

**MAKING A
MEASURABLE
DIFFERENCE:** CASE STUDIES FROM
THE HIGH-QUALITY ASSESSMENT PROJECT



STRATEGIES
FOR ENGAGING
LATINO PARENTS
IN ASSESSMENTS
ADVOCACY



States are now using higher quality tests to better measure important student skills such as writing, problem-solving and critical thinking. This case study describes why Latino parents support these tests and successful strategies for authentically engaging them in using test results to advocate for student success.



PREPARED BY

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research

INTRODUCTION: One in four students in classrooms today are Latino, and this number will increase to one in three by 2050. With these changing demographics, education policies are being debated and implemented that affect millions of Latino children—and more state leaders, educators and education advocates are looking for ways to effectively engage Latino parents. In particular, as states have raised expectations for student learning in recent years to better ensure students are being taught skills and knowledge they need for success—and put in place higher quality tests aligned to these expectations—Latino parents have both embraced these changes and sometimes been unsure how to use these new tools to advocate for their children.

IN THIS BRIEF:

We share the strategies and tactics Unidos US and its affiliates use to engage with Latino families on advocacy around standards and assessments.

This case study describes the work of the **Unidos US**—using resources from the High-Quality Assessment Project (HQAP) and others—to engage Latino parents in how to use higher standards and results from better tests to advocate for their children’s success, as well as suggestions Unidos US has learned about how best to communicate with and create partnerships with this community. Formerly called the National Council of La Raza (including when it worked with HQAP), Unidos US has worked since 1968 to be the non-partisan voice for Latinos.

“ I have learned how to help my children with their homework, how to understand the report card and how to understand the school standards. All this is important to know how to better support our children. ”

*– Mom, Amqui Elementary School
(Nashville, TN), Fall 2016*

Decades of research show that parent engagement is a key contributor to student success, and Latino parents overwhelmingly identify education for their children as one of their top priorities and are eager to engage in helping to improve education systems and advocate for what their children need. But significant communication barriers exist. Some of these barriers are logistical—holding parent meetings at times that don't work for parents or without childcare provided, and others are more substantive, such as jumping into policy discussions without providing proper framing or situating within the larger education system.

The good news is that there is now both more awareness about these barriers and commitment from advocacy and education groups to rethink their engagement strategies with Latino families. Unidos US is the U.S.'s largest Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization. Unidos US has worked for over two decades with civil rights leaders, education advocates, policymakers and legislators to ensure that the unique needs of Latino students and English learners are considered in federal, state and local education policy decisions. From work on No Child Left Behind to the Every Student Succeeds Act, Unidos US has been a leader in standards-based education reforms and supporting policies that promote equality of opportunity for all children, regardless of ZIP code. In addition to legislative advocacy for better and more fair education policies, Unidos US has a 50-year history of supporting and empowering the Latino community through capacity-building and delivering programs that are culturally and linguistically appropriate to its affiliate network of nearly 300 affiliated community-based organizations and charter schools that directly serve Latino communities across the country.

“ Honestly, before this I didn't know much about the school system. All the examples, games and explanations [of the school system] have helped me greatly. I've learned a lot more about how schools work and the learning standards for students. ”

*– Mom, Amqui Elementary School
(Nashville, TN), Fall 2016*

COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY WITH LATINO FAMILIES

Unidos US has found that organizations and schools using culturally informed engagement strategies see more effective participation from Latino families, which results in empowered parent advocates and thus better-supported students. This case study shares the specific strategies and tactics Unidos US and its affiliates use to engage Latino families to become stronger advocates for higher standards and better tests that reflect important skills and knowledge. It describes general perceptions about standards and assessments among Latino families, the strategies schools and organizations can employ when engaging with Latino families around these topics and successful, tangible examples of these strategies in action. This case study is informed by message testing and field work Unidos US conducted from 2015-2016 and phone interviews in May 2017.

WHAT DO LATINO PARENTS THINK ABOUT STANDARDS AND TESTS—AND WHAT'S THE BEST WAY TO COMMUNICATE ABOUT THESE POLICIES?

Summer 2015 was a critical time to build awareness and support for standards and assessments among communities of color. Having adopted new standards focused on teaching and learning aligned to college- and career-ready expectations, many states needed tests that could measure these new expectations for writing, problem-solving and critical thinking. Most states had joined one of two consortia—PARCC or Smarter Balanced—to pool resources and develop a common test, and the first year of testing was completed as criticisms about implementation of the new tests were on the rise. Unidos US continued to support college- and career-ready standards and their aligned assessments at a national level, but it also knew more local engagement was needed to raise awareness and articulate the value of these changes to students and families.

