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## Strengthening Parental Engagement in Low-Income Latino Communities

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## Strengthening Parental Engagement in Low-Income Latino Communities

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## **Introduction**

In the light of meager educational outcomes and low levels of parental involvement, Avenue Community Development Corporation (Avenue CDC) saw the necessity of increasing parent engagement while fostering leadership development in Houston's Northside community. The primary goals of Avenue CDC's Family Leadership Program are to actively engage parents in their children's education at all grade levels and foster strong relationships between parents, teachers, administrators and the district at large through establishing a dedicated parent leadership team in the community. We aim at providing each school with an opportunity to engage parents through a proven organizing method developed by Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) Houston and Avenue CDC, and parents with a chance to learn how to navigate the school system, monitor their children's academic development, contribute to the schools' activities and events, and ultimately advocate for the educational rights of children growing up in the neighborhood.

## **Background**

In recent years, the ethnic tapestry of the United States has been undergoing significant changes with the Hispanic population emerging as the fastest growing ethnic group. In the first decade of the third

millennium, the Latino population grew by 43 percent.<sup>1</sup> In 2010 the US population was comprised of 72 percent White, 13 percent African-American, 5 percent Asian, 0.9 percent American Indian and Alaska Native and 0.2 percent Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander. Within the White population, Latinos accounted for 15 percent and 23.1 percent of total children aged 17 and younger were of Hispanic descent.<sup>2</sup> Across America, Hispanic youth face daunting challenges growing up in poverty-stricken communities with minimal access to quality education and job opportunities alongside easy access to drugs and gangs. Due to the lack of support systems, many Hispanic youth perform poorly in school and end up dropping out before graduating from high school. The drop-out rate of Latinos (28%) is the highest among ethnic groups in the United States.

Considering the high drop-out rate and the meager educational outcomes of Hispanic students as well as acknowledging the positive role that parents can play in their children's education, the need for enhancing parental involvement becomes apparent. Research suggests that active parental involvement positively contributes to improving educational outcomes.<sup>3,4</sup> Several studies have shown that the more parents are involved in their children's education, the more likely their children are to graduate from high school and continue to pursue a degree in higher education.<sup>5,6</sup>

As more than half of the students in Houston's Independent School District are of Hispanic descent (62.4%), addressing low educational outcomes in the Latino community is among one of the most pressing issues in Houston's schools.<sup>7</sup> Houston's Latino student population fared poorly in comparison with other ethnic groups on the most recent standardized tests. Asians were the highest performing ethnic group (SAT mean 1180), followed by Caucasian students (1132). Latino students' SAT test results were at 884, slightly ahead of African-American students' test scores (842).<sup>7</sup> In order to ensure improvements in the academic performance of the Hispanic student populous, a stronger focus needs to be put on parental involvement. As the largest school district in Texas and the seventh largest in the nation, Houston Independent School District could become a leading model for Latino parental involvement in the country.

### **Neighborhood Profile**

In recent years the target community of the Family Leadership Project, Houston's Northside, has undergone significant changes, transforming it from a notorious crime-ridden warehouse district into a neighborhood with a more promising and vibrant future. Given its proximity to Downtown, a growing interest for investing in the Northside's housing and business

stock has been observed. In an effort to preserve historic buildings, offer affordable housing, and revitalize the dilapidated areas north and west of Downtown Houston, a group of neighbors created an organization in 1991, which came to be known as Avenue Community Development Corporation. By 1999, the target areas covered by the organization's holistic community revitalization program included the entire Near Northside as well as Washington Avenue communities. The organization, which was initially run by volunteers, currently employs 18 full-time staff.

