5-2008

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Latino Parent Involvement in Middle Tennessee:
A Community-Based Program to Empower Hispanic Immigrants

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ABSTRACT

As increasing parent involvement in education is an important strategy to maximizing a child’s academic success, and given the recent influx of Hispanic students in public schools, Latino parent involvement in education has become a concern for many communities in the US. This student population is at-risk for poor academic achievement, and many Hispanic parents experience seemingly basic obstacles preventing their involvement in schools. This issue has recently surfaced for a non-profit agency, Conexión Américas, which serves Hispanic families located in Nashville, TN. This project assesses the needs and perceptions of Hispanic immigrant parents living in Nashville, particularly emphasizing their interaction with the local school system. This needs assessment research was done with the ultimate objective to establish the most effective and appropriate community-based Latino parent involvement program for Conexión Américas.

Three sets of informal focus groups and interviews were conducted with approximately 25-30 Hispanic immigrant parents, school administrators, and community organizers. Discussions were designed to gain perceptions of parent involvement, barriers to parent involvement, past experience in the public school system, and preferences and hopes regarding program design and curriculum.

Reflecting much of the pre-existing literature on this topic, the findings suggest that local Hispanic immigrant families experience many concrete barriers to their involvement in their child’s education. They report heavy discrimination within the schools, inadequate communication efforts to Latino parents, and a lack of interpreters. As confirmed by these findings, increasing Latino parent involvement is a complicated issue that cannot be solved overnight. The ‘Parents as Partners’ Program was found to be the most appropriate strategy for Conexión Américas. However, in order to maximize the program’s impact, the school district, local government, and other community organizations must also make the Latino community, and their involvement in areas such as education, a priority.

En Español

Es sabido que aumentar la participación de los padres en la educación es una estrategia muy importante para mejorar el éxito del niño. Es también una realidad que el número de estudiantes latinos en las escuelas públicas ha crecido mucho. Esta población de estudiantes además tiene el riesgo de obtener resultados académicos inferiores. También muchos padres latinos no están involucrados en la educación de sus hijos debido a obstáculos básicos que impiden su participación. Como resultado, varias comunidades en los Estados Unidos se preocupan por la falta de participación de los padres latinos en las escuelas. Este asunto llamó la atención a Conexión Américas, una organización que sirve a las familias hispanas en Nashville, Tennessee. Mi proyecto de investigación evaluó las necesidades y opiniones de algunos padres latinos en Nashville enfatizando sus relaciones con el sistema educativo. Se realizó esta investigación también con el objetivo de establecer un programa adecuado y efectivo para aumentar la participación de los padres latinos con quienes trabaja Conexión Américas.

Se llevaron a cabo tres series de discusiones informales y entrevistas con 25-30 familias hispanas-inmigrantes, administradores de las escuelas y organizadores en la comunidad. Se
diseñaron los conversatorios para conocer las opiniones y percepciones de participación de los padres latinos, los obstáculos a la participación, las experiencias pasadas con el sistema educativo, y sus preferencias e ideas sobre el diseño y currículo del programa.

Los resultados sugieren que las familias hispanas-inmigrantes experimentan muchas dificultades concretas que impiden su participación en la vida académica de sus hijos, lo que confirma la opinión de los expertos. Los participantes hablaron de mucha discriminación dentro de las escuelas, esfuerzos insuficientes para comunicarse con padres latinos, y la falta de intérpretes. Como los resultados indican, aumentar la participación de los padres latinos es un tema muy complicado que no se resolverá rápidamente. El proyecto concluye que el programa llamado ‘Padres como líderes y compañeros’ será la estrategia más adecuada para Conexión Américas. Además, el sistema educativo, el gobierno local y otras organizaciones tienen que considerar a la comunidad latina y su participación en áreas como la educación, como prioridad para maximizar el éxito de este proyecto.
Introduction

