Creating Connections that Change Lives
How Boulder County’s Foundation Is Working with Its Latino Community

In the years since trustees of The Community Foundation Serving Boulder County, in Colorado, decided in 2008 to launch a major initiative that has begun to help close the “achievement gap” between young Anglo and Latino students in the county, two strategic moves have proven to be key.

The first, said President Josie Heath, was engaging a highly regarded leader from the Latino community in shaping the project — first as a valued advisor, then as a trustee whose contribution has been extraordinary.

Heath described the second as an “ah-ha” moment. It was realizing, as part of the Resident Engagement Community Leadership Network, that a vital piece of enabling more Latino children to succeed in school was to engage directly with their parents — and to build trusting relationships, one family at a time.

This story sums up those two breakthroughs. The first began when Josie Heath invited Richard Garcia to come talk with her board.

“He’s very much trusted”

Most students from lower-income backgrounds in Boulder County are Latino, and Heath knew Garcia as a highly regarded activist in that community. His primary focus is on early childhood education. He founded and directs a statewide nonprofit whose main program, PASO (Providers Advancing School Outcomes), provides unlicensed child care providers, most of them Latino, with the skills, materials and knowledge they need to help children truly learn.

“He’s a real voice in the community, and he’s very much trusted by everyone,” said Dalia Dorta, a local Latina activist.

After a careful process, the foundation’s board had settled on school readiness and early childhood education as key to closing the achievement gap. “I thought about Richard as a resource,” Heath recalled. “He came into a meeting, and brought some folks from his program. I was a little anxious about it — but he did such a beautiful job of capturing what he was doing, of what could be done with an investment in those early years. He just had a depth, and a kind of wisdom, about this topic that was very persuasive.”

That meeting led to several more. Garcia helped shape the School Readiness Initiative that the foundation launched in 2008, with a major commitment of resources and a full-time director. In 2009, he joined the foundation’s board, and he served as its chair for a year as the initiative moved forward.

“He really helped us think it through in a very authentic way, so that we connected with the Latino community and understood it better,” said Trustee Jane McConnell, who...
The project has been very active. “We have run awareness campaigns, financed and led campaigns on four education funding measures, and made this work a major focus of our TRENDS Report on the social and economic health of our county,” reported Chris Barge, who directs the initiative.

“We are seeing really strong gains”

The work has begun to show results. In 2010 and again in 2013, as part of statewide standard-assessment testing, the county’s two school districts, Boulder Valley and St. Vrain, collected data on how many third graders were reading at grade level. That achievement is “the most important predictor of high school graduation and career success,” says the nationwide Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, a research-based effort by foundations, nonprofits, states and communities.

The districts compared the percentage of all third graders who were reading at grade level to those meeting the standard who were receiving meal assistance, a lower-income group that, in Boulder County, includes mostly Latinos. Between 2010 and 2013, the grade-level reading gap between all students and those on meal assistance shrank from 40 to 30 points in Boulder Valley. Between 2009 and 2013 in St. Vrain, the same measure decreased from 25 to 19 points.

The progress has not been without setbacks: In 2014, the same assessment found that third-grade reading scores had dropped four percentage points among all students receiving meal assistance. But overall, “We are seeing really strong gains among our Latino students,” observed John Creighton, a foundation Trustee who is the School Board President in St. Vrain School District, which has a large Latino population.

“The early years are so critical, and the community foundation was a key player in St. Vrain being able to expand what we’re doing in early childhood education,” he said. “Our community now sees early education as a priority.”

As the School Readiness Initiative developed, Richard Garcia “continued to be such a great resource that I think he carried a lot of weight,” Heath said. “People kept coming back to him, because he had such great insight. When our board chose Richard to be the chair, it elevated the wisdom we could bring to other matters. It moved well beyond Richard as an early childhood specialist.”

“Now what?”

In 2013, the achievement gap was narrowing, but foundation leaders knew they could do more. How could their School Readiness Initiative reach for a new level of impact?

That summer, the organization became one of eight community foundations from around the country to begin participating in the Resident Engagement Community Leadership Network, a year-long program that included eight community foundations and was coordinated by CFLeads, a national organization through which community foundations work together to advance community leadership practices. At the first network conference in Beverly, Massachusetts, Boulder’s team described how their project had convened forums of county school leaders, then Latino community leaders, to ask what more could be done.

The team then listened as colleagues from other foundations shared their experiences with resident engagement — an approach to making positive change that centers
on inviting community residents to help determine what needs to be done, then engaging them to play a key role in achieving those goals.

“As we came back from that first meeting and described what we had learned,” said Heath, “it was very clear that we had left out a big piece of resolving this. We had this ‘ah-ha!’ moment. The concept of resident engagement hadn’t been on our radar screen — and who were those residents? Of course, they were the Latino parents.”

Over the coming weeks, the foundation organized parent forums in three communities that have large Latino populations. Richard Garcia moderated. Each gathering drew about 60-80 people, to discuss how more parents could be encouraged to support their children's learning, and to be actively involved in school affairs.

It was also clear that the county’s close-knit Latino community can be skeptical of well-meaning outsiders. So at the next network gathering, in February 2014 in Sausalito, California, the foundation’s team asked how they might work through that resistance, to build productive relationships with individual families.

Said Garcia, “We came to Sausalito to ask, ‘Now what?’” A brainstorming session sparked an idea: hire several people, drawn from within the Latino community, to be part-time parent outreach workers. If those folks were locally known and respected, they could reach out to parents and...

Leadership: Networking for Diversity

“One of the roles you have to play in leadership is to be a talent scout,” noted Josie Heath, President of The Community Foundation Serving Boulder County. The foundation itself has become a talent scout — and talent developer — for new leaders who can help bring the diversity of the county’s population onto its nonprofit boards, public commissions and elected positions.

Leadership Fellows Boulder County is a foundation program, in collaboration with the Boulder Chamber of Commerce, through which self-identified emerging leaders commit to nearly a year of monthly half-day gatherings, where they talk with and learn from leaders of the county’s public, private and nonprofit sectors. In its fourth year, the program has almost 90 graduates. Half are from under-represented groups: people of color, the disabled and/or the LGBTQ community.

“This is not a training — it’s about building a network of transformational and inclusive leaders in Boulder County,” said Elvira Ramos, the foundation’s Director of Programs. Leadership Fellows represent Boulder County’s public, business, nonprofit and cultural sectors; each commits to serving within six months of graduation on a board of trustees, running for office, or otherwise taking on a leadership role. Presenters commit to being available afterward for conversation, advice and networking.

“My involvement with the Leadership Fellows made me feel more connected to my community, and it empowered me to take more of a leadership role,” said graduate Eliberto Mendoza of Longmont, a child of Texas farmworkers who became Interim Director of Boulder County Community Action Programs.

The foundation’s project began when its research showed how few leadership positions across the county were held by people from under-represented populations. Twenty percent of graduated fellows have served on committees at the community foundation; one sits on the Board of Trustees. Others are on nonprofit boards and/or public boards or commissions. One graduate is a state representative.

“Another is now board chair of a large Boulder County nonprofit — the first time a Latina has held that position,” Ramos said.

The board of The Community Foundation Serving Boulder County now includes five people of color among its 22 total members. That closely reflects the proportion of people of color within the county’s overall population.

“What I like about the foundation is that they appreciate what you do in the community,” noted Richard Garcia, a longtime activist in Colorado’s Latino community who has chaired the foundation’s board. “They recruit members because of their community leadership and activism.”
build on that initial trust.

Back in Boulder, Barge, McConnell and Garcia worked with community members in a process that led to the hiring of four well-qualified school readiness coordinators, each of whom is working in the community where she lives. “The key here will be to help parents of very young children really activate in their role as their children’s first teacher,” Barge explained.

“Another important aspect of the school coordinators’ work is building the leadership skills of young Latino parents to begin organizing their neighborhoods, in search of improved school outcomes for their kids. We’re calling this new program ELPASO – Engaged Latino Parents Advancing School Outcomes,”

“I believe we can only be a strong community foundation if we reflect our community,” Heath summed up. “The CFLeads process has pushed me to see how important this is in every aspect of what we do. Are we being a part of all that we hope for our community?”

“What I’ve learned the most, and what we’ve all learned at the Community Foundation, is that it’s about listening,” added Trustee McConnell. “We can’t come in and say, ‘This is what you need to do, to make sure your kids are graduating from high school.’ We need to listen to the community, find out what they need and what’s working for them — and then build on that.”