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Policy Memorandum: Engaging Immigrant Families for Student Success

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Who We Are

We are an Edtech Startup Co-Founder/CEO and nonprofit leader from Texas and California. After 11 years in education as a teacher, administrator, and principal, Oscar Romano transitioned to found Ember Within, PBC, an Edtech startup company in the assessment and data analytics space of virtual learning. Most recently, Oscar was the principal of YES Prep Gulfton (part of YES Prep Public Schools in Houston, TX), a charter school of 1,050 students from 6th-12th grade where 96% are Latino or Black, 98% qualify for free or reduced lunch, and more than 40% are English learners (ELs).

Jordan Harrison is Vice President of Community Impact and Partnerships at Reality Changers, which serves more than 1,200 students in southern California and Mexico. In our student body, 86% identify as Latinx, 98% are first-generation college students and 60% of our students come from mixed-status families.

We are both fellows with UnidosUS through the National Institute of Latino School Leaders, which seeks to bridge the divide between policy and practice and to train effective advocates for policy reform in ways that lead to increased educational outcomes for Latino students and families.

Background

As of 2018, the Migration Policy Institute reported that there were an estimated 18 million children in the United States living in a household with at least one parent who was an immigrant, either documented or undocumented, and 2.1 million of those children were immigrants themselves. These 18 million children represented 26% of the total 69.5 million children in the United States, now making up a significant share of the U.S. population under the age of 18. Of the 26.9 million children under the age of 18 who are also living in low-income families, 32% (8.5 million) of them were children of immigrants. In all, those 8.5 million children of immigrants living in low-income families make up 47% of all children of immigrants.¹

When breaking down the data by ethnicity, a 2017 study reported that 54% of all children of immigrants were Latinx.² This data begets three points:

1. Children of immigrants and their families are not a monolithic entity that can be addressed with a single set of broad educational policies.
2. A significant portion of all children of immigrants (8.5 million) live in low-income families and may require additional targeted services.
3. With Latinx children making up a majority of all children of immigrants, it is important to appropriately represent them in major educational policy decisions.

The United States' public school system was built to help ensure that all students receive a quality education, regardless of income level. The pandemic has upended schools' abilities to help compensate for the inequities that Latinx children of immigrants face in K-12 education. Latinx families are now on the frontlines of their children's daily educational progress, and leveraging their support could have meaningful impacts on their children's lives.

The Ask

Parent engagement is critical for the desired outcomes and improvements of our Latinx and immigrant students. To increase and improve support for effective engagement, we recommend:

- Increase the Title I family engagement set-aside from 1% to 3% to support innovative and evidence-based family engagement programming. With this increase, districts must go beyond posting in information in multiple languages. Funding must be used to implement innovative, evidence-based practices that reach families of all languages and to ensure that the engagement leads to families understanding where to find information, how to understand it, and how to use it effectively to improve outcomes for their students.
- Create set-aside in Title III that requires grantees to use 2% of their grants for innovative, evidence-based family engagement practices that reach families of all languages and ensure that the engagement leads to families understanding where to find information, how to understand it, and how to use it effectively to improve outcomes for their students.
- Incentivize schools to partner with community-based organizations to support family and student engagement.

The Need

Family involvement is a key lever in improving educational outcomes for children of immigrants.

The reality is that state and federal government agencies do not have the capacity to provide children of immigrants with the support they need to succeed in K-12 education. Families are the conduit through which support can be provided, but many immigrant families are not properly equipped to support their children through the American education system. Numerous studies have found positive correlations between family involvement and stronger academic achievement performance. "This relationship holds across families of all economic, racial/ethnic, and educational backgrounds and for students at all ages."³

Immigrant parents need more support because of their unfamiliarity with the system.

Unfortunately, immigrant parents are at a disadvantage when supporting their children, simply because they weren't raised in the American educational system. In one example, a

parent attending a session led by the Parent Institute for Quality Education spoke up and said, “We don’t know what we don’t know, and that’s a dangerous place to be. Teachers assume I’m not asking because I’m not interested, but I don’t even know what questions to ask.”⁴ An equitable education for children of immigrants must involve clearer and more explicit entry points by which these students’ parents can adequately support their children.

School closures due to COVID-19 have amplified some of the inequities that work against children of immigrants.

