

# HAVING COURAGEOUS CONVERSATIONS REGARDING LATINO YOUTH IN MINNESOTA

By Chris Ochocki

We are losing the minds of young people. We are losing their talents, their potential and their economic impact. We are losing our future citizens and quite possibly our hope. We need to change. If I spoke to a large group of white citizens in any school district in Minnesota and stated that just over fifty percent of white young people at their high schools are graduating, we would probably have an uproar at the state capitol, a riot in the streets, a call for heads to roll and an immediate development of a multi-point plan on to how to fix this problem. There would be feelings of anger and terms like epidemic, problem and outrage would flood the airwaves of our state's media. I would not need a megaphone to ignite this upheaval and arouse a concerned citizenry to create a change, I would need only to utter the facts, softly, to adult listeners and the wheels of change would be rolling.

## REFLECTING ON PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

I come to this subject matter after working with youth for over sixteen years, the past eleven as a therapist working with youth and families at several dozen Minnesota schools. Early in this work I began to hear stories from Latino youth about challenging experiences with school staff, peers and administration. I developed relationships within the school and supported staff in discussing youth populations that they reported as having difficulties. Over the course of eleven years, I heard system-wide discussions on how to change things for certain populations in order to draw these youth into the school system and I supported individual youth and families in challenging the status quo of educational institutions. I sat with young Latinos who shared stories with me about how challenging it is for them to feel connected to their school's community and how angry they feel about being left out.

Much of what I have experienced has frustrated and angered me. Proposed solutions decided upon to help this group of young people still seem to be white-centered. Decisions are sometimes made without the full inclusion or direction of the communities impacted by these choices. The larger community is often disengaged about wanting to create solutions to identified challenges. We are not providing the appropriate opportunities for all children to learn and be successful, and we continue to treat education as a one-size-fits-all model. Too often programs, models and ideas that support disadvantaged youth best are seen as added-value educational ideas, subject to budgetary discretion, instead of recognized as what may be required for young people from different walks of life to be able to grow. Most importantly, I have discovered through the years, through the patience of young people and their families and through the guidance of other youth workers who are in the know, that I am white, that schools are largely white institutions and that this leaves some, like myself, in a place of privilege. This is my battle cry: to leverage my privilege so that we can make changes in order that all children can succeed in the state of Minnesota.

## THE SEARCH FOR BETTER ANSWERS

The NorthStar Fellowship provided the time and opportunity for me to study the data, read the literature, visit successful programs and talk to people with expertise who, like me, are committed to leveraging their power and privilege to make changes in the schools. This paper is organized around a four-point plan to

begin the change that is needed. This plan begins with recognition of the systemic problems of white power and privilege and the commitment to create educational environments based on a model of equity. It moves to assure culturally appropriate supports for Latino youth and families and endorses free expression by Latinos in our schools.

Using the provisional data from the U.S. Department of Education for the year 2010-2011, one can see that in Minnesota Latinos have a four-year graduation rate of 51%, as compared with their white peers' graduation rate of 84% (United States Department of Education, 2012). This is the lowest percentage rate of graduation for Latinos reported by the Department of Education for the entire United States. This disparity is staggering and means that almost one in two Latino youth may not have the opportunity to walk across the stage at graduation or attend a higher learning institution. Alongside this information, Pew research reports that currently Latinos make up about 20-25% of the student body in the schools in U.S. and that overall, Latinos are the largest minority group in the nation, "making up more than 50 million people" (Fry & Lopez, 2011).

In conjunction with this data HACER (Hispanic Advocacy and Community Empowerment through Research) published a position paper in 2012 discussing the Latino population and its impact on Minnesota. The authors began by sharing that the Latino population is "the fastest growing and ... second largest minority population in Minnesota" (Shurilla, Ebinger, Deal-Marquez, & Gutierrez, 2012). Using Minnesota census data the report goes on to say that as Minnesota's population ages over the next twenty-five years the 65-plus demographic will double. Meanwhile the number of people under 65 years will grow by only 10% in that same twenty-five year period, and this under-65 population will be the future of our state's economy and be providing for our aging "Boomer" population. The authors explain that Latinos will be the fastest growing population within this supportive generation. I believe these data show that we have a looming crisis in Minnesota.

We have the fastest growing population in our state failing in our schools at a rate of almost 50 percent and yet we need this population to be educated and engaged productively in the workforce to support the aging population. It seems that we are on course currently to diminish the returns on our youth. It means that youth of Latino decent will be ill-equipped to be a part of our educated work force, which will be needed to support the economics of Minnesota in the future.

How do we allow this unjust and unproductive educational environment for this sub-population of students in our schools? What barriers keep young people of Latino decent from developing into successful students and in turn, into financially successful adults? What needs to be done to bring about change?

Let us begin by working backwards with the issue and then see what changes can be made. In 1973 Gisela Konopka laid out her ideas for creating healthy adolescents. She discussed in that paper conditions that should be in place in order to provide opportunities for all young people to develop as citizens and become responsible members of our communities. She stated that healthy development of youth should contain opportunities to "participate as citizens...gain experience in decision making...experiment with their own identity...to reflect on self in relation to others and discover self by looking outward as well as inward" (Konopka, 1973). This, to me, seems to be what schools can create for young people. An environment where they have the chance to succeed, develop and grow safely. Taking from Konopka's work of healthy youth development and in the context of our current failure rate of Latino students in our schools, I propose that schools, communities and society are charged to create educational environments that:

1. Face the realities that white power and privilege impose on schools and the lives of those who are educated there.

2. Work actively to create educational environments that engage Latino youth and families where they are, basing this work on models of equity.
3. Selectively direct resources to assure that culturally appropriate supports and opportunities engage the Latino community and address the power of institutions.
4. Encourage and create mechanisms that allow for Latino free-expression as part of the school.

Focusing on these four principles will help us to change the current direction for Latinos in our schools. In order to move in this direction, we need to understand some basic things about our school system as it currently presents itself.

## **THE REALITY OF WHITE POWER AND PRIVILEGE IN SCHOOLS**

Our American educational system is based upon the principles of a single-minded delivery model of learning, constructed by people of privilege, and does not take into consideration the changing nature of our diverse populations. It supports the families of white students best and is based on the assumption that all students and families have the same resources to engage in learning environments and do so in the same manner. Formal education began in this country as a privilege for white, wealthy people in order for them to continue the economic leadership for the future. Overall, our education system was designed by white people, to create advantages for white people, while also delivering information that would help assimilate and cement a common cultural experience and common workforce. If one looks at the history and uses of education in this country, one can see many examples of how whiteness tries to maintain the authority of these educational institutions and how our educational institutions use power to create pathways for assimilation and patriotism within our culture.

It is not difficult to find the threads of how schools have been tools to create an American ideal under the authority of those in privileged positions. As one administrator pointedly said during an interview, “Schools are a microcosm of society, everything plays out with racism in schools.” In saying this, I think the administrator means that schools are an extension of the society and the racial and authoritarian challenges of each generation are present within the walls of the schools.

Just think about a few of the following examples of how this power has been used: the use of boarding schools for Native people’s forced assimilation; *Brown vs. Board of Education* and its impact and challenges regarding desegregation of schools; white flight and its impact on inner city schools and resources; standardized testing that was based on experiences and exposures related to white culture; the use of American history textbooks to create an idealized and whitewashed history of America, as shared in the book, *White Lies My Teacher Told Me*; requiring the Pledge of Allegiance in schools; and on and on.

White privilege in our educational institutions is a fundamental barrier to the success of Latino youth. It is the concept that if acknowledged, understood and addressed by our schools and communities, will allow some of the other more practical solutions to come to light, and will create communities that will have a desire to develop a significant, inclusive and long-lasting response to its shortfalls. White privilege in schools means that I can assume that the persons in power will reflect me, the curriculum will be based on my cultural upbringing and the supports, financially and within the construct of school and community culture, will be sustained and supported with my own interest in mind. It is a challenge because white people are generally the persons in power who have a large voice in the funding streams of education and often shape the policies decided upon for our youth in schools. For the demographic shift occurring now and in the future, this white way of thinking will need to be addressed and changed so that we can meet the needs of the growing Latino population and reap the benefits of their education in this state.

Before one can create solutions to a problem, one must acknowledge that a problem exists. In terms of white privilege and school systems, one must come to terms with the fact that “race—and thus racism, in both individual and institutional forms—whether acknowledged or unacknowledged—plays a primary role in student’s struggle to achieve at high levels” (Singleton and Linton, 2006, p. 2). Or as Ryan Vernosh, 2010 Minnesota Teacher of the Year stated, “Racial inequality is fundamental to the achievement gap and needs to be addressed head-on” (Koumpilova, 2013). I do not propose many specific solutions as to how to reduce these privileges, but offer some examples of steps certain communities have made to create equity. There are much smarter people than I who have developed programs that address privilege and racism. If you would like to begin a better understanding of these concepts and how they impact education see Singleton and Linton’s book, *Courageous Conversations about Race* (2006). I do hope that we can acknowledge and learn about our privilege and agree to create a working lens that acknowledges our educational system is steeped in white privilege and therefore hinders the healthy development of all students of color, including Latino students.

Singleton and Linton (2006) explain that youth are already responding to the inequity in schools through means of anger, failing, truancy and outright refusal of school expectations. It is foolish to think that our continuation of doing more of the same to solve the problem will produce any better results. Cornell West wrote that “White Americans expect that people of color should be ‘integrated into White society and culture’ and become ‘worthy of acceptance by the White way of life’ and establish Whiteness as the acceptable standard” (Singleton & Linton, 2006). This principle that “white is right” is surely outdated, and if the demographics continue as projected it will leave many people outside of the fold of education in its current form. It is far past time to change how educators and our system engage the student of color and join in creating equity in the educational field for all students.

Whiteness and white pride in our schools is pervasive, from the posters on the wall, to how subjects are taught and who and what those subjects focus on. It controls the social gatherings related to the school experience and it controls the discipline process. It seems few schools embrace the fact that there are many cultures that make up this America and many cultural experiences reflected in the students. Walking through many schools, as I have, it is hard to see the value of those cultures when they are not represented on the walls, in the books and not seen in the faces of those who are teaching and administrating. A student shared one example of this lack of appropriate cultural expression in response to a school’s scheduled cultural event saying, “Taco night is not a Latino cultural event.” This lack of cultural understanding and expression must be acknowledged, addressed and changed on some level before we can see real and genuine Latino student engagement and success in our schools. Furthermore, this change is needed to create the healthy development necessary to shape our economy for the next generation.

Racism exists in schools in many forms. One needs only to look at the research based on discipline referrals and school responses in this country to see that skin color has an impact in the school environment. One administrator shared the challenges of racism in schools when he said, “Staff see non-white as ‘less than’ and we have to work on this.” One Latina student shared her experience in school saying, “Teachers take away my phone, but let the other white kids have theirs out.” She was angered by the number of times she was sent to the office because of her phone being out and the lack of the same disciplinary response occurring for the other white students. As Singleton and Linton (2006) explain, equality is based on the assumptions that all students “have the same opportunities and experiences.” They believe, and I agree, that opportunities are not the same for all people, and in our schools, race can impact many of the opportunities available to a student. It is true that things need to be fair for all, but equality does not take into consideration that things are not fair currently, nor historically. I would argue that equality and fairness cannot exist until we create equity. We cannot assume equality and turn a blind eye on the fact that

the system is inequitable. Equality cannot exist until all things are on the same playing field. Instead, when we focus on changing the Latino educational experience, we must look through the lens of creating equity.

Equity is a different principle than equality; it is a general condition characterized by justice, fairness, and impartiality. Singleton and Linton explain that educationally, equity means narrowing the gap between the highest and lowest performing students and eliminating the racial predictability and disproportionality of which student groups occupy the highest and lowest categories (2006). They further explain that equity means that all students will have the opportunities and resources to succeed. They do not state that the resources available will be the same for all students, saying instead that each student will have resources and opportunities. If we look at the principle of equality versus equity, equity is much more important in terms of the educational process. We need to develop our understanding of white privilege in order to realize that the current system is unjust, and historically education has been unjust. Once we create an understanding of the injustice, we can more easily create equity within the system to improve fairness. Justice also means that developing and enacting extra supports and programs for Latinos, although on its face may look unjust, is an important step toward balancing the system. For example, if we were to have Latino youth, families and supporters design and implement specific supports and tools in order for them to achieve school success, on its face it would look as if we are creating an unfair system that allows for more resources given to one population over another. This is true only if we do not recognize that the system has given unfair advantage to white people throughout the course of educational history. Equity means that we find appropriate ways for Latino families and students to engage in the educational process. Equity also means that in order to build this kind of relationship, we must provide appropriate resources to help engage in these productive relationships. It may mean that we need to give more resources, staff and energy toward helping to understand the Latino community and engage in a way that this community will bring forth constructive ideas to change the education system and raise the effective level of the students from this community.

## **CREATE EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENTS THAT MODEL EDUCATIONAL EQUITY**

A great example of creating equity within the educational system, is The TORCH program in Northfield, Minnesota. TORCH (Tackling Obstacles and Raising College Hopes) came out of a response to the dismal graduation rates and high dropout levels of for Latinos in the Northfield public schools. It was a collaborative effort to find ways to connect Latino students with more resources to tackle their specific academic and social challenges, help them maintain their education and connect them to possibilities after high school. In the short time the program has been in place, they have seen the graduation rate for Latino students go from about 36% to almost 90%. One youth I spoke with, who was in the TORCH program when living in Northfield, described the positive impact she experienced by participating in a school that understood her culture and provided many more supports and opportunities. She reported she had access to several Latino mentors, each serving a different role in her life and education and each having access to the resources and understanding needed to assist her when challenges in her life came up, educationally, or in her community life. The program was meeting many of her developmental needs.

She shared a specific example of the school meeting these needs with a story about how she sometimes missed the bus because she needed to stay up late to care for her siblings so her mother could work extra hours to keep the family afloat financially. She reported that while enrolled in Northfield and the TORCH program she was always “able to call a support person and they picked me up” when she overslept. “I usually only missed the first period of class.” She shared how her grades were much better in that supportive environment and because of the familial aspects of the program, her mother would participate in some of the school functions when she could, knowing she could connect with other Latino families and get

resources for the things her family needed at times. The youth reported that the success and academic progress she achieved while enrolled in that program had not translated well since her move to her new community and new school. She felt that the supports were not available to her in the new school in the same way; she felt disconnected and was failing her classes without that extra support. Now when she misses the bus, which still happens often because of the care she feels she needs to provide for her siblings, she said she ends up missing the whole day of school because she does not have a mentor who is able to give her a ride or a support person in the school who understands. She shared that her current school's response to her absences is to meet with the administrative team and file truancy instead of discussing possible ways to address her challenges within her family and community. "There is no way I can catch up and no one seems to understand the challenges my family and I face." She shared through tears that this depresses her and leaves her less motivated for school. She was on the honor roll while enrolled in the TORCH program in Northfield and she dreamed of doing positive things with her life, including college. She failed the majority of her classes last semester, mostly because of attendance issues, and her mother is not engaged in any social and resource supports or the school because she is unsure how to connect with them within this current community.

It seems by this example alone, one can see the value of having specified programming for disadvantaged youth to address specific needs and reduce the obstacles to education. What seems most distressing about this example is that this program providing equity within the school has shown a great rate of success in implementing solutions for Latino youth, but is entirely funded, so their website states "by grants and donations." That means that we are treating an effective educational program, one that reduces barriers to education and supports the healthy development of youth, as an extra-curricular activity, instead of seeing this as a necessary program for our students' success and our future economy. We need to think about what our communities and districts are willing to do to truly address the hurdles students have and sustainably support solutions that have a greater ability of being effective at developing our future generations.

## **DIRECT RESOURCES AND SUPPORT TO MEET SPECIFIC COMMUNITY NEEDS**

One can see the power of creating programs that are designed specifically for community needs. I don't think that allowing for the creation of programs that benefit a specific group of students, such as Latinos, who are stuck in an unjust system, is that much of a difficulty when white privilege and racism are understood and addressed. Genuine equity, such as the TORCH program demonstrates, takes into account that the educational experiences and advantages given to whites and not granted to Latinos, as is the current model, can be changed. It requires a significant boost in supports and programming that is tailored to level the playing field for Latino students. It also requires a community of citizenry to care enough about the healthy development of all youth. Both of these requirements were present in order for the TORCH program succeed. This is justice and the reason equity is more important than equality. Equity acknowledges through the community and school system's growth, and through their own introspective look at the historical nature of the problem, that things did not begin from the place of all being equal, and it tries to repair that through catch-up programs and changing the system to benefit all youth. In this instance this was accomplished by paying particular attention to creating opportunities for the Latino youth whom the system was failing.

## **TRY NEW APPROACHES TO LANGUAGE LEARNING**

One of the other barriers to Latino success that came up during this project was the impact of language. Language can be a large barrier for Latino students for several reasons. Latino youth may come to school with some dual-language experiences. It can be the case that at home they may speak Spanish and at school

they are taught English. This language barrier can create many challenges for schools and families, and few school opportunities seem to address this challenge and utilize this potential resource as a strength. Many of the students in our state who are raised in Spanish-speaking households, or recently arrived from Spanish-speaking countries, begin their education in English Language Learning (ELL) classes where students can learn the English language in order to integrate themselves into the larger system of education. Although I believe it is important to assist the students to develop the language of the dominant culture in order for them to attain long-term success, I think this ELL-only process may be shortsighted, and it negates a skill that these students already have. It can also continue to devalue the youth's experience and further create a feeling of "less than" in not giving significance to their own cultural origins. One interviewee, a Latino support worker, related this feeling when he said "focusing only on English language development takes away from them having pride in their native tongue and diminished respect for their own cultural experiences." Many of the first-generational interviewees spoke of feeling embarrassed at their parents' inability to speak English and their own embarrassment about their native language and outright refusal to speak their native tongue when in school. One of the interviewees, who is an adult now, spoke of how she spent most of her adult life trying to regain what she had lost in her ability to communicate and understand Spanish because of her shame about her Latino heritage when she was a child in school. I believe our ELL-only focus in education for newly arrived students, may do a disservice by further creating this shame.

It is important for us to look at how we can utilize a student's native language skills to help them create a stronger global skill set in language fluency in both their primary and secondary languages. How does it shape school for dual-language learners if we tailor our educational process to allow for these students to develop their English skills in conjunction with developing their primary language skills, resulting in the students becoming dual-language fluent faster and easier than their white counterparts? There is a program offered at one high school that teaches a Spanish language class only for native speakers, instead of basing the assumption that all students are at the same skill level in this language. I believe this accomplishes several tasks at once. First it allows native speakers a better learning environment to build off of skills that these students already possess. It takes these students out of the traditional Spanish 1, Spanish 2 sequence, knowing that this process may not meet their true needs with respect to the language, and takes into account that students with prior knowledge may be bored in a class that is beneath them in content.

Secondly, this class design does not assume that all of the language skills are equal among all of the Latino students and instead teaches the members of the class the skills that each needs to develop individually based on initial and follow-up testing of skills. It is individualized learning at its core with a cohort of students who share some of the basic language skills. This means that one class member may be able to maintain a high level of communication verbally but may lack written skills in the language and thus the learning would focus on that student becoming proficient in writing and literacy. Another student may be able to read and write well, but have challenges with the conversational pieces of communication. The important point is the individual students have different plans based on need within the classroom setting. It really meets the needs of the students where they are.

Thirdly, it allows a whole segment of the Latino student body to build and promote positive cultural connections amongst their Latino peers. We know that language is the tool used to create connection. Having these students be connected through learning the same language together while acknowledging and supporting their previous knowledge about the subject matter can help to foster a better connection within the school and within their community. It helps to build connections within the group of Latino students and gets them working together to learn very specific material related to their culture and language. HACER identifies research showing how Latino students are influenced by their social relationships at home, school and community and the impact those relationships can have when they are intertwined within

positive settings (Shurilla et al., 2012). This model of learning allows for Latino students to benefit from building these significant and important relationships with peers in the safety of the school.

One of the other key points in this example is that this class was designed and is taught by a teacher who is also a native speaker and immigrant. The importance of this is that it allows the students to have the opportunity to form a positive connection with an adult in the building who may be seen by the students as being more like themselves. This piece may begin to assist in addressing a difficult problem that the HACER report points out in schools. The report says, “Latino teachers and administrators are underrepresented in schools, depriving Latino students of access to staff that could serve as language and cultural interpreters and positive role-models” (Shurilla et al., 2012, p. 15). Requiring the teacher to be a native speaker and to have gone through the process of immigration allows for the opportunity to build an open relationship with the students. This model of using instruction in this way for dual-language learners directly results in the students having time to build a positive relationship with one teacher who may be seen as a positive role model from their community.

The ability to speak Spanish certainly seems to be a skill that has real economic value in our global society and may be an untapped resource for our state and for our young people. This principle of bicultural experiences and fluency is so important that even corporations in Minnesota see the value of bicultural individuals, referring to foreign-born immigrants as an asset for their “divergent and complementary cultures that support out-of-the-box thinking and innovation” (Minnesota Regional Chamber of Commerce, 2012). Furthermore, they seem to see the value not only in development of a positive skilled labor force of problem-solvers, but also see immigrants as potentially having social connections to their home country that may further the growth and development of our own state’s economy in the long run.

Many of the interviewees shared stories of how language was the primary impact on the student development and identified how language becomes the building block for school connectedness. One school support person explained, “Language allows a space for families to feel connected.” She recalled that at the beginning of the year the school held a welcome back night to explain expectations and begin building connections with families, but they only gave the welcoming presentation in English. She reminded me that “Fifty percent of the student body is identified as being Latino.” She explained how this seemed to show that the school was not interested in truly building connections with families and seemed to create a feeling of disconnection that has resonated throughout the year for her Latino families. She further explained that most of the time, in her experience, schools rely on the students themselves to be the interpreters of the information. She explained how this places the youth in an oftentimes, uncomfortable place and she is concerned that young people are leaving out important information. She shared that this creates a barrier in working with the family because it leaves the young person with having too much power in the family-school connection. It makes it challenging for a parent to do the difficult tasks of parenting if the gate-keeper of the educational information is the child. She further shared how parents can feel helpless in not understanding the language and without significant increase in interpreter access, “parents just turn off.”

One support person, who arrived in the U.S. as a high school student discussed how interpreters are good to have, but sometimes the communication can be lost in only providing interpretative services versus having someone who is in constant contact with families in order to develop positive working relationships within the school. She expressed the real need for schools to have cultural liaisons within the school structure to develop relationships with Latino families. I think these thoughts shared by the interviewees reflect the importance of having more supports for the Latino population in schools. Again it speaks to the lack of connectedness discussed in the HACER report and the under-representative nature of schools for minorities (Shurilla et al., 2012). Having cultural support people can assist with the language and cultural challenges

families have with school and can help to build positive connections for all. It may help engage students further in the system and provide resources and opportunities for families to engage more. It certainly helped the young person in the TORCH program and seems to assist overall with the positive results of an increased graduation rate for Northfield.

