BUILDING A LATINO PARENT REVOLUTION

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The mother rocked her infant in the carrier at her feet and asked me enthusiastic questions. What is The Community Foundation? What is your job? Why did you create this program, ELPASO? Why are you – a white man – interested in helping Latina women?

There, in the living room of her neighbor's two-bedroom apartment, inside one of east Longmont's lower income neighborhoods, I had a profound opportunity, a year and a half into the work, to check in about how the plans we made were working at the grassroots level.

She was one of seven Latino parents squeezed into two couches and a few dining room chairs, who had come together four times over four months to talk about how to ensure their young children were ready when the time came for them to go to Kindergarten. Their host had invited them to learn what she was learning in her parent leadership cohort with ELPASO - Engaged Latino Parents Advancing School Outcomes.

On this particular Saturday afternoon, they had learned about early childhood numeracy. Using pipe cleaners and beads, they learned how to teach their children concepts about patterns.

These "Cafecitos," as they called them, were happening almost every day now, all over Boulder County. They called them Cafecitos, or "little coffees," but it didn't matter whether coffee was served. What mattered was that Latina parent leaders were sharing their recently acquired knowledge about early childhood education with their neighbors.

The key to ELPASO's success were the three bilingual, bicultural School Readiness Coordinators, who lived in low-income Latino neighborhoods, and who had recruited these parent leaders by knocking on their neighbors' doors.

After the lesson on early numeracy was over, we snacked on pizza and discussed what this ELPASO movement was all about.

The Community Foundation Serving Boulder County, I explained, makes grants to nonprofits, provides information about our community's social and economic health, and leads on key issues of community-wide concern. One of the issues that most concerns us

is the achievement gap between Latino and Anglo students, which is wider in our area than anywhere else in the state.

As Director of our School Readiness Initiative, my job has been to help close this achievement gap by helping the whole community focus on early learning and parent engagement. We created ELPASO for two basic reasons. First, we realized that parents are on the front line, holding the key to ensuring their children are ready for Kindergarten. Second, we saw that parents were perhaps the only stakeholders who could make sure community leaders funded relevant interventions.

So why was I – a white man – interested in helping Latina women? It was a fantastic question, I told her. Too many people aren't willing to talk about race. They want to talk about how they care about all children, or how families with lower incomes need our attention. But the more I worked with community leaders on the achievement gap, the more meetings I attended, the more clear it became that in our county, the achievement gap was disproportionately impacting Latino students and families. Yet, by and large, we were a bunch of well-meaning white people trying to guess at what Latino families and students needed.

We needed the Latino parent voice at the leadership tables where decisions were made that impacted their children's future. And so ELPASO rose as a grassroots movement whose objective was to build the Latino parent voice.

One of our former board chairs put it more bluntly: "We need a Latino parent revolution," he told me two years ago.

I remember where we were when he said it.

We were at a resort in Colorado Springs with teams from a total of eight community foundations from across the country. CFLeads and the Aspen Institute had convened us for a learning year to talk about how to better engage residents in the work we hoped would impact them.

It was such a simple concept, yet one that had somehow eluded much of the community foundation field. And so this call to action had emerged:

"Resident engagement is the next step in community leadership. To fulfill their potential for impact, community foundations can reach beyond traditional leaders — such as policymakers, nonprofit executives, researchers and other funders — to directly engage residents as partners in change."

For us, that meant directly engaging with Latino parents of young children if we had any hope of closing the achievement gap.

We were ashamed to realize we had not been doing this.

We took on this old adage as our new mantra: “Do nothing about me without me.”

Those words are now in our Community Foundation’s strategic plan.

TARGETING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

You could say our work in this area started around the turn of the century, when we began tracking the social and economic indicators of our community’s health in our now-biennial TRENDS Report. Over and over again, the achievement gap came up as a persistent and almost intractable challenge for our community.

Our foundation’s leaders wanted to do something about it. But with a small staff and relatively small unrestricted endowment, we felt somewhat powerless.

In 2008, we got serious about positioning ourselves to take action on key issues of community-wide concern. We launched a four-year, $4 million fundraising initiative. It would allow us to double our unrestricted grantmaking, immediately and permanently, while reserving $1 million to help us tackle one of these key issues.