As soon as the coronavirus hit our communities, schools around the country were closed, and parents of all backgrounds instantly became the primary facilitators of content-learning for their children. The impact has been more starkly felt among low-income households where parents have no choice but to expose themselves to danger as essential workers. Across the United States, 69% of all immigrants and 74% of undocumented workers can be classified as essential workers—individuals employed in critical infrastructure roles.⁵ Considering that 50% of all immigrants are Latinx, the impact of the pandemic to Latinx immigrant households becomes more pronounced.⁶ Families have faced greater risks of exposure to the coronavirus, placing entire communities in danger of illness. Children have struggled to keep up with the transition to virtual learning, where insufficient income (for devices and/or WiFi) serves as a daunting barrier to equitable access to education.

Impact

In our careers, we have seen the positive impact that educating and partnering with immigrant families can have on the outcomes of our students. We have seen the joy one family can have when they feel like they have an impact within their students’ educational journey. For example, Ms. Perez, who did not speak any English, started attending school board and PTA meetings when translation services were provided and when brochures in Spanish and an entire online website for Spanish-speaking families were created. She insisted on supporting her three children in applying to college, and they now attend the University of Hawaii, University of California, Berkeley, and San Diego State University.

Additional research suggests that:

Family engagement will increase overall student well-being and academic success.

Zhang (2016) states, “parental involvement in children’s school-related activities is directly related to their academic achievement, cognitive development, and English ability.”⁷

Studies have shown that when the student feels parental support they perform better in school, their academics go up, they participate in the classroom and in school activities.⁸

Family social capital will increase to support their children. According to a 2009 report from the Pew Hispanic Center, 89% of Latino parents believe college is important for success in life, yet only 40% feel they have the knowledge to help their children prepare for college.⁹ Our families have the right for their children to succeed, and supporting our immigrant families will deepen the funds of knowledge for their success.

Family engagement will broaden from a cultural survivor role to a cultural leader capacity.

Supporting our immigrant population is a way to support our expanding community. When families engage in their student’s lives there is an increase of family engagement in other areas within school and the community.¹⁰

Endnotes

- 1 Jeanne Batalova, Brittany Blizzard, and Jessica Bolte, "Frequently Requested Statistics on Immigrants and Immigration in the United States," (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2020).
- 2 Budiman, Abby, et al, "Immigrants in America: Key Charts and Facts," *Pew Research Center's Hispanic Trends Project*, Pew Research Center, October 1, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/hispanic/2020/08/20/facts-on-u-s-immigrants/> (accessed January 31, 2021).
- 3 Anne. T. Henderson and Karen. L. Mapp, *A New Wave Of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement* (Austin, TX: Southwest, Educational Development Laboratory, 2002).
- 4 Luz Santana, et al. *Partnering with Parents to Ask the Right Questions: A Powerful Strategy for Strengthening School-Family Partnerships*. ASCD, 2016, <http://www.ascd.org/Publications/Books/Overview/Partnering-with-Parents-to-Ask-the-Right-Questions.aspx>.
- 5 Donald Kerwin, Mike Nicholson, Daniela Alulema, and Robert Warren, US Foreign-Born Essential Workers by Status and State, and the Global Pandemic, Center for Migration Studies, 2020, <https://cmsny.org/publications/us-essential-workers/> (accessed January 31, 2021).
- 6 Budiman, Abby, et al, "Immigrants in America: Key Charts and Facts."
- 7 Yue Zhang and Eunjo Jung, "Parental Involvement, Children's Aspirations, and Achievement in New Immigrant Families," *The Journal of Educational Research* 109, no. 4 (2016): 1-18.
- 8 Charles Tebben, "Immigrant Parental Involvement In Student Academics," *Empowering Research for Educators* 1, no. 1, Article 3 (2017).
- 9 "Latinos and Education: Explaining the Attainment Gap," *Pew Research Center's Hispanic Trends Project*, Pew Research Center, September 18, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/hispanic/2009/10/07/latinos-and-education-explaining-the-attainment-gap> (accessed January 31, 2021).
- 10 Jennifer Love, et al, "Stages of Immigrant Parent Involvement - Survivors to Leaders," *Kappanonline.org*, May 9, 2019, <https://kappanonline.org/stages-of-immigrant-parent-involvement-survivors-to-leaders/> (accessed January 31, 2021).