Parental involvement is widely recognized as an important component to any child's academic success. Involvement in a child's education can take various forms; parents can participate in school leadership, events, and decision-making processes, assist their child at home with homework assignments, or simply stay informed and educated about their child's academic behavior and performance. These strategies and many others oftentimes foster the skills, motivation, and communication needed to maximize a child's success in school. Parents and schools alike can play a role in promoting these strategies and practices, within and outside the classroom. Yet many times seemingly basic obstacles prevent a parent or teacher's aspiration to increase student academic achievement. Cultural barriers, language barriers, and logistical issues are often cited as common obstacles to parental involvement. These barriers are further confounded when a family lives in poverty and has limited resources. Minority groups and parental involvement have been the topic of many studies as minority students and the economically disadvantaged are at the greatest risk for low academic performance (Jones & Velez, 1997). Latinos in particular have been the focus of many of these studies relating to parental involvement, education, and otherwise (Camarota, 2007; Gibson, 2002; Hyslop 2000).

It is overwhelmingly evident that on a national level the number of Hispanic immigrants has increased exponentially over the past decade. Latinos are the fastest growing immigrant population, and a majority of this population lives in poverty (Camarota, 2001). The number of Latino students in public schools nationwide has increased significantly over the past two decades, with 10.8 million Latino children from immigrant families enrolled in public schools (Camarota, 2007). Yet because of their low socioeconomic and minority status, this student population is at risk for poor academic achievement. Indeed, Hispanic students have the highest high school dropout rate in the United States (Gibson, 2002; as quoted in Tinkler, 2002).

On a local level, the State of Tennessee has also seen significant growth in the Latino immigrant population. Between 1990 and 2000, Tennessee experienced the 4th highest growth rate of Latinos in the nation (US Census Bureau, 2000). Furthermore, the growth rate of the Hispanic school-age population in Tennessee increased by 239.1% between 1990 and 2000 (US Census Bureau, 2000). The Metro Nashville Public School System (MNPS) has indeed experienced a significant increase in the Latino student population as well (TN DOE, 2000-
Currently there are around 10,400 Hispanic students enrolled in Metro Nashville Public Schools (TN DOE, 2007).

The State of Tennessee and Nashville in particular are the primary focus of this research project due to my internship with Conexión Américas, a non-profit organization serving Hispanic families in Middle Tennessee. At the core of this organization's work is its mission "to help Latino families realize their aspirations for social and economic advancement by promoting their integration into the local community" (conexionamericas.org). Conexión Américas serves over 2,500 Latino families in Middle Tennessee each year, providing a range of programs and services to both the Hispanic immigrant community and the host community as well. Among the programs administered by the bicultural and bilingual staff are Latino cultural competency training and translation services to the host community, and information and referrals, language exchange, financial education, and home-ownership programs to the Latino community. Conexión Américas also has a body of grassroots volunteer leadership called the Hispanic Council. This Council provides an opportunity for the clients and members of the community to participate in the decision-making processes of the organization. Members of the Hispanic Council are low to moderate income immigrants, have benefitted from Conexión's services in some way, and share the commitment to give back to the organization and the community at-large (conexionamericas.org).

It is from within this grassroots governing body that the need for a Latino parent involvement program originated. The Hispanic Council voiced their hope to establish a community based program to enable Latino parents to better advocate for their children within the school system. The council recognized a significant gap in communication between schools and Latino parents, various barriers preventing Latino parental involvement, and the need for a program to address such concerns. Researching and assessing the needs of this population and community lies at the core of establishing and implementing an effective parental involvement program. Thus the purpose of this project is to carry out needs assessment research with members of the Latino community in Nashville in order to gain their perceptions of parent involvement, barriers to parent involvement, their experience in the public school system, and their preferences and hopes regarding program design and curriculum. The Hispanic Council as well as other parents, teachers, and administrators involved in Metro Nashville Public Schools participated in this research. Many of the concerns and ideas voiced by the Hispanic Council and
other parents and individuals involved in this process indeed reflect much of the pre-existing literature on Latino parent involvement and advocacy.