We spoke with community stakeholders, surveyed the national landscape, and honed in pretty quickly on the achievement gap as the key issue we wanted to impact. We decided to focus upstream, on early childhood education.

The first grant of our initiative, in 2009, went to a grassroots nonprofit program called PASO – Providers Advancing School Outcomes. They were reaching Latino children by training informal, unlicensed immigrants who were already caring for their children and their neighbor’s or extended family’s children. We gave them $90,000 – the most we’d ever given any organization through our unrestricted funds. The bridge funding allowed the fledgling program to survive past its third year and secure other, much larger grants. The program has since expanded many times over across Colorado.

The PASO program was founded by Richard Garcia, who had worked on closing the achievement gap through Latino parent engagement over more than three decades in our community. We recruited him onto our Board of Trustees.

We decided to complement this grassroots-level funding with an effort to expand our community's licensed, early childhood education capacity. A $100,000 grant from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation allowed us to design and launch a public awareness campaign in 2010, called Ready.Set.Learn, about the importance of early childhood education.

We simultaneously worked behind the scenes with elected officials and other leaders from Boulder County and the Boulder Valley School District, to negotiate a ballot issue that would put more public funding into preschool and full-day kindergarten.

The school board was preparing a ballot issue to ask voters for about $23 million more in property tax revenue annually. We offered to fund the majority of the campaign if they would carve out $5 million to double access to preschool and full-day kindergarten for children growing up in poverty. They agreed, and the ballot issue passed in November, 2010.

We supported a statewide ballot proposal in 2011 to increase public education funding, including Kindergarten. The measure passed in Boulder County, but failed by a 2-1 margin statewide.

We funded a school funding ballot issue the next year in the St. Vrain Valley School District, which already had preschool and full-day kindergarten in all of its elementary schools. This one passed too, and allowed St. Vrain to remain a leader on early childhood education, while keeping pace with rapid population growth.

By 2012, we had successfully completed our four-year, $4 million fundraising initiative. We had immediately and permanently doubled the amount we granted from our unrestricted fund to nonprofits.

"WHO ARE WE TALKING ABOUT, ANYWAY?"

We had built good momentum in our community for early childhood education. But the achievement gap remained large. We held a retreat with several of our Trustees to take stock. We emerged with a new idea, to fund a full-time staff person to direct our School Readiness Initiative, and extend our commitment to the initiative for five years.

I moved into the new role, and immediately set to work trying to organize our community's leaders around closing the achievement gap through school readiness. We recruited a taskforce and spent a year working together to establish a network of collaborative leadership with a common agenda, shared measurement, and a clear plan of action.

We had elected officials, nonprofit and agency directors, business and faith leaders at the table. But we didn't have the parents.

"Who are we talking about anyway?" Richard Garcia asked rhetorically at one of our meetings.

Of course, we were trying to help Latino students and families. Yet Latino parents weren't at the table.

It wasn't as easy as just inviting them to our table. We needed to do some serious outreach, and we had to be willing to drastically shift our agenda to address their needs and concerns. We needed to create a welcoming environment that would make them feel like it was a table where they would genuinely feel like they belonged and had a voice, and where they felt empowered to contribute.

So we gathered leaders of nonprofits that worked directly with Latino families. I have come think of them as "grass-shoots leaders," or "cultural brokers" who can connect with both Latino parents at the grassroots level, and with our community's leaders, at the "grasstops" level. Over three lunch meetings in Boulder, Lafayette and Longmont, these magical, hyper-local sets of leaders helped us determine who was organizing the Latino parent community already, and who else needed to be at the table if progress were to be made on the achievement gap.

We then held Latino parent focus groups in Boulder, Lafayette and Longmont. Our nonprofit advisors helped us recruit a solid turnout totaling over 200 parents, and helped us facilitate the meetings, which were conducted completely in Spanish. We provided dinner and childcare and a $10 Wal-Mart gift card to each participant.

At our Boulder meeting, we screened a 4-minute film we commissioned, called "Ruben's Story: Closing the Achievement Gap." It chronicled the life of Ruben Garcia, a standout Boulder County Latino parent and champion for the importance of early learning and parent and community engagement. The standing-room only audience cheered enthusiastically, and Ruben beamed as he then spoke directly to the parents about why they must be involved, starting in the earliest years.

In the end, we had a lot of ideas on paper, which we integrated into the planning documents developed by our taskforce. Here were the top five ideas from Latino parent leaders:

1. Recruit community coordinators in each city to help do this work, and compensate them for it.
2. Build an authentic early learning awareness campaign for and by Latino parents.
3. Build Latino parent leadership and advocacy on early learning.
4. Promote Latino parent skill building.
5. Raise funding to help sustain these activities.

These concepts became the basis for our new program, ELPASO – Engaged Latino Parents Advancing School Outcomes. Richard Garcia, founder of PASO, came up with the name.

"THE CIRCLE OF LIFE"

We hired School Readiness Coordinators in Boulder, Lafayette and Longmont. Each of them were born in Mexico but raised their families in Boulder County. This was important to us, since 80% of Latinos in our community also have roots specifically in Mexico.

Each day, Ere Juarez knocks on doors in Longmont's low-income Latino neighborhoods. Veronica Sangabriel does the same in Lafayette. Claudia Sanchez covers Boulder.

Each week, the three of them conduct a total of 20 in-depth interviews, in Spanish, with Latino parents of children aged 0-5. They talk about the achievement gap and how so much of a child's early success depends on what their parents do with and for them in the earliest years. They refer the parents to early childhood and parenting resources in their neighborhoods, such as Head Start and parenting classes.

"I think it's the circle of life," said Veronica, who used to knock on doors as a 5-year-old child in Mexico, asking neighbors if she could clean their houses or do their dishes in return for money to help pay for her school supplies. "Now I'm knocking on doors to help my community. I believe that, even if my childhood was really hard, there was a reason that everything happened. It has made me Veronica."

Her story inspired us so much, we commissioned a video about her work, called "Veronica's Story."

Veronica, Ere and Claudia will be the first to tell you - this is hard work. The parents tell our coordinators about all sorts of issues, and often call them later with questions about where else they can go for help.

When our coordinators meet Latino parents with leadership potential, they recruit them into a year-long leadership cohort. They explain that we are building a Latino parent movement. They tell them we need Latino parent leaders like them to help us connect with and empower more Latino parents, so that the achievement gap will close.

The parent leaders gather 13 times over a school year to learn various skills related to building a Latino parent movement for early childhood education. Our lead trainer, Tere Garcia, developed the curriculum and leads the meetings. The parent leaders are mesmerized by her charismatic presentations.

The parents learn leadership skills. They learn how to navigate the early childhood system. They learn how to facilitate a good house meeting. Then they learn about early childhood cognitive development, social-emotional development, language development, early numeracy, early literacy, and early writing.

In between these sessions, they hold Cafecitos in their homes, where they teach their Latino neighbors and friends what they've learned.

In the Cafecito on cognitive development, they learn about how children develop mainly their senses in the first two years, and move into mental processing after that.

During the social-emotional Cafecito, they practice how to help their children talk about their feelings. After one such session, Ere received a call from a father, who said he wanted to be connected to a mental health specialist. The social-emotional lesson his wife had brought home from a Cafecito helped his children tell him for the first time that he had an anger problem.

The Cafecitos on language development help parents understand how to get their children talking at every age, from 0-5.

The unit on early numeracy walks through simple ways that parents can use household items to support their children in learning about foundational concepts such as shapes, patterns, counting and measurement.

The Cafecitos on early literacy show parents how to read with their children so that they develop a lifelong love of books and stories – whether or not the parents themselves can read well.

And the lesson on early writing helps parents understand how to support and engage their children as they move from scribbling with crayons, to forming letters, to eventually writing stories of their own.

The learning year ends with a big celebration, where the parent leaders "graduate" from ELPASO, and receive certificates of completion with their families and friends in attendance. At our first celebration last year, many of the parents spoke passionately of their own personal transformations – not only as parents – but as leaders in their communities.

HITTING OUR MARKS

Ere was knocking on doors in an apartment complex when Marta Rivas saw her and asked her what she was up to. She immediately took interest, and explained that she saw the achievement gap every day as a teacher at Head Start. Ere recruited Marta to become a parent leader.

Ere and Marta became a team. Marta recruited neighbors and friends to come to her cafecitos, where she would teach them what she was learning in the ELPASO leadership meetings. Ere attended the cafecitos too, providing $25 from The Community Foundation to compensate Marta for the refreshments she provided, and helping to answer questions about the content of the lessons.

The conversations – all in Spanish – were lively. One parent in attendance decided to enroll her 3-year-old in Head Start full-time instead of part-time after learning about the value of preschool in her child's cognitive and social-emotional development.

Another parent told me she volunteers regularly at her child's preschool.

"All the parents need this information," she told me. "Right now their only interaction with the school is back-to-school night and a couple of parent-teacher conferences each year."

Language barriers also keep many Latino parents from engaging with their children's schools.

She thanked me and Ere and Marta for spending our time with her and her neighbors, helping them help their children.

The next weekend, I returned to Marta's home, and brought a peer from a nearby community foundation, which also supports early childhood education. He brought his wife and his two sons, ages 1 and 5.

They quickly became as engrossed in the lesson as the other parents were as their children played on the living room floor at their feet with the other children.

ELPASO helps parents feel connected to one another, he said. Stay-at-home parenting can be an isolating experience for a mom, who may feel depressed. Having a Cafecito to look forward to can make a big difference.

Clearly, ELPASO is taking hold. By this writing, we had interviewed more than 1,600 Latino parents in Boulder County, heard their hopes and dreams for their children, and helped them navigate their way towards available community resources. Our ELPASO parent leaders hosted an astounding 190 cafecitos in their homes during the 2015-2016 school year. Our external evaluator observes that our Cafecito, community organizing model, holds promise for replication nationally. And he is working with us to document the myriad ways that Latino parents are changing their behavior as a result of their involvement with our program.

As a program, ELPASO is hitting its marks. And I believe its potential as a movement still lies on the horizon.

REALIZING THE VISION

Over the next year, The Community Foundation will work with our School Readiness Coordinators to continue to strengthen and improve ELPASO. Meanwhile, we are working to transition the program out from under The Community Foundation and establish it as its own nonprofit organization, under the direction of Richard Garcia and his wife, Tere, who is a retired bilingual educator in addition to serving as our lead trainer. She will become the first Executive Director of ELPASO once it becomes its own nonprofit.

Ensuring ELPASO continues and strengthens is important. But it is also our job at The Community Foundation to do whatever we can to help deliver on ELPASO's larger vision, of creating a Latino parent revolution.

We will know this vision is being realized when we see more Latino parents shaping public policy, and when we see more Latino children succeeding in school, starting in preschool and Kindergarten.

In the meantime, we must act as the surrogate voice for Latino parents and join them at the leadership tables where decisions impacting their children are made. And we must build a strong leadership network of allies to Latino parents, who are in touch with their lived experience every day.

This is some of the thinking that led me and Richard Garcia to run for the Boulder Valley School Board in 2015. I drew a very competitive race and ultimately lost by a 4% margin after the largest campaign in a decade. Richard ran unopposed and is now the only Latino parent on either of our county's school boards. Along the way, we jointly raised awareness about the achievement gap and the importance of parent engagement and early childhood education.

Today we continue to connect leaders to each other across our county who are passionate about closing the achievement gap. Sometimes we take the lead on a convening. Sometimes we support other efforts. Sometimes we help connect others so that they may take the lead. In each case, we remain alert to every opportunity to raise more funding for the cause.

This fall we will financially support the St. Vrain Valley's $200 million bond campaign for school construction. Just as in the case of their successful mill levy campaign we supported, if this is successful, it will help them stay on top of school readiness in a district where the Latino population is booming.

Meanwhile we are raising a permanent school readiness endowment as a major part of our community foundation's new capacity building effort, called The 25th Anniversary Fund – A Foundation for Our Future.

If successful, this fund will help us stay at the leadership tables where decisions impacting the students we care about most are made.

Have we built a Latino parent revolution? Not yet. But I hope we look back on these days as the beginning of a movement. This is messy, painstaking work. It takes a lot of effort every day to build the parent voice. But step by step, “paso a paso,” I believe we’re getting there. We will be a better community when every child succeeds.

For more information, please visit www.commfound.org/ready, or contact Chris Barge directly, at chris@commfound.org, or 303-442-0436, Ext. 114.