“I have learned a lot, I have a lot of information about schools, the scores on the standardized tests and about how schools are doing.”

*—Mom, Whitsitt Elementary School (Nashville, TN),
Fall 2015*

Because of the negative rhetoric at the time about Common Core standards as well as Unidos US's understanding that Latino families remained largely in the dark about new policy shifts, Unidos US conducted message-testing to develop effective messages that most resonated with Latino parents and most clearly highlighted the benefits of high academic standards and aligned assessments. Through online and telephone surveys, Unidos US—in partnership with EDGE Research—examined messages in English and Spanish with Latino parents to determine their views about their children's education, college- and career-ready standards and state tests.

The results were telling. At a time when the testing “opt out” movement was gaining traction nationwide, Latino parents instead said that state tests were valuable tools to gauge how well their children were progressing. They viewed tests as a part of life and thus were generally uninterested or unaware of “opting out.” Further, families were eager to help their children succeed on these tests by helping them master grade-level expectations. At the same time, although Latino families were optimistic about tests and eager to help their children, they had little to no knowledge about and what academic standards the tests measured. For Latino families to fully embrace the new assessments, they needed to first understand the new standards and then see how these tests were aligned to them.

“This information has made a huge impact. I didn't know much before—not even what the letters meant on the report card. This program has been a great learning opportunity, I'm so grateful to all the people that took a role in making this program possible.”

-Mom, Glenciff Elementary School (Nashville, TN), Spring 2016

WHAT LATINO PARENTS THINK ABOUT EDUCATION, STANDARDS AND TESTING¹

Unidos US public opinion research showed:

- Latino parents feel that the expectations that are set at home and children wanting to do their best are the top reasons for students' academic success.
- Latino parents believe that students should take annual assessments and most do not believe there is too much testing in schools.
- Latino parents believe tests provide parents and teachers with information to help students improve in school.
- Latino parents find that tests are an important, consistent measure of how students are progressing in comparison to their peers.

1. <http://publications.nclr.org/handle/123456789/1450>.

Unidos US used the survey findings to develop a comprehensive strategy to communicate with Latino parents about the value of high-quality standards and aligned assessments—eventually reaching 6,000 parents during the 2015-16 school year. Unidos US affiliates in 12 states² built on this campaign in many local communities by hosting workshops to raise awareness of the importance of standards and assessments to even more families. In these workshops, parents learned how standards (goals for what students should be learning) and assessments (how well students are learning the skills and knowledge in the standards) were interconnected, as well as how to make sense of the new score reports coming out from PARCC and Smarter Balanced with information about their child’s individual performance. These workshops also connected parents with resources that supported children’s learning. While the workshops confirmed the presence of an information gap, it also reinforced that Latino families have a favorable view of intensified academic standards and of accurate school assessments.

INFORM, ENGAGE AND EMPOWER LATINO PARENTS

The success of the Unidos US affiliate workshops suggest important lessons for working effectively with Latino families and planning culturally and linguistically responsive engagement opportunities. Because Latino parents today do not always receive basic information about standards and tests, including dates from their schools for when students are tested and details about available testing accommodations, they often feel in the dark about how they can help their children prepare for the intensified academic standards and do well on state tests.

When planning an event to share information with Latino families about assessments, Unidos US recommends considering three phases carefully: logistics and planning, meeting content and agenda, and follow-up details.

Across all these phases, organizations and schools should consistently ask:

Does our work on this event reflect that the families are putting their other responsibilities on hold to attend?

2. Tennessee, Illinois, New York, New Jersey, Colorado, Arizona, Illinois, Maryland, Delaware, Michigan, Massachusetts and Ohio.