### ENCOURAGE FREE EXPRESSION BY LATINO YOUTH AND FAMILIES

Another example of this idea of having cultural support was shared when an interviewee reported that schools do not seem to understand that most Latino families would not just open up to school supports about things that are going on within the home. She reports that “culturally, we do not air our dirty laundry.” She went on to share that Latinos would feel more comfortable talking with other Latinos, and the lack of Latino professionals in the building makes it difficult for the families and the youth to connect genuinely with educators and the educational process. She explained it can take much longer for Latino families to open to white people because there is always a fear of rejection based on the family’s history of prejudice. We know that parent involvement is one of the keys to student success overall and that family involvement is important culturally for Latinos. As cited in HACER “Lee and Brown found that involvement at school occurred more often for parents whose culture and lifestyle were more congruent with the school’s culture” (Shurilla et al., 2012, p. 15). We all want to be connected to places where people look like us and understand our experiences. There are few schools in Minnesota where the school makes a point to provide the necessary programs and staff available for Latino students and families to be engaged. When they do, like the case of the TORCH program in Northfield Minnesota, there seems to be a rise in success and graduation.

Columbia Heights is another example of a community having the foresight for equity and perseverance for developing programs for the benefit of all students. One of the interviewees I met with used to be a part of this school and talked about the programs created in this district. The schools and community realized they had a high Latino population and wanted to meet the needs of the students attending the schools. She reported the school engaged in after-school programs, as well as in-class instruction, to engage in cultural understanding and learning. She reported that the school would help set the curriculum to focus on Latino cultural experiences and history and teachers would find ways to weave Latino culture into the common core standards needed to be learned by all students in Minnesota. She shared how they would choose books such as *Enrique’s Journey* to read in English class that would focus on specific Latino subjects, to both connect the students to Latino culture as well as provide places for students to grow and share about their own experiences.

This interviewee also shared that the school understood the importance of building relationships with families. Together with community supports the school arranged many family nights that included cooking traditional foods, cultural dances, and other things relevant to these families. She said that it was amazing to see how it helped to build relationships with families beyond just talking about grades. She reported that the initiative invited the school to be a part of its community and that relationships were built that then could also be leveraged when things got difficult for a student, or a behavior needed to be addressed. She reported that these family nights did not focus only on the Latino community— all students and families in the school were encouraged to participate. This allowed the other non-Latino students a chance to learn about new cultures and gave the Latino students a chance to show their knowledge and teach things, like dances, to the other students and families. The Latino students “became the experts during the events and took pride in them. There was real value in this.” This interviewee happened to have also spent a few years teaching and working in Mexico and she noted that this is how things were done in Mexico. “There were school presentations for everything in Mexico, constant cultural engagements. Whole towns would come to the school to participate in them. In the U.S., there is a disconnect between most schools and the families

they serve, and this does not help the Latino youth.” She explained that a lot of this disconnect occurs because of the lack of relationship-building time and appropriate resources offered to families through school experiences.

There are many ways that schools can change to better meet the needs of our students. The examples provided here are just a few of the many ideas generated out there in order to better the success rate for Latino students, which in turn betters the overall experience for all our students. When I think about the cultural influences that some of these programs created within their own schools, I cannot help but think about how those programs and ideas not only assisted with Latino students’ development, but allowed an opportunity for white students and the communities at large to have global exposure that more readily expresses the world we live in. I truly believe that a rising tide will lift all boats. I believe that we can create equity for one student and in so doing help create equity for all students. I think the examples and words above reflect this thinking. It is a difficult first step, but we need to recognize racism, privilege and its impact on our current system. We need to develop the courage to have these conversations because through them, we can create action and resources necessary to ensure justice for all of Minnesota’s youth.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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