Literature Review

Given the complexity and possible implications of Latino parent involvement, or lack thereof, the literature provides abundant information, perspectives, and research on this subject. One of the key topics vital to understanding this issue is recognizing the barriers to Latino parent involvement. Innumerable studies have identified concrete obstacles that prevent Latino parents from being involved in their child’s education—some obstacles stem from and must be addressed by the schools, while some are the result of deeper cultural trends exhibited by many Latino parents. Nevertheless, these barriers reflect the complexity and lack of cooperation and communication that many Latino parents and school administrators are trying to overcome. For example, Chavkin (1993) notes that the school environment can prevent parent participation, as oftentimes parents report feeling unwelcome at their child’s school. A welcoming school environment encourages parent involvement—yet many parents feel “anxious, unwelcome, and misinformed” when visiting the school (Bright, 1996; as quoted in Tinkler, 2002). Hyslop (2000) reports that Latino parents also feel intimidated by teachers. As many teachers do not receive appropriate training to develop the skills necessary to initiate and maintain parent relationships, this is an issue of concern as well (as quoted in Tinkler, 2002). Language barriers also play a major role in impeding Latino parent involvement. Oftentimes it is difficult for Latino parents to communicate with schools and teachers in English, and furthermore, they are unable to help their children with their homework (Aspiazú et. al., 1998). This creates a serious gap in communication, one of the key elements in parental involvement and advocacy. Cultural differences also create obstacles to Latino parent involvement. While these characteristics are common traits found in the Latino culture, it is important to note that they are not exhibited by all Latinos without exception. With that said, the Hispanic culture indeed highly values education, yet holds that the school setting is a separate entity from the home setting. Two distinct sets of caregivers function in each environment, each possessing different roles and responsibilities (Tinkler, 2002). Some Latino parents deem it inappropriate to be involved in their child’s education as the schools and teachers are viewed as the true education experts (NCLR PAP Manual). Thus their lack of involvement, while it may be perceived as apathetic, is in reality due to a set of cultural beliefs that must be taken into account. Differences such as
these create misunderstanding between the parents and the school and hinder parent involvement. In addition, oftentimes the parents' level of education and past experience in school can impact their perception and interaction with the school system in the host country. Tinkler (2002) states that "it is not unusual for Latino immigrant families to have limited formal education." A lack of formal education can impede parents' ability to assist their children with homework and take initiative in interacting with their child's school (Trumbull et. al., 2001). Furthermore, if the parent has had a negative experience with schools in the past, this can "create feelings of low self-esteem and anxiety" upon entering the school environment (Hyslop, 2000; as quoted in Tinkler, 2002). And finally, logistical issues are often cited as a common barrier to Latino parent involvement. Many immigrant and migrant workers must work multiple jobs and long hours in order to provide for their family, which leaves little time to be involved in their child's academic life (Fuentes, Cantu & Stechuk, 1996). The collective influence of these barriers makes it difficult for Latinos and schools to cooperatively achieve an adequate level of parent involvement. So how can parents and schools overcome these obstacles?

Delgado-Gaitan (2004) emphasizes several key components to a successful Latino parent involvement program. In her "Involving Latino Families in Schools" she notes that establishing a home-school connection is imperative, and that the education system must reach out to Latino parents in "culturally appropriate ways." Schools need to understand and respect Latino family values, and Latino parents need to understand the "school culture" as well in order to initiate the move towards parent involvement. Schools must make a concerted effort to learn about cultural differences in order to establish respect and trust, and avoid misunderstanding. Regarding the school environment, Latino parents must learn about how the school operates, and the resources available to them. Delgado-Gaitan also maintains that Latino parents must assume an active role in the planning of their child's academic goals and pursuits. In addition, she adds that actually involving the students in the program is beneficial as well when ultimately trying to raise student achievement. Teaching the "vast challenges and rewards of academic achievement" helps families promote the motivation needed to succeed. Furthermore the author suggests another helpful component that involves acquainting parents and students to higher education and professional career options after middle and high school (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004). This method will inform and educate, while providing students and parents with the tools necessary to succeed beyond elementary and secondary education. The author points out that these ideas and
strategies can be implemented from many different angles—programs can be successful whether they are school-driven or community-based. While Delgado-Gaitan provides comprehensive and helpful insight into some ‘best practices’ of Latino parent involvement programs, it is also important to consider the context in which a program will operate, the needs of the target population to be served, and the resources available to implement a successful program.