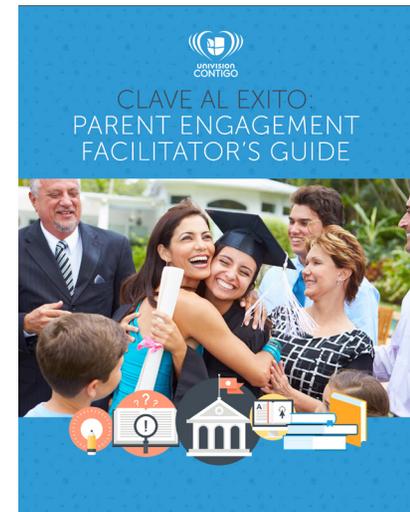
PHASE 1: LOGISTICS AND PLANNING

Event budgets should allow for inclusive programming and be sure to anticipate these logistical details:

- **Location:** Transportation is an important consideration for families attending meetings. Consider locations that are easy for families, such as a local community-based organization, a church or a communal center at an apartment building. If possible, go where Latino families already congregate.
- **Timing and dates:** Offer several meeting options for families to attend: daytime, afternoon and weekend options allow more flexibility for families.
- **Childcare/child involvement:** When hosting a meeting, consider what students will be doing while not with their parents/families. Offering childcare helps with parent participation, but also consider incorporating children in the meeting. One easy way to plan for this is to ask, “What is the child doing while parents participate in the meeting?”
- **Food:** Food and light beverages help boost attendance at your event and show families that you care about making them feel welcome and comfortable. Consider asking local grocery stores or wholesale providers to donate to your meeting to keep overall costs low.
- **Interpreter** Since language continues to be a significant barrier for families, prioritize translation services.
- **Outreach about events:** When disseminating details about your meeting, partner with trusted organizations, such as the *affiliates in Unidos US’s national network*. Co-host meetings with a local community-based organization or church.
- **Traditional and electronic outreach:** Deliver information through both digital and paper media. Drop off flyers at community centers and post on church bulletin boards. Also, plan to have online materials that are easy for parents to access, read, download and use at a later time.

Here is a facilitators’ guide that can be used as a resource when planning a parent engagement event.

Click on the picture to view the guide.



PHASE 2: MEETING AGENDA AND DELIVERY OF CONTENT

After getting parents to your meeting, it is important to have an intentional and focused strategy for engaging parents with the information.

Consider the following tips:

- **Begin by finding common ground:** Always start by finding common ground with parents. Begin with an ice breaker that taps into parents' own experiences. Let families know the direct effect their participation will have on their child's success.
- **Contextualize assessments with information about standards:** Remember, public education is not the same in all countries. Information presented to parents needs to be contextualized within the education system. First, begin by explaining what academic standards are and why they matter, and then link them to how assessments help teachers and parents determine how well students are progressing. Second, contextualize the material you present. If it is a tip sheet, explain how the tip sheet is helpful. If you are sharing background material, explain why you created this background material. Put things in context for families and have parent-friendly entry points for understanding that material.
- **Phrasing positively:** Ensure the language in the material used by the presenter is not deficit-focused. For example, instead of saying "We know this is the first time you're hearing this information and it may be overwhelming," consider, "Let's work together to bring what you know about your child to this conversation and work together to ensure his or her future success."
- **Allow for critiques:** Parents have valid critiques of the tests, and it is important to value their point of view. Unidos US's research showed Latino parents weren't supportive of the idea of "opting out" of state tests, but it did find they worried about the pressure and anxiety their children felt to do well on the tests. Value parents' concerns about tests for their children, whether they are focused on overtesting or on their children having additional learning needs. Acknowledge parents' concerns and be prepared to provide information and resources for families to tackle these challenges.

PHASE 3: PLANNING AFTER THE EVENT:

After the event, it's important to provide parents with additional points of communication.

Consider the following:

- **Leave behinds:** Create a bilingual “question & answer” document to keep parents engaged after the event. Helpful questions to get parents thinking about—in the context of what new standards and tests require and how parents can use these tools to advocate—include:

- *How do I know if my child is going to a good school?*
- *How do I set up a meeting with my child's school if my child is struggling?*
- *How do I connect with an interpreter?*

- **The next engagement opportunity:** Even if you are not planning to host another in-person meeting for some time, families will want to stay in touch. Consider creating a Facebook group or email listserv where families can receive information on a regular basis. Continuing to stay in touch with families is critical for ongoing engagement.

CONCLUSION

Research confirms the importance of family engagement in students' academic success. But, done well, it also affects each parent's sense of empowerment, as reflected in the accompanying quotes from parents who participated in Unidos US workshops.

Every organization can be proactive in anticipating the unique supports families of different backgrounds will need by asking itself the following three questions:

- 1** What steps do I need to take to understