelines to promote parent-school collaboration.
- Shared goals between students, their parents and teachers.
- School policies and guidelines that prioritise parent-school collaboration as a key component of the school improvement strategy.
- A designated senior staff member to oversee and coordinate the planning and implementation of parent-school collaboration.

Engagement with families, key to removing barriers to achievement

For social equity, effective communication with families from diverse linguistic backgrounds is vital. To empower parents/guardians in the education of their children, consider:

- Being wary of imposing values and decisions without genuine consultation. Be conscious of an inequality of power between the school and the ELLs’ families, for example in giving consent for research and in taking part in the consultation process about sexuality education. Consider going to places where the communities meet rather than just expecting them to come to school.
- Using a trained, professional interpreter (not other students) to help family members:
  - Give rich information including their aspirations about their children at enrolment.
  - Take in and consider important information at enrolment.
  - Understand the expectations about their involvement in school.
  - Understand and discuss The New Zealand Curriculum.
  - Take part in school consultation processes e.g. principal appointment, sexuality programmes
  - Buddy up new parents / families with established ones or join with school groups e.g. PTA.
- An Australian resource kit for schools that gives a range of strategies to enable full participation of families from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds is Opening the school gate: Engaging CLD families in schools. On TKI there are several places to look, including: How can we engage effectively with families and communities?, Community engagement and Sexuality education: Consulting with community. On the NZQA website the video How NCEA works is in several languages and can be discussed in other languages with an interpreter.