

Lanzando Líderes: Realizing the Potential of Latino Youth Through Family Engagement in Afterschool Programming

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Overview

Lanzando Líderes (Launching Leaders) is an afterschool program for high school students in South Philadelphia's Latino immigrant community that aims to advance the educational attainment of youth through leadership development, personalized academic support, college mentoring, and parent engagement. Working in partnership with Puentes de Salud (Bridges to Health), a community-based health and wellness center, we developed a culturally grounded program model that has made parent engagement and empowerment a priority. Our work in the community acknowledges and seeks to address the various issues that limit the engagement of immigrant parents in their children's education. In the past year, we have listened, sought feedback, and consciously reflected on our abilities as practitioners to foster deeper, more meaningful involvement of parents in their children's

educational success. In sharing our journey as practitioners, our model, and reflections, we hope to inform community members, social entrepreneurs, and policymakers who are interested in promoting immigrant parent engagement in various settings.

Our Journey Begins with Our Community

To understand the context of the families our program serves, it is necessary to understand the recent history of South Philadelphia's Latino immigrant community. Beginning in the 1990s, South Philadelphia became a home to young immigrants, primarily from Mexico. Over the past three decades, these individuals have established roots in the community by opening businesses along the historic 9th Street Italian Market corridor, creating traditions to celebrate and share their cultural heritage, and starting families (Benitez, 2009). As the number of foreign-born and first-generation Latinos in Philadelphia nears a population of 200,000, much of the growth can be attributed to a growing generation of youth (Pew Research Center, 2014). Yet, when it comes to education, Latinos in Philadelphia continue to have the highest dropout rate and lowest graduation rate of all ethnic groups (School District of Philadelphia, 2016). For the community to thrive, it is critical to support the holistic development of its youth, which requires stakeholders to address multigenerational inequities in access to quality educational opportunities.

Developing a Family-Centered Approach

At the beginning of our journey with Lanzando Líderes, we conceptualized a program that understood and addressed the multiple factors influencing, and oftentimes limiting, the educational attainment of immigrant and first-generation Latino youth. Through our own shared experiences as the sons and daughters of immigrants from Mexico and Colombia, we approached program development with an awareness of how integrating elements of *cultura* (culture) and *comunidad* (community) in an afterschool setting could add unique value to the lives of children growing up *entre mundos* (between worlds) -- American and their native cultures, each shaped by a distinct set of values, beliefs, and languages.

The focus on *familia* (family), a value shared by many Latino cultures, provides a foundation to promote student achievement by enabling greater parental engagement in their children's education (Suarez-Orozco, 2002; Crispeels et al., 2001). There is a large body of research that validates the direct positive impact that parents' involvement can have on their children's success in school and persistence in their educational journeys (Decker et al. 2000; Henderson & et al., 2002; Yoshikawa, Hirozaka, & Shinn, 2008). For immigrant families, this involvement can have an even greater impact given the aspirational and moral support that many parents translate to their children (Suarez-Orozco, 2002).

Our approach began with amplifying parent voices at the inception of the program when we met individually with each parent to establish communication, rapport, and trust. Parents took the opportunity to share the worries and aspirations they had for their children's futures.

Overwhelmingly, they expressed a strong desire for their children to attend college and find a fulfilling career; yet, many also affirmed their limited knowledge about the American education system -- including how to navigate public schools and help their children apply and pay for college.

It was critical to address these knowledge gaps in ways that were easily accessible to parents. As a result, we hosted two community workshops overviewing the college application process, *Camino a la Universidad* (Path to College), and options for financing a college education, *Como Pagar la Universidad* (How to Pay for College). Both of these events were hosted entirely in Spanish and provided parents with additional resources to learn more about the topics. After these events, parents expressed a better understanding of the related concepts and their capability to support their children through the college process. While these presentations were well-attended by more than 60 participants, there also emerged a desire for parents to have a space to talk about their experiences raising bicultural and bilingual young adults.

To acknowledge the worries and desires voiced by

parents, we initiated a three-part series of charlas (discussion groups) focused on unpacking, reflecting, and translating the experiences of immigrant parents towards leadership and self-advocacy in the home. These conversations validated many parents' fears and frustrations and the barriers they encountered while navigating an unfamiliar social and educational system. Throughout the charlas, parents also shared personal stories and discussed ways to take more active roles in their children's lives. The parents all expressed relief and gratitude for having a space where they felt they were heard and supported which highlights the important role that afterschool programs, schools, and other family-serving organizations can play in cultivating stronger relationships with parents through similar platforms.

While building trusting relationships with parents is essential to any meaningful engagement, there are also practical considerations that can make these efforts more accessible to families. Facilitating access means that the planning process needs to be inclusive of families' holistic needs. Scheduling events during times that do not conflict with parents' work schedules, providing child care on-site to the extent possible, and having food as an incentive, are factors that can either encourage parent participation. Finally, outreach requires an intentional approach that initiates contact with parents across multiple platforms from direct text messaging to phone calls and social media posts emphasizing the personal nature of such

communication by taking the time to check-in and provide updates on their children's participation in the program. The question of access and inclusion should seek to address a simple idea -- Meet families where they are.

Moving Forward as a Community

As we move into the next year, we are guided by the notion that parents want to feel welcomed, validated, and engaged in their children's education. However, despite this drive and determination, there are still persistent barriers that limit their ability to advocate for their children in school. Language access, cultural differences, and knowledge gaps can make it difficult to establish relationships with teachers and staff. As a community-based afterschool program, we have the opportunity to serve as a bridge-builder between parents and schools. We believe that increasing parents' knowledge of their rights in schools and developing their self-advocacy skills will build their confidence and enable them to have greater participation in their children's education.

With positive initial results, we aim to expand our reach within the community. While our initiatives have supported the parents in Lanzando Líderes, we will further integrate our efforts within the education programs at Puentes de Salud to expand services to families with children from grades Pre-K through 12th. Through this multigenerational approach, we hope that families will be able to share knowledge, resources, and information they gain to

promote greater awareness of and access to postsecondary opportunities.

Conclusion

There is an urgent need for safe, supportive spaces for immigrant communities across the country that embrace youth's multicultural identities and provide resources and hope for a brighter future. Like many immigrant communities, our community embodies the strength of collective support and a vibrant culture that spans generations. These characteristics uniquely position community-based programs in immigrant communities to bridge cultural and linguistic disparities that limit the positive development of youth and families. Aligning afterschool programming to the culture and values of the community is paramount to facilitating engagement of immigrant parents in their children's education. In doing so, programs can leverage the resilience, optimism, and love of immigrant parents who seek brighter futures for themselves and their children.

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