Since its outset in 1991, Avenue CDC has considerably contributed to the revitalization of the area by leveraging more than \$60 million in investments. As of April 2014, Avenue CDC has developed 100 single-family homes, 526 rental units, and 140,000 square feet of commercial space. In addition to offering affordable housing options, Avenue CDC educates individuals on homeownership, leading them through the process of acquiring their own home and offering supportive services on site. In 2011, the organization guided 75 families through the process of purchasing a home, provided 490 families with pre-purchase housing education and counseling, offered foreclosure prevention counseling to 184 families, developed 193 affordable apartments, and provided supportive services to residents of 490 apartments in six complexes, including after-school educational and recreational programs.

Despite these positive developments, the Northside continues to face challenges attributed to low-income urban areas. There is an urgent need for halting the rampant housing decay and improving real estate conditions in the neighborhood. In terms of schooling, the Northside positions itself among neighborhoods with meager educational outcomes. More than half of its residents do not have a high school degree. An estimated 40 percent of high school students graduate, of which a mere 6 percent pursue a degree in higher education. The low educational attainment is clearly reflected in the area's disconcerting poverty level. Almost a third of Northside residents, 29.3 percent to be exact, live below the national poverty line compared to the 19.2 percent in the City of Houston.<sup>8</sup> As far as economic opportunities are concerned, a trend towards steadily rising unemployment rates has been noted. These rising unemployment rates have perpetuated poverty in the neighborhood, as well as contributed to an influx of criminal activities.

These barriers to positive community development shed light on the necessity of a transformative community building activity that promotes community engagement, creates a sense of pride in the neighborhood, connects residents to community services, and develops local leaders in the process. Since its outset, our parent engagement program, the Family

Leadership Project has created an inclusive and welcoming space in which these constructive changes have begun to take place.

### **GO Neighborhoods**

*We envision that our community will be a safe and inviting place where all ages and income levels can live well in quality housing; a place with an outstanding educational system that nurtures every child until they achieve their goals in education and life; and a neighborhood where we all work together to build on our strengths to create a diverse, vibrant, and connected community.*<sup>9</sup>

The Family Leadership Project forms part of a broader community development initiative, called Great Opportunity Neighborhoods (GO Neighborhoods), which was launched in 2009 by the Local Initiative Support Corporation (LISC) Houston. As an organization, LISC provides community-based organizations with the resources, expertise, and financial support to “transform distressed neighborhoods into healthy and sustainable communities of choice and opportunity – good places to work, do business and raise children.”<sup>10</sup> LISC came into existence in 1979 through the funding of the Ford Foundation and several other major corporate funders. By 1990, LISC had expanded to include several local offices throughout the United States, including the one in Houston. In



2007, LISC abandoned traditional community development practices and embraced an innovative place-based comprehensive community development approach called “Building Sustainable Communities.” The goals of this program include improvements in the areas of housing and real estate investment, family income and wealth, education, and the promotion of economic development, healthy environments and lifestyles.<sup>11</sup> As part of this novel approach to community development, LISC launched a grassroots model that rests on the tenants of shared leadership, relationship building, and inclusiveness in 2009. GO Neighborhoods, as it came to be known, has proven successful in the Northside community resulting in over \$18 million in leveraged resources for the neighborhood. Avenue CDC has been the convening agency of the GO Neighborhoods project in the Northside ever since its 2009 introduction.

### **School Profiles**

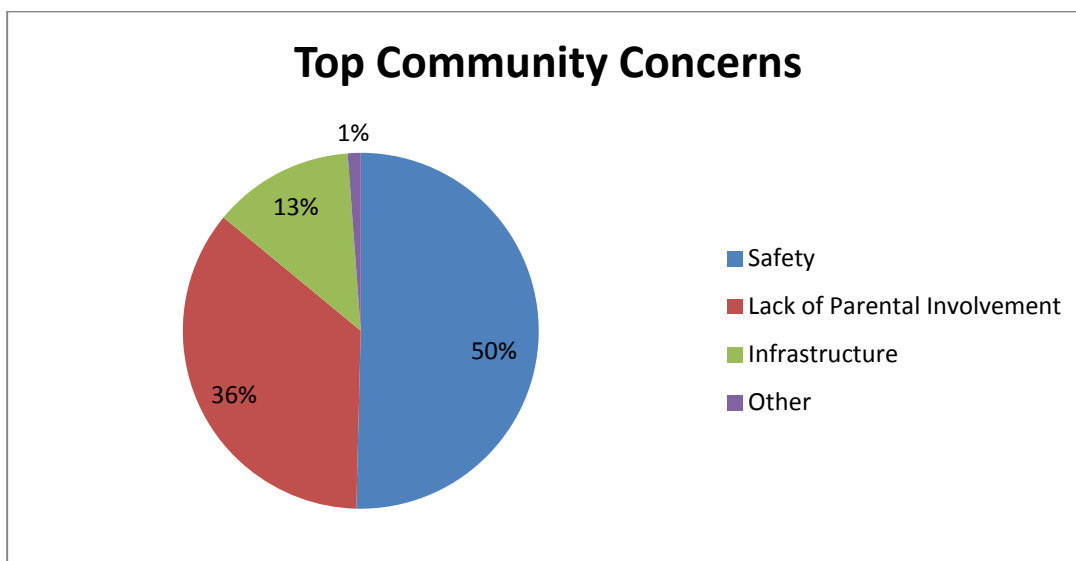
The Family Leadership Program engages eight neighborhood schools across the elementary, middle, and high school level. All of the target campuses are Title I schools, in which the majority of students receive free lunch. Ninety-five percent of students come from economically disadvantaged families. On average, the schools are comprised of 90

percent Hispanic, 9 percent African-American and 1 percent Caucasian students.<sup>12</sup> In terms of academic attainment, schools in the Northside fare relatively low compared to other schools in the Houston Independent School District. Even though all of the schools except for one met the overall academic standards in the most recent nation-wide school ranking, only two schools obtained math, reading, and student progress distinctions.<sup>13</sup> In contrast, schools in districts located in Houston's periphery such as Cypress and Katy Independent School District rank among the best in the country.

### **Project Development**

At the outset of this project, parents from eight local schools participated in a listening campaign. A total of 279 surveys were collected, in which participants identified the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats in their children's schools and their community. As can be seen in Figure 2, lack of safety around schools as well as in the community emerged as the principal community concern. More than half of the respondents mentioned lack of safety as a community weakness and/or threat. The pool of general safety concerns (283 responses) include the presence of gangs, homeless and drug addicts around campuses, traffic violations and train crossings near schools, stray dogs in the

neighborhood, and alcohol consumption in bars located close to schools. Additionally, 37 respondents voiced concerns regarding infrastructure in their neighborhood such as poor lighting, abandoned properties, dilapidated homes, and lack of recreational areas. Moreover, more than a hundred respondents raised issues relating to parental involvement. Within this category, 49 participants mentioned lack of parental involvement as a weakness, 33 noted limited activities for parents (i.e. ESL, computer and fitness classes), and 30 stated lack of communication between parents, teachers and administrators as a barrier.



**Figure 2.** Top Community Concerns

After the data had been compiled, parents were invited to the first family leadership coalition meeting, where they engaged with their

school's survey data and developed a plan of action to address identified issues including safety concerns, lack of communication between teachers, administrators and parents, and lack of parental involvement. Since then, more than a hundred parents have regularly participated in leadership development training and collaboratively carried out community and school projects. Participants have been provided with the necessary tools for leading successful meetings and parent-teacher conferences at their schools. In order to facilitate interactions between parents and school staff, a workshop on leading successful meetings was offered. Coaching was provided in the areas of agenda creation, meeting facilitation, and note-taking. Prior to school meetings, parents were supported in setting agendas that highlighted their main concerns and stated possible solutions. The goal of creating agendas was not only to prepare parents for meetings, but also to offer school staff information about the nature of the issues discussed in meetings beforehand.

Furthermore, participants were encouraged to engage in project-based work. After having undergone leadership training, parents were able to put their skills to work. Parent groups from each campus were encouraged to apply for funding for individual school projects. In the course of four months, parents were guided through the process of project development, implementation, and evaluation. While planning their own

projects, parents were also provided the opportunity to actively participate and learn from projects at other schools.

As part of the meetings, parents have also been connected to resources and services available in the community. By functioning as an intermediary, Avenue CDC has been able to raise the residents' awareness of community services present in their immediate surroundings. We created the space for interactions between parents and representatives from several community-based organizations (i.e. Literacy Advance, Project GRAD, Wesley Community Center, Houston Public Library, MD Anderson Cancer Center, Volunteers of America as well as district representatives – HISD Trustee and Department of Parent Engagement staff).

## **Elements of the Program**

### **1. Build Relationships**

The success of our program heavily rests on the practice of relationship building. We believe that transforming a community begins with helping all people connect to their neighbors and to community-based organizations that are active in the neighborhood. Each of our meetings includes a relational activity (similar to an icebreaker), which contributes to building greater trust and bonds across the community. Strong relationships

among participants nurture an atmosphere of mutual understanding, crucial for decision-making and consensus building. From the outset of the initiative, building relationship has been at the core of the program. The initial months were spent on one-on-one conversations and group meetings in order to identify community leaders as well as shared interests. The continuous interactions marked by sharing stories, experiences, interests, and concerns led to a strong bond among participants. Collaborating on a more personal level than in traditional parent engagement activities (i.e. literacy and science nights and open houses) has proven to be imperative to successful parent engagement models.<sup>14</sup>

As parents reach out to their friends, family members, and neighbors, a movement built on relationships can reach unprecedented levels of involvement. In the course of the pilot year, we have observed a noteworthy increase in the number of participants. Between 30 and 35 parents from the program's target schools attended the initial meetings. As the program earned recognition in the community, the parent leadership team has grown to include 50 leaders that individually work with their own parent groups in their children's schools. Through word of mouth the program has also expanded to include parents from schools that were not initially targeted by the project.

## **2. Practice Shared Leadership**

The uniqueness of the program lies in the fact that it breaks with the traditional hierarchical nature of PTOs and PTAs and offers an alternative model built on the tenants of relationship building, shared leadership, and mutual respect. The project's success has shown that the principles of shared leadership seem to resonate highly within the Hispanic population. Accustomed to hierarchical structures in their native land, in which power oftentimes equals the abuse thereof coupled with high levels of corruption, a model focused on the diffusion of power as well as collective empowerment seems to be highly effective in predominately Latino communities. Participants stated power relations in schools as a reason for not getting more actively involved and more importantly for not voicing their concerns. Driven by fear of retaliation, parents in neighborhood schools tend to refrain from combating injustices at their children's schools. They decided to hold back their concerns in order to avoid problems for their children.

By means of practicing shared leadership and creating an environment in which each participant feels valued and encouraged to become a leader, we attempt to break with traditional "power over" relations and foster "power with" relations. We have noticed that by transgressing the traditional structure of parent groups and practicing

flattened leadership instead, parents are able to fully focus their efforts around their most commonly shared interest: the well-being of their children.

### **3. Engage in Leadership Training**

Another important aspect of the program was to equip emerging parent leaders with the necessary tools to become successful community leaders and advocates for their children's education. We particularly emphasized the development of skills, which would allow them to lead successful meetings and effectively carry out projects. They received substantial training in agenda creation, meeting facilitation, and note-taking as well as in project planning, implementation, and evaluation. The program actively engages participants in collectively identifying and addressing the needs of their children's schools. In an interactive setting participants engage with representatives from community organizations that provide them with valuable information. Lessons learned in workshops are afterwards shared with parents at their children's schools. Thus, participants that would function as passive listeners in a traditional environment evolve as active teachers. The purpose of our method is to not only transform parents into active leaders, but also to distribute knowledge about social services through word of mouth. This is of utmost importance in distressed communities, in which social services are not fully exhausted.



In addition to the leadership training, parents were given the opportunity to engage in project-based work. After the initial training phase, participants were granted access to funding for their own school projects. Parents engaged in a three-months planning process, in which they acquired basic project management skills. As participants documented their project's progress at our monthly meetings, the program created space for shared learning, in which parents learned from each other's triumphs and struggles. In addition to our monthly meetings, Avenue CDC staff regularly met with individual parent groups to guide them through the process. The project phase culminated in the presentation of the projects at the end-of-the-year meeting.

#### **4. Promote Inclusion**

Another key principle that governs the Family Leadership Program is inclusivity. Our parent meetings are open to the public and anyone who would like to participate is welcome at the table. The practice of inclusivity is particularly important in an ethnically and socioeconomically-diverse neighborhood. Creating community space in which everyone feels welcome regardless of their ethnic or socioeconomic background can be achieved through meetings that transgress cultural, socioeconomic, and linguistic barriers. Several studies have shown that linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic barriers can have a negative impact on parent

engagement.<sup>15,16</sup> In order to overcome these differences, we aim at creating an inclusive climate that is responsive to the linguistic and cultural needs of our participants. We believe that change is most likely to happen and to be most impactful if it stems from a collaborative community effort. Therefore, our projects are co-created by community members of diverse backgrounds, community stakeholders, representatives from community-based organizations, and school personnel.

### **5. Promote Mutual Respect**

Along the same lines, mutual respect plays a critical role in programs in ethnically-diverse communities. In environments favoring acculturation over preservation, foreign customs and traditions tend to be frequently overlooked and undervalued. Crossing the border does not equal leaving behind one's own cultural heritage. In fact, many immigrants continue to be deeply rooted in the traditions of their home land. Most of the participants of the Family Leadership Program are from Mexico, Central and South America and have migrated to the United States to offer their children a more promising future. Within that cultural diversity lies the danger of overgeneralizing.<sup>17</sup> Cultural competency and sensitivity of schools and community-based organizations is of paramount importance for creating an environment of mutual respect. Several researchers have suggested the importance of promoting cultural responsiveness in schools

for increasing parental involvement.<sup>18</sup> In his study on Latino parental involvement, Fred Ramirez concludes that “to deny a person’s cultural identity may cause further social distance between the school and home.”<sup>17</sup> Individuals are most likely to excel in environments in which they feel appreciated and valued. Our program confirmed that parents feel more welcome and willing to be engaged in schools with administrators and teachers that share their linguistic and cultural traits or are culturally responsive.

#### **6. Connect to Resources and Share Common Interests**

Since the majority of participants are immigrants, they continuously express interest in learning more about the American school system. Most of them are unaware of the roles of parents in their children’s schools and need help in demystifying the American educational system. They want to learn about navigating the school system so that they can help their children succeed. They also tend to be unfamiliar with the materials and assistance offered by the school district. In one of the meetings, representatives from the school district presented a tool to check students’ progress and curricula online. None of the parents present at the meeting had knowledge of those links. The same holds true for resources available in the community. Most participants were not aware of the range of community-based organizations located in the neighborhood.

Even though programs are offered to inform immigrants about the American school system, the didactical delivery of these programs and the lack of understanding the realities of immigrant families seem to defeat their purpose. Rather than following a predesigned curriculum, the Family Leadership Program continuously evolves through the participants' input. As such, the agendas for the meetings are built around the participants' interests. Parents work together to frame areas of interest, which are presented in an interactive and hands-on manner to allow for active participation. The importance of offering activities based upon parents' interests has been highlighted in other parental engagement programs. Instead of following routine activities, administrators in selected schools offer training tailored towards parents' interests and needs.<sup>14</sup> In order to raise awareness of resources, participants are connected to services in the community by personally interacting with representatives from community-based organizations. In an engaging manner, participants learn about available resources and are equipped with the skills to share information in their children's schools and in the community at large.

### **7. Hold Regular Meetings**

Another component that has contributed to the success of the program is the continuity thereof. Regular meetings provide space for continuous interactions between participants, which has led to strong ties between

parents. In addition to our monthly meetings, parent groups hold regular individual meetings with fellow parents at their schools. Each parent is personally invited to each meeting. At the beginning, participants were called by Avenue CDC staff and as the program progressed by parent leaders. Research findings have shown a positive correlation between personal invitations by schools and parental involvement.<sup>19</sup> Parents in our program were more likely to attend school events when they received personal invitations. In some schools, parents were unable to participate because they were not regularly informed about school events or not provided with information in their native language. Most parents were eager to learn about ways to help their children succeed and welcomed opportunities for involvement at their children's schools, but felt that they were sometimes held back by barriers such as miscommunication or lack of information.

### **Program Evaluation**

Quantitative as well as qualitative measures were applied to continuously measure the success of the initiative. In quantitative terms, we reached approximately 300 parents from eight neighborhood schools as part of the initial listening campaign, of which a group of 40 parent leaders emerged. Each of the parent leaders worked with their own parent groups at their

local schools and they were able to engage around 3000 parents through parent meetings, community events, and other community engagement opportunities. The program was designed for parents to participate in leadership training on a monthly basis in addition to facilitating parent meetings at their children's schools.

As the program progressed, each of the parent groups became in charge of their own school project, for which they recruited volunteers and vendors. The most powerful moment of the program was when parents started taking action. It was transformative to see how individuals facing daunting challenges living in the shadow of society such as gender inequity, domestic violence and social marginalization facilitated meetings and carried out projects. Driven by their enthusiasm for their children's education and their creative vein, Northside parents envisioned a variety of projects, including a dinner party for elementary school students and their dads, a Halloween costume dance, a bingo night, and several community festivals. The beauty of the program lies in the fact that each single project served a community cause. By leveraging resources for their Halloween Costume Dance, parents from the local Middle School were able to provide much-needed school uniforms for disadvantaged students. The proceeds from one of the Elementary School's Fall Festival went directly towards the purchase of Christmas presents for students in

need. The remaining schools are still fashioning ideas to reinvest the raised funds to enhance their students' educational experience.

In addition to the quantitative outcomes, there was a range of intangible outcomes such as the creation of a support network and deep friendships among participants. As the months progressed, a deep bond between participants was formed and a strong support network was built while the tenants of shared leadership, inclusivity, and mutual respect were practiced. All of this contributed to nurturing an environment in which each participant felt truly appreciated and valued. Most of the participants quickly bonded with fellow parents facing similar issues and came to understand that there were other parents in the neighborhood struggling in similar ways. Sharing their experiences in their children's schools created a deep bond between them. Through their interactions parents fostered a community built on trust and mutual respect.

### **Conclusion**

This program has offered parents the opportunity to participate in leadership training as well as engage in projects improving their children's education. Through this pilot project, parents have also been connected to resources and social services available in the community. We have created space for personal gratification and growth while achieving a

community-wide impact. Parents participating in our program leave our meetings not only with having acquired new knowledge, but with a sense of having contributed to making their children's schools and ultimately the community at large a better place. In the past year the program caught the attention of Houston Independent School District's Parent Engagement Department, Houston Public Library as well as educational organizations such as Communities in Schools and Project Grad.

As the program is kicking off its second year, our parents strive to create stronger ties with teachers and administrators and contribute to fostering a welcoming atmosphere conducive to parent engagement at our local schools. Schools will benefit from cooperating with a core group of parent leaders that are fully dedicated to their children's academic success and equipped with the tools to collaborate effectively. Projects of this kind are of importance not just for the Greater Houston area, but also for other urban centers across the country displaying high levels of inequality in access to quality education, high levels of poverty and a considerable Latino immigrant population.



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