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## **Para Nuestros Padres: Addressing the Parental Mental Health Crisis and the Importance of Youth Mentorship**

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### **Executive Summary**

The mental health crisis among parents and caregivers has emerged as a national public health priority, disproportionately affecting Latino families due to cultural and systemic inequities. Latino parents, deeply invested in their children's education, face unique challenges, including language barriers, untranslatable educational experiences outside of the United States, and work obligations. These obstacles hinder their ability to support their children academically, compounding the challenges they face in maintaining mental well-being.

Culturally responsive mentorship programs offer a dual benefit: improving educational outcomes for Latino students and reducing parental stress by bridging the gaps in support and advocacy. However, such programs remain underfunded, inaccessible, and inadequately tailored to meet the cultural and linguistic needs of Latino families. This brief outlines the overwhelming potential for targeted policies that invest in mentorship initiatives to address the limitations perpetuating educational inequities and parental stress.

### **Background**

The U.S. Surgeon General's recent advisory emphasizes that the declining state of parental mental health is a national public health crisis requiring immediate action (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2024). Compared to other adults, caregivers (legal guardians responsible for the care of a child or adolescent) are encountering disproportionate stress levels due to the growing weight of childcare responsibilities, which differ significantly from those of previous generations. The advisory highlights pervasive factors, such as inflated childcare costs, while also calling attention to the compounded stress faced by minorities and parents of undocumented children due to intersectional challenges. To support the mental health of parents who are at an increased risk, this brief will focus on Latinos and their children's access to culturally inclusive mentorship programs at K-12 schools.

Latino parents are an important priority among assessments regarding parental mental health, as they are the largest growing minority in the United States—accounting for more than 19% of the US population (U.S. Census, 2023a). Additionally, they are at the forefront of this crisis. Studies indicate they are more likely to be parents and, moreover, at an earlier age than other immigrant groups and their white, non-Hispanic counterparts (U.S. Census Bureau,

2023b, Table S0201; Pew Research Center, 2009). Aside from their significant share of the demographic experiencing this public health crisis, Latino parents are constrained in their capacity to support their children effectively by systemic factors such as lower rates of employment and educational attainment paired with income disparities when compared to white, non-Hispanic individuals (U.S. Census, 2023b). Due to these challenges, Latino parents hold a deep sense of concern for their children's educational attainment (Langenkamp, 2017). For many Latinos, the pursuit of better educational opportunities for their children are among the primary reasons for immigrating to the United States (Hill & Torres, 2010).

However, barriers, such as language differences, untranslatable educational experiences, and demanding work obligations, often prevent Latino parents from engaging in their children's education as much as they would like (Zarate, 2007). This lack of involvement has profound implications, as parental engagement is a key factor in student success (Menheere and Hooge, 2010). Therefore, a critical avenue can be presented to mitigate both parental stress and educational disparities through culturally responsive mentorship programs. Mentorship programs, which pair young individuals with mentors for guidance and support,

have demonstrated their effectiveness in alleviating parental stress, even encouraging greater parental involvement in education (Erdem et al., 2024; Jent & Niec, 2006; Larose et al., 2012). For Latino families, culturally inclusive mentorship programs have the capacity to benefit both students and their parents:

- **For Students:** Mentors provide role models, academic assistance, and emotional support, fostering improved academic outcomes, social outcomes, and school engagement (De La Rosa, 2022).
- **For Parents:** Mentors help fill the gaps that parents encounter when navigating the educational system for their children, which can alleviate stress.

Despite the extensive advantages, existing mentorship programs are often inaccessible, underfunded, and insufficiently tailored to meet the needs of Latino families in the K-12 space (Brown, 2022). This underscores the urgency of targeted policies that invest in culturally inclusive mentorship initiatives as a means of addressing both the mental health crisis among Latino parents and the educational inequities faced by their children.

### **Problem Analysis**

Latino families face a dual set of challenges: barriers limit parental engagement in education, and students remain underserved by mentorship programs. Together, these issues compound parental stress and contribute to widespread mental health concerns. While the benefits of mentorship programs are well-documented, their current design and implementation often fail to address the specific needs of Latino families, leaving them underfunded, inaccessible, and

culturally misaligned (Brown, 2022). Addressing these gaps requires examining the barriers parents face and the shortcomings in mentorship programs that limit their reach and impact.

### **Barriers to Latino-Parent Engagement in Education**

#### ***Linguistic Barriers***

Latinos make up two-thirds of the nation's population with limited English proficiency (LEP), parents are disproportionately affected by language barriers, which significantly hinder their engagement in their children's education (Anderson et al., 2020; Haldar, Pillai, & Artiga, 2023). These barriers limit effective communication with educators while impeding their understanding of school policies, their children's academic progress, and available resources (Hill & Torres, 2010). As a result, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reports decreased participation in school activities, such as parent-teacher conferences, among Latino parents (NCES, 2024a), as well as a growing sense of alienation from the educational system (NCES, 2024b). The lack of parental support and advocacy perpetuates educational disparities, contributing to lower levels of educational attainment and academic performance among Latino students (Marschall, 2006).

#### ***Untranslatable Educational Experiences***

Many Latino parents come from educational systems abroad that differ significantly from the U.S. model (Ryberg & Guzman, 2023). These untranslatable experiences make it difficult for them to navigate American school structures, policies, and expectations effectively. This disconnect can discourage deeper engagement, leaving students without the necessary guidance

and advocacy at home. Additionally, educational credentials from other countries often lack recognition in the U.S., leading to diminished confidence among parents in their ability to contribute meaningfully to their children's education.

#### ***Work and Family Obligations***

Demanding work schedules and caregiving responsibilities significantly limit Latino parents' ability to engage in their children's education. Economic pressures often require parents to work multiple jobs or long hours, leaving little time for school involvement (Crosby & Mendez, 2017). For example, evening parent-teacher conferences or volunteer opportunities may conflict with work schedules, preventing parents from participating in key educational interactions. Additionally, cultural caregiving norms place further burdens on Latinos. As a higher proportion of adults, about three in ten, are part of the "sandwich generation," they are tasked with simultaneously caring for both elderly parents and children (Parker & Patten, 2013). These obligations create structural barriers that hinder consistent parental involvement in school activities, exacerbating educational disparities for their children.

### **Issues with Current Mentorship Programs**

#### ***Lack of Accountability in Mentorship Programs***

Federal and state funding for mentorship initiatives remains insufficient. While recent notable priorities reflect student support, they fall short in their lack of accountability toward minority communities and Latino populations (The White House, 2022). Because accounting for race and ethnicity through targeted mentorship programs in schools leads to better outcomes

(Allen & Eby, 2014), the reciprocal indicates that Latino families can be excluded from the resources that could help alleviate educational inequities and reduce parental stress.

### ***Immigration-Related Fears and Anti-Immigrant Rhetoric***

Latino students and their families often experience heightened anxiety due to concerns about deportation and immigration status (Roche, Vaquera, White, & Rivera, 2018). These fears can discourage both students and parents from fully engaging with mentorship programs or educational systems. This anxiety is further exacerbated during periods of heightened anti-immigrant rhetoric, such as during election cycles or under administrations promoting restrictive immigration policies (Stavelly, 2024). The uncertainty and fear created by such rhetoric can deter families from seeking out or participating in programs that could otherwise benefit them, including mentorship initiatives aimed at supporting students' academic and social development.

### ***Cultural and Linguistic Challenges***

Educational systems often lack culturally and linguistically responsive resources (Osipova & Lao, 2022). For Latino families, this translates into a disconnect between their cultural values and the design of existing mentorship initiatives. Programs that fail to account for language differences, cultural traditions, and unique family dynamics unintentionally alienate the very communities they aim to support. For example, mentoring activities may rely on English-language materials or practices unfamiliar to Latino families, making it difficult for parents to feel involved or confident in their child's participation. This lack of inclusivity erodes trust in both the educational system and the mentorship

programs it promotes, further reducing engagement (Schneider, Martinez, & Owens, 2006).

### **Conclusion & Policy Recommendations**

Addressing the challenges faced by Latino families requires a multifaceted approach that recognizes the intersection of parental mental health and educational disparities in youth. By translating these concerns into action, governments and community organizations can ensure that Latino families thrive, reducing the disproportionate amount of stress that they experience and prioritizing the national call to action regarding parental mental health.

The following policy recommendations offer a means of increasing the academic success of youth while improving the well-being of parents, which far outweigh the costs of implementation:

#### ***Increase Federal and State Funding for Culturally Inclusive Mentorship Programs***

Investing in mentorship programs specifically designed to support Latino families is a critical first step. Federal and state governments should establish dedicated funding for initiatives to incorporate cultural and linguistic inclusivity, ensuring these programs are accessible to underserved communities. For example, governments can allocate a portion of federal education grants specifically for mentorship initiatives in high-density Latino areas and provide incentives for mentorship programs to recruit and train mentors who share cultural backgrounds with the students they serve. These efforts will address recent budgetary constraints to effective federal initiatives such as the Youth Mentoring Program grant

(MENTOR, 2024), creating opportunities for Latino students to receive academic and social support while also promoting an impactful pathway toward alleviating parental stress.

#### ***Address Immigration-Related Fears with Clear Protections and Community Partnerships***

Governments should actively work to reduce the fears stemming from anti-immigrant rhetoric by implementing policies that protect immigrant families and promote safety within educational settings. Passing legislation to ensure that immigration enforcement actions cannot occur on school grounds would be an effective means, along with partnering with trusted community organizations to communicate these protections to schools and families. Reducing fears related to immigration status will empower Latino families to engage more openly with mentorship programs and schools, fostering stronger educational and community ties while alleviating stress.

#### ***Develop Culturally and Linguistically Inclusive Resources***

Mentorship programs must be supported with materials and practices that reflect the experiences and values of Latino families. This includes offering bilingual resources and adapting mentoring approaches to align with cultural traditions and family dynamics. Effective measures include requiring federally funded mentorship programs to provide materials in both English and Spanish and integrating cultural proficiency as a core component of mentor training programs. Providing culturally relevant resources will strengthen trust and engagement, making mentorship programs more effective for Latino students and their families while also fostering a sense of inclusion.

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