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Introduction

Latinos for Education (L4E) is a national, nonprofit organization driven by the mission to develop, place, and connect essential Latino leadership in the education sector, while mobilizing Latino voices to promote practices and policies that remove barriers to equitable educational opportunity. Since its inception in 2016, Latinos for Education has focused on a critical piece of the education puzzle—diversifying the education sector with more Latino teachers, leaders, and advocates. Strengthening the Latino leadership pipeline was envisioned as a critical component of a greater vision that includes increasing the number of Latino advocates and driving policy to improve the educational outcomes of Latino students.

Latinos represent one of the fastest growing demographics in the nation. Between 2009 and 2018, the percentage of public school students who were Latino increased from 22% to 27%. Contrary to a common misperception, immigration is not the primary driver of Latino population growth. In fact, 95% of Latinos under the age of 18 are U.S.-born. This young population continues to steadily grow. Based on the recent Census 2020 data, “Latinos were the largest or second largest racial/ethnic group in 24 states in 2020.” It is estimated that by 2060, 32% of children in the U.S. will be Latino. Yet, Latino students face unique challenges in terms of access to high-quality early childhood education, college access and improving college completion as well as lack of racial, ethnic, and linguistic representation within the educator workforce.

Background

In 2019, Latinos for Education convened a national group of Latino leaders to discuss the barriers that impede Latinos from succeeding in education and beyond. After a robust discussion, gathered leaders identified three national principles that are critical to closing both the opportunity and achievement gaps for Latino students. In August 2021, L4E hosted virtual focus groups with national and local Latino educators to further distill the previously identified national principles. The overarching goal of the focus groups was to refine policy recommendations under each of the national principles to ensure that the proposed policy solutions accurately and adequately respond to the needs of Latino students. The decision to revisit the national principles was also prompted by the disproportionate impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the Latino community. It was important to bring a chorus of educator voices to the table to identify, name, and prioritize the education issues that must be addressed to actualize equity within the education ecosystem.

Three focus groups, composed of 44 education leaders representing K-12 school districts, the nonprofit sector, higher education, national organizations, and state policy-making bodies, were convened to receive input on the challenges and opportunities facing Latinos in early childhood education, college access and completion, and educator diversity. Approximately 30% of the recruited participants were classroom teachers. Latinos For Education intentionally targeted teachers, including those who previously participated in our leadership development fellowships, because this critical stakeholder group is often excluded from policy discussions relevant to the field of education. Yet, teachers are in the field, creating trusting relationships with students and families, implementing policies, and keeping a real-time pulse on issues impacting the Latino community and the educator workforce.



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This report summarizes the key points raised in each focus group regarding perceived barriers and policy solutions to overcome identified challenges. The feedback received and aggregate information will be further refined and informed by research and evidence-based practices to design a Latino Action agenda, advocacy plan, and communications strategy that elevates, amplifies, and effectively addresses pressing needs and persistent barriers faced by Latino students.

To better synthesize the data gathered from each focus group, the recommendations below are categorized under the following themes: Preparation, Supports, and Accountability. These categories are not mutually exclusive, and the proposed themes only serve as an organizing exercise meant to provide a consistent and cohesive framework across the three focus areas.

Early Childhood Education (ECE)

High-quality ECE is essential to improving a young child's cognitive, behavioral, and social emotional development. The research suggests that the positive impacts of attending preschool may be stronger for Latino children. Unfortunately, Latino children have lower rates of participation in ECE programs than White or Black children and face educational disadvantages when starting kindergarten. For instance, low-income Latinos tend to live in communities characterized as "childcare deserts." In communities that did offer early childhood education options, these options were threatened by the Covid-19 pandemic. In fact, public school enrollment has dropped nationwide, with steep declines in the early grades: prekindergarten and kindergarten. Prekindergarten drops were most pronounced for students who are economically disadvantaged, Black and Latinos. In fact, enrollment among children considered economically disadvantaged dropped by 32%—more than four times as large as the rate observed for non-economically disadvantaged children. Lack of access to childcare and ECE options contribute to an opportunity and achievement gap well before Latino students enter the K-12 school system.



Barriers

Families lack access to information about the difference between childcare and early childhood education as well as the long-term benefits of ECE. When information is provided, families have a difficult time navigating the ECE enrollment process. This tends to be exacerbated in communities where ECE and childcare centers compete for enrollment and parents are not sufficiently informed about the various programs to make informed decisions. When families do pursue enrollment options, they are not authentically or meaningfully engaged. Instead, parental involvement often happens as a reactive, not proactive engagement effort.



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Participants also recognized the challenges facing the ECE workforce, many of whom are Latina. Nationally, about one in five (19%) ECE teachers are Latina. This figure represents double the national percentage of Latino educators in the K-12 system which currently stands at 9%. Retaining Latinas in the ECE field is beneficial to the field as they bring cultural assets, competencies, language and lived experiences that mirror the population they serve. In addition, many Latina ECE providers lack access to culturally and linguistically relevant training and professional development, English language proficiency, livable wages, as well as affordable high quality, early childhood education and childcare options for their own children.

Recommendations

According to participants, community outreach efforts should be culturally responsive, sensitive to the language needs of Spanish-speaking families, provide families with information regarding the benefits of high quality ECE, and inform families about the process to enroll children in quality ECE programs. Participants also suggested a massive public awareness campaign launched by the federal government to raise awareness amongst Latino families about the benefits of early childhood education. This multifaceted campaign would feature trusted members of the Latino community, ranging from Spanish media personalities to community-based organizations, providing the Latino community information and raising awareness of the critical brain, language, and social development of children during the early formative years. Further, participants suggested culturally relevant and accessible training programs, with a host of incentives that may serve to diversify and grow the ECE workforce.

Preparation

- Grow the early childhood education workforce by creating flexible virtual certification programs and providing financial incentives for at-home caregivers who want to enter the field.
- Designate funding to support flexible and accessible ECE virtual training programs, created through partnerships with research-driven institutions, that enhance the competencies of ECE workers.
- Provide subsidies to childcare providers and ECE workers so they can pursue mandatory certifications.

Supports

- Provide aid to ECE centers that have endured low enrollment due to the pandemic and ensure funding addresses interrupted learning or learning loss caused by delayed enrollment.
- Pay ECE workers a livable wage.
- Provide funding for community-based organizations, individuals, and local agencies to support grassroots mobilization efforts to educate the Latino community and Spanish speakers on ECE that addresses misconceptions around ECE and highlights the positive impact of early education in child development.
- Launch user-friendly websites to help people find certified ECE programs in their respective community.

"Our society has to change its mindset about early childhood education. We don't value ECE and its workforce...we don't properly compensate ECE workers. There's a lot of change that needs to happen...It's a process of leadership change."



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Accountability

- Improve the enrollment process by streamlining steps, increasing transparency and accountability, shortening waitlists, and removing language barriers.
- Provide universal access to pre-K and explore the feasibility of making early childhood education mandatory.
- Support the improvement of quality ECE programs.

Higher Education



Between 1976 and 2017, the Latino proportion of all students enrolled in college rose from 4% to 19%. While Latino college enrollment was gradually growing, unfortunately, the pandemic has set us back, with Latino students experiencing the largest swing in declining enrollment. Even prior to the pandemic, Latino students faced major gaps in rates of completion at the bachelor's degree level with only 54% of Latino students who began seeking a bachelor's degree in 2010 graduated within six years, compared to 64% of white students. In addition, Latino students are overrepresented in public 2-year associate's degree programs, and face low graduation and transfer rates. For instance, only 30% of Latino students who began seeking a certificate or associate degree graduated within three years and approximately 39.5% of Latino students transferred from a 2-year institution to a 4-year institution compared to 50% of white students.

Barriers

Addressing the barriers Latino students face in college enrollment and college completion, participants identified the need to strengthen the academic preparation of students, streamline processes that create bureaucratic barriers, and dramatically improve college affordability. In terms of academic preparation, participants cited the lack of access to advanced courses or early college programs in high school that are meant to prepare students for the rigorous demands of college. This lack of adequate preparation often results in Latino students being placed in non-credit bearing, remedial courses upon enrolling in college. Preparation issues were contextualized by participants as byproducts of narrow course offerings, poor or inadequate college and career advising, and limited access to advisors and counselors of color who share a similar cultural, socio-economic background as Latino students.



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Focus group attendees also discussed the high and increasing cost of college and the challenges faced by Latino students when attempting to access financial aid. In particular, college affordability and navigating the financial aid process pose barriers for undocumented students who are ineligible for public assistance and first-generation students whose parents do not speak English or hesitate to share personal and financial information as required by the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). The financial aid process is further complicated by the verification process that tends to be complex and lengthy. Participants also voiced the need to better support Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) by increasing funding to these eligible institutions that have an enrollment of undergraduate full-time equivalent students that is at least 25 percent Latino students.

Recommendations

Proposed recommendations for addressing barriers in college access and completion ranged from addressing issues in the K-12 system to targeting the broken immigration system that denies Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and undocumented American students the opportunity to receive benefits and fully participate in our higher education system and workforce. Participants proposed broad policy solutions like repealing any laws that exclude undocumented immigrants from receiving financial aid as well as access to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), affordable housing, and other safety net programs currently inaccessible to them; thus, preventing some students from attending college. The scope of policy solutions also focused on the level of academic preparation that Latino students receive in their high school careers and the need to ensure that low-income students, including undocumented students, have access to adequate financial support to cover college cost, including universal basic income stipends to help meet basic needs. The topic of boosting financial assistance was a resounding theme with focus group members who proposed a host of solutions including doubling the value of the Pell grant, extending the benefit to DACA students, identifying provisions for student loan forgiveness programs, and streamlining the FAFSA application and process.

Preparation

- Require K-12 schools to employ evidence-based practices and models that increase the college completion rates of Latino students.
- Promote partnerships between community college and local 4-year institutions to streamline and increase the transfer process and rate.
- Support early college programs that prepare students for college level coursework and inform students about career pathways in high demand industries that offer proper compensation and upward economic mobility.
- Adopt policies that place students in credit bearing courses with the appropriate support rather than in remedial courses.

"We can't have free college without thinking about how we're going to get them to complete. If we don't do it differently, all we're doing is just attracting more students to these institutions that are going to replicate the same results. I'd strongly urge the adoption of a completion fund that incentivizes evidence based practices to improve completion."



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Supports

- Freeze tuition rates for college students for a period of 4 years. This incentivizes undergraduate students to graduate within 4-years and ensures zero tuition hikes during this timeframe.
- Incentivize community colleges to develop effective articulation agreements with 4-year institutions to improve transfer rates.
- Provide access to broadband and devices to ensure students have the necessary tools to navigate higher education and fully engage in classes and course work.
- Support re-enrollment strategies by launching a national campaign and providing incentives to re-enroll Latino students and adults who delayed enrollment during the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic or seek to upskill.

Accountability

- Hold institutions of higher education accountable for college completion rates of Latino students and incentivize their retention efforts by establishing a fund for college completion grants.
- Set stringent regulations on for-profit colleges to avoid predatory practices that negatively impact Latino students.
- If free community college is enacted, the federal government must ensure all students, regardless of citizenship status and full-time or part-time status, have access to free community college. Community colleges should also recognize the needs of and provide support to non-traditional students or students who delayed enrollment in higher education.
- The federal government should evaluate outcomes of institutions receiving Title V funds to ensure that funds directed to HSIs indeed benefit and serve Latino students.

Educator Diversity



While Latino students represent more than 27% of public school students in the U.S., only nine percent of teachers and nine percent of principals in public schools are Latino. Research shows that students perform better academically and have a more positive experience in school when they see themselves represented in their teachers and role models. To diversify the educator workforce, and ensure all students encounter teachers and mentors who understand and validate their lived experiences and cultural assets, we must break down the systemic barriers that prevent the recruitment and retention of educators of color. The absence of Latino representation perpetuates the conditions which impede opportunities and academic success of Latino students. For instance, lack of racial and ethnic diversity in the education ecosystem can lead to the homogeneity that causes Latino students to be missed, underserved, and community voices to go unheard.



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Barriers

Addressing the lack of educator diversity, participants noted the role racism plays in the education ecosystem and the broken pipeline for recruiting, preparing, and retaining educators of color. Participants noted that Latinos are not prioritized during outreach efforts to diversify the teacher pipeline. When Latinos are targeted, many students feel discouraged from even exploring the profession because of their own negative experience with their teachers. Latino teachers who do pursue the profession often find themselves alienated by colleagues and higher ups. For instance, Latino educators can experience work-place hostility and microaggressions when they interrogate structural racism in the school system or advocate for equity. Furthermore, their cultural assets and skills are undervalued or exploited. Latino teachers are often placed in high needs, racially isolated communities but not provided the proper support and training to meet the wide breadth of academic, language, and social emotional needs of students. Spanish-speaking educators are often tapped to translate materials and serve as a language broker for families during meetings and events, but they are not compensated for the additional workload and multiple roles they assume. One focus group participant referred to the added pressure and workload placed on Latino educators as the “Brown Tax.”

Participants also problematized the teacher certification requirements. Challenging factors identified included the limited availability of materials to help aspiring teachers to study for preparation exams, no sense of community or belonging when pursuing teacher and leadership programs, and the high rates of aspiring Latino teachers who fail licensure exams. The negative public perception of teachers was also referenced by educators. The teaching profession, which has been feminized and culturally not seen as a career pathway for Latino males, is not valued or respected in our society. This is evident by the inadequate compensation for educators and the scrutinization of the field. When compounded, these barriers can serve to deter interested candidates from entering the field of education.

Recommendations

Focus group contributors identified several potential solutions to fix the broken pipeline for Latino educators and enhance efforts to diversify the workforce. The suggested solutions included targeting early recruitment efforts to expose high school students to the field. Early intervention and recruitment strategies should include policies that strengthen the articulation efforts between institutions. For instance, local education agencies should make a college preparation curriculum the default requirement for high school graduation. This will ensure that students meet the minimum admission requirements for college eligibility. Additionally, partnerships between high schools and universities must be strengthened to create early college programs or career pathways focused on the teaching profession.

"We need a seat at the table. To get into the room where decisions are being made regarding the direct impact is going to have on us or our students...There has to be an easy way for us to get to the microphone and advocate on behalf of our students and our colleagues."



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These incentivized partnerships can facilitate the identification process of students so schools can cultivate students' interest, provide career counseling, and grow their own teacher pipeline. Support systems must be established, enhanced, and expanded to support educators at all stages of the talent development cycle. Structured supports include induction programs, culturally responsive mentorship, resources and assistance with licensure exams, and investing in leadership development opportunities to prepare and augment the pool of teacher leaders, administrators, and Latino superintendents.

Preparation

- Provide a pathway to citizenship for DACA recipients who enter the teacher profession.
- Consider alternative certification for immigrants and international educators who cannot go through the traditional teaching credential route.
- Incentivize schools to provide Grow Your Own programs for high school students via early college models and career pathways as well as for school staff (such as tutors, paraprofessionals, janitors, etc.) to be trained and certified to become teachers.
- Incentivize schools to create teacher induction programs that include formal mentoring for incoming teachers with no previous teaching experience.
- Increase the number of tries a candidate can take the prep exam and make it a one-time fee.
- Ensure that American Rescue Plan (ARP) funds that have been slated for social-emotional learning are also invested in teacher access to mental health care, particularly for teachers who work in challenging communities.

Supports

- Provide financial assistance for teacher preparation programs and licensure exams.
- Raise teacher salaries and provide economic incentives to help them stay in their communities (i.e., housing stipends).
- Increase financial supports like loan forgiveness, increased Pell grants, stipends for bilingual educators and funding for teacher development programs to remove financial obstacles to enter the teaching profession.
- Increase funding for schools that hire staff that match the demographics of their communities and provide professional development as well as leadership opportunities.
- Reward teacher preparation programs that increase the percentage of Latino teachers that complete a certification program.

Accountability

- Create a Latino teacher led commission to oversee how ARP funds are being spent and re-engage community stakeholders to provide feedback.
- Issue guidance for schools to evaluate their effectiveness in recruiting and retaining Latino teachers.
- Each Local Education Agency (LEA) should establish an educator dashboard that sets target goals for increased recruitment and retention of racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse teachers.
- Hold teacher preparation programs accountable for higher Latino teacher certification rates.



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Conclusion

We are extremely grateful to our focus group contributors, our policy co-authors, for their insights, passion, expertise, and service to the field of public education. The rich feedback that was gathered from this stellar group of education leaders will be further analyzed to identify recurring themes within focus areas and across the national principles. This information will help design the Latino Action Agenda that Latinos For Education will pursue in 2022. It is our hope that practitioners, policymakers, parents, Latino stakeholders, and members of the funding community continue to serve as thought-partners, advisors, collaborators, and supporters as we engage in this endeavor. Con Ganas We Can!