The research questions were formulated around these ideas, yet it is also important to note that I went into this project with a comprehensive idea of the different parent involvement program models available to Conexión Áméricas. Many variables were taken into account when evaluating possible program curricula and design such as: cost, program goals, availability of bilingual materials, quality of session material, and outcomes. For a variety of reasons, the Parents as Partners (PAP) program met the objectives of Conexión Áméricas regarding this endeavor.

An introduction to the Parents as Partners program

Conexión Áméricas is an affiliate organization of the National Council of La Raza (NCLR), the “largest national Latino civil rights and advocacy organization in the United States” (nclr.org). NCLR has developed their curriculum, “Parents as Partners,” or “Padres como lideres y compañeros,” for low-income, ethnically diverse parents, in order to increase parent involvement in their child’s education. The program urges parents to “take a participatory role in assisting their children to stay in school; improve their academic performance; improve parent/child relationships; and attend college or other forms of higher education” (nclr.org). This program is based on a model from the Parent Institute for Quality Education (PIQE) that has been proven successful (Zellman et. al., 1998). In addition, many core elements of PAP fit the best practices discussed by Delgado-Gaitan. Thus some of the research questions were formulated in order to find out whether or not PAP would indeed fit the needs of the community.

Research Questions

With Delgado-Gaitan’s ‘best practices’ in mind, I set out to first assess the perceptions and needs of the local community and target population, Hispanic parents with children in Metro Nashville Public Schools. This process will enable Conexión Áméricas to provide the most effective and appropriate program for the population being served. As parental involvement not only increases student academic performance, it also suggests a partnership between parents and schools with constant communication between the two groups. Thus this research will include
participants from Metro Public Schools and their perspectives as well. The following are the primary research questions for this work:

1) What are the attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions of Hispanic parents with children in Metro Schools regarding the school environment and parent involvement? 
2) What are the attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions of teachers and administrators in Metro Schools regarding Latino parent involvement? 
3) What barriers do parents and administrators perceive to Latino parent involvement? 
4) What is the school system currently doing to increase Latino parent involvement? 
5) What are some ideas and suggestions from parents and administrators to improve Latino parent involvement? 
6) In what specific areas do Latino parents need the most assistance? 
7) What are the preferences of the Hispanic Council regarding the structure, design, and curriculum of a Latino parent involvement program? 
8) What resources, funds, and additional capabilities will Conexión Américas need as an organization to implement such a program?

Methods

Data Set 1, “Immigrant Family Access to Public Schools” by Katharine Donato, is unanalyzed secondary research included in this report due to its pertinence and local work with the Hispanic community in Nashville. Katharine Donato is a Professor in the Sociology Department at Vanderbilt University and this study is a three-city comparative study conducted in part through a partnership with Vanderbilt’s Center for Nashville Studies. Only the findings from Nashville are included in this report. While these findings are not my own empirical research, they are presented as the first “Data Set” in order to provide helpful information about the context in which Nashville Hispanic immigrant families live. Donato reports that “data sources include federally collected, publicly accessible data about Nashville schools and original household interviews with immigrant families. Interviews [were] conducted in English and
Spanish in two Mexican Nashville neighborhoods on a wide range of education topics, including parental involvement and evaluation of schools, parental perceptions of school resources, outreach practices, and barriers to family involvement, and parental involvement in their children’s academic activities” (Donato, 2007). Interviews were conducted in either Spanish or English with over 300 parents.

Data Set 2 reports the findings from a focus group with members of the Hispanic Council of Conexión Américas. The 12-15 members that participated all have children in Metro Nashville Public Schools of varying ages. The participants are low to moderate income earners with service jobs in the areas of childcare, house cleaning, and food service, or work manual labor in construction or car manufacturing. Various nationalities were represented, with four families from Mexico, one from Argentina, one from Columbia, and one from Guatemala. All participants have lived in the United States for at least five years. I, along with Renata Soto, Executive Director of Conexión Américas, facilitated this informal focus group. All discussion was held in Spanish and I translated, interpreted, and compiled the findings into English.

Data Set 3 reports the findings from a focus group facilitated by representatives from the Nashville Mayor’s Office Task Force on Education. One representative currently holds an administrative position in the school system, and the other representative, a community activist in the Nashville area. In attendance were approximately five to seven Hispanic immigrant parents with children in high school in MNPS, a bilingual teacher and former guidance counselor, and an interpreter. Discussion was held in English and Spanish. I observed and compiled the findings.

Data Set 4 reports the findings from two phone interviews with members of other non-profit organizations that have implemented the Parents as Partners program with success. One located in Washington DC, and another located in Phoenix, both organizations have used the PAP curriculum with the Hispanic parent populations they serve. Questions regarding the logistical aspects of the program were asked in English.

Results

Findings from Katharine Donato, Data Set 1

1. Parents report that schools do little to involve them. From our surveys of approximately 300 immigrant parents in Nashville, they report that schools only sometimes translate documents into Spanish, interpreters are not always available for parent-teachers
meetings and other smaller interactions. More importantly, parents consistently report
that schools are unable to offer them an environment of "confianza" in which they could
feel comfortable participating in all aspects of their child's education. This finding is
consistent with findings from another analysis using federal school data presented at
SSRC in NY in Dec 2007. In that paper, schools reported low levels of parent
involvement programs and practices, despite the strong link between parent involvement
and children's school achievement.

2. Many parents report they do not formally engage in their children's schools because of
English language deficits, time constraints, and the lack of adequate school supports. The
most commonly reported reasons for not participating are 1) parents cannot understand
what is said at formal meetings and schools do not consistently provide interpreters; and
2) because they have work commitments at the same time that schools hold
meetings/conferences. These (and other) reasons suggest straightforward policy solutions
that the district could implement assuming it has the necessary political will and
economic resources to do so.

3. Another obstacle to parent participation is that parents perceive racism in schools.
Whether racism actually occurs, it is important to note that this was a perception that
many parents reported as a result of some interaction they had with their child's school.
For example, one father who reported to be very involved in his child's education told us
he was kicked out of his son's high school for wanting to visit his classroom. Many
parents told us that personnel in school offices ignored Latino parents and helped others
instead. Both parents described punishing their elementary school child because of
teacher reports of very poor grades and bad behavior, but they later found out that this
was not true. Having called the school board and principal but with no response, this
family eventually switched schools by claiming a different address. Finally many parents
told us about their concerns about bus drivers, who reportedly let their children off
elsewhere and not at the correct bus stop.

4. Immigrant families live in their neighborhoods in fear. Whether they have the legal status
to live and work in the United States, most immigrant parents describe themselves as
fearful of the police and federal immigration enforcement. Their reports, as well as our
own field observations, suggest that police presence is strong in these neighborhoods and
that many immigrants who drive are being pulled over for small traffic offenses that then
may lead to their deportation because of the 287G program and obstacles to obtaining a
form of official identification acceptable to police. Despite strong police presence in the
community, immigrants living in apartment complexes are also fearful of criminal attacks
especially after dark. Our field observations suggest that police are rarely patrolling
inside apartment complexes but remain on the streets outside them. Living in fear also then becomes another reason why parents do not engage in schools.

5. **Because they are fearful, immigrant parents are unable to engage in their communities in ways comparable to nonimmigrant parents.** Many families rarely leave their homes except for going to work. Often non-working mothers put their children on the school bus and then return home to lock the door until the bus brings home their children. Immigrant mothers, in particular, are especially isolated because they are frightened to go out alone, even to their child’s school. Nonimmigrant mothers do not face the same fears.

6. **As more immigrant families have become increasingly isolated, we have learned that the only way to gain trust is to engage in intensive field operations and returning to sample households many times.** This type of field effort was not planned, but was necessary given the xenophobic political climate in which we now live and the fear and isolation in which many immigrants live.

**Findings, Data Set 2**

1. **Hispanic families experience heavy discrimination, particularly inside the classroom.** The Council reports that although sometimes it appears otherwise, Hispanic families experience discrimination from teachers. As a result, parents are reluctant and afraid to report the discrimination or even interact with their child’s school.

2. **The Council reports that many of the difficulties they experience are a reflection of problems stemming from within the school system itself.** This focus group identifies the lack of effective communication from teachers as one of the biggest barriers to parental involvement and advocacy. Many parents shared personal stories of serious problems that could have been avoided with active and effective communication from their child’s teacher. In addition, many parents also perceive a lack of adequate explanations and help for Hispanic children within the classroom.

3. **The Council reports the need for assistance with middle and high school aged children.** The focus group identifies that receiving assistance with this age group is a top priority. These Hispanic parents report the desire to help their adolescent children follow their dreams, yet also report feeling unequipped to do so. As many adolescents do not know what career path to pursue, nor are knowledgeable about the resources to help them achieve their dreams, parents find it difficult to advocate for their children in this area.
The Council identifies certain key areas of interest related to their child’s education: (a) strategies to motivate adolescents to continue their education, (b) high school credits required to graduate, (c) the necessary materials and information regarding options for college, and the college application process, and (d) honors or Advanced Placement opportunities that could help their college applicant.

4. The Council also feels that Hispanic parents have difficulty understanding and successfully assisting their child’s development during adolescence. Educating Hispanic parents about their child’s development during adolescence is one of the first steps in enabling them to better advocate for their child. These parents recognize the value of a program that also emphasizes adolescent development in its curriculum.

Findings, Data Set 3

1. The group perceives bias and discrimination against Hispanics within the schools. They report that many non-Hispanics, teachers and students alike, assume that all Spanish speakers are “illegal immigrants.” In addition, gangs and bullying are increasingly problematic, and multiple parents report instances in which their children were victimized by such groups. This discrimination is also confounded by the perceived notion that the administration gives inconsistent and unfair punishment in cases of school conflict involving Latino students.

2. The group reports a lack of cultural competency within the school system. In a diverse school environment that should foster respect and appreciation for different cultures, this group calls for extensive diversity training for all school staff.

3. The group reports inadequate communication efforts from schools. When asked how their experience in Metro Nashville Public Schools compares to experiences in previous school systems, Hispanic parents report that they (a) received more frequent communication and (b) received more communication in Spanish from their previous school system. They recognize the need for more frequent and effective communication to Hispanic parents.

4. The group recognizes a severe shortage of Spanish interpreters within the school system. Hispanic parents report that if a problem arises with their child, oftentimes no interpreter is provided. The group reports that this is because there are approximately 20 interpreters for the entire school district. Furthermore, this specific high school, with more than 500 Hispanic students, must share one interpreter with other schools in the district.
5. Parents report that they do not come to their child's school very often. This report is a result of the aforementioned findings.

6. The group reports that Hispanic children undergo a rough transition when they must immigrate reluctantly. This trend oftentimes results in social and emotional problems that the school is unable to handle. The teacher and former counselor reports that the school staff is not properly equipped to deal with the wide array of needs that their diverse student body exhibits. In addition, s/he reports that due to administrative priorities, the school guidance counselors do not counsel, and the schools lack proper college counseling.

7. The group reports a lack of parent orientation to their child's school. While school orientation is given to students, the group recognizes the need for an informative parent orientation for Latinos. Furthermore they report the need for a community program to educate Hispanic parents about the school system itself, the curriculum options available to their children, and ways to track their child's academic success.

8. The group recognizes a lack of opportunity for undocumented Hispanic students. The group reports that too often, academically exceptional Hispanic students do not have the opportunity to further their education due to their undocumented immigration status.

Findings, Data Set 4

1. Conexión Américas will need to work closely with the school system itself in order to gain the support and resources needed for the success of this program. The individuals report that "buy in" from the school system is a necessary component of this program. Aligning organizations with similar objectives, such as increasing parent involvement, is an efficient way to reach the goal of this program. In addition, they report that it is beneficial to hold the PAP class sessions in a classroom setting.

2. The most appropriate time to implement the program is in the fall, at the opening of the academic year. They report that from their past experience, interest, motivation, and energy to participate in the program is highest for parents during this time.

3. Targeting two to three schools with the largest Latino populations is an effective strategy when resources are limited. As Conexión Américas is a small non-profit organization serving a large population of Latino families, participants report that specifying a focus area within the school system will maximize outcome.

4. As the Parents as Partners program is parent-driven, it is not difficult to implement. One participant notes that parents they work with oftentimes demonstrate initiative when
participating in the program. For example, frequently, discussions are rich with personal stories that many parents can relate to and learn from. Trends such as these minimize the role the organization plays in the weekly execution of the program.

5. **Cost to implement the program is minimal.** One participant reports higher cost, as the organization provides a stipend to the facilitators, and food, child care, and materials to the participants. However, these costs are optional depending on the funding available to the organization.

**Analysis/Discussion**

It is evident in the findings from all data sets that increasing Latino parent involvement is a multi-faceted issue that cannot be solved overnight. This issue has become an important concern for Conexión Américas, the school system, and other organizations working with the Latino community in Nashville and the issue will continue to grow without collaboration from many different groups. The results from this research project point to many meaningful conclusions and suggestions for improvement.

First, many of the findings related to the barriers to parent involvement reflect what is found in the literature. School environment and language barriers were the most commonly cited obstacles preventing these parents from participating in their child’s academic life. Parents from these data sets reported high levels of discrimination and racism within the schools, suggesting the lack of a welcoming environment that would foster parent involvement. Additionally, the findings from these data sets also report a serious shortage of interpreters and translators in schools. This makes it difficult for parents to communicate with teachers, especially in times when effective communication is most needed. While specific cultural barriers were not discussed, it is important to note that these Hispanic parents care very deeply about their child’s education—a trend oftentimes unknown to or misinterpreted by educators working with this population. Each story and opinion was shared ardently, with the sincere hope to improve the situation and advocate for their children in a more successful manner. Logistical issues as well, while they were not directly discussed or included in the presented findings, were evident throughout this process. Logistical issues such as those previously discussed by Fuentes, et. al. (2006) posed challenges as these parents work long hours while also supporting their families, like many immigrant parents. For example, as many parents cannot afford childcare, it was common for participants’ children to attend meetings, oftentimes distracting and disrupting the
discussion. In addition, logistical difficulties were especially evident when determining the timing and availability of the Hispanic Council members interested in participation and facilitation of the program in the future. In order to maximize attendance and overcome logistical obstacles to parent involvement during this project and in the future, meetings must always be held after work hours, at a convenient location, with refreshments and childcare provided. Thus these findings echoed many of the barriers reported in the literature.

As some of these findings paint a bleak picture of the school environment, it is important to note that the school system is indeed taking measures to access their Hispanic families in many ways. The primary channel of communication with the Hispanic community is executed through COPLA, the district-wide Latino Parent Advisory Committee. This Council holds community meetings on a monthly basis in order to promote effective interaction between the school district and Latino parents and students. The meetings also serve as a forum for Latino parents to voice their concerns and ask clarifying questions regarding their child’s academic life. Additionally, the school district’s website is available in Spanish, and additional meetings such as Hispanic Parents Nights are held periodically when Latino parents need to be informed of particular district-wide changes in the system. MNPS also employs bilingual and bicultural ELL counselors, teachers, and community liaisons.

While these efforts are beneficial to the schools and the Latino population, more can be done. The schools must equip teachers with the strategies and resources necessary to communicate with Latino parents about their child’s academic behavior and performance. One of the most obvious suggestions for improvement is to increase the number of Spanish translators and interpreters. The school system currently employs a total of 29 interpreters, providing services in multiple languages. Approximately 20 are Spanish interpreters that must collectively serve a Hispanic student population of over 10,000 (mnps.org). This number is insufficient, and as discussed in Data Set 3 though not previously presented, COPLA has recently requested additional funding to hire more Spanish interpreters. These individuals must be accessible to the Hispanic population and the educators looking to assist them. Yet reaching out to Latino parents in order to increase their involvement must go a step further than translating documents. This data suggests that diversity training for all school staff members would be beneficial, and even necessary, to eliminate the racism and discrimination experienced by many of the parents involved in this project. Currently teachers can attend optional workshops on eliminating bias,
discrimination, and bullying in the classroom, yet the school system does not require formal diversity training for its staff. Regardless of individual beliefs about immigration, teachers and administrators must recognize that Latino families are becoming one of their biggest ‘customers,’ if you will. Discriminating against this large group will only pose greater problems, such as poor academic performance and high drop-out rates, in the future. That is not to say that all teachers and administrators discriminate, nor that they do not realize the potential consequences of this issue already. It is to say that a pro-active, intentional, and coordinated effort must be made to provide more translators and eliminate the perceived discrimination to ultimately increase parent involvement and student achievement. Additionally, if allotted more time, this project could be enhanced by discussing these issues more extensively with additional representatives from the school system.

The school system cannot tackle this problem alone, nor can Conexión Américas. The data also points to some clarifying conclusions which will provide Conexión Américas with the direction needed to do our part in increasing Latino parent involvement. The findings confirm that NCLR’s Parents as Partners program will indeed be an appropriate, effective, and realistic curriculum to implement. The PAP program covers many of Delgado-Gaitán’s ‘best practices,’ as well as meets the needs and areas of interest of the Hispanic Council. For example, PAP will establish the home-school connection needed to increase parent involvement by equipping parents with the necessary strategies and tools to interact with the schools, and by inviting a principal from the school system to the last class session. Latino parents will learn about how the school system operates and the resources available to them, another key component to a successful Latino parent involvement program. The program will also acquaint parents with options for higher education and the college application process. These strategies also agree with the areas of interest put forth by the Hispanic Council of Conexión Américas. As a whole, the curriculum is a comprehensive approach to enable Latino parents to better advocate for their children.

From here, Conexión Américas will look to implement the Parents as Partners program at the beginning of the 2008-2009 academic year. The program will target two specific schools in the district with large numbers of Hispanic students. Members of the Hispanic Council have children in the two schools discussed, which collectively have almost 700 Hispanic students. We will also begin to research options for possible partnerships with other organizations as well as
the school system itself. The program will include an evaluation process as well, and techniques to measure the success of the program will be further defined in the coming months. Possibilities may include pre- and post-tests with the participants, and a mechanism to track their children's academic success over the long term.

As stated before, increasing Latino parent involvement is a complicated issue. Yet many practices, the Parents as Partners program in particular, have had success in overcoming the various barriers associated with the issue. The school district, local government, and other community organizations must make the Latino community, and their involvement in areas such as education, a priority. In a meeting with researcher Katharine Donato, she stated that Nashville is now presented with an opportunity—an opportunity to deliberately address these issues, maximize the success of many students of the next generation, and embrace the diversity of our growing city. If left unchecked, the missed opportunity could have unfortunate implications for a city with such promise. Increasing Latino parent involvement in education is perhaps one way of many to take advantage of the opportunity facing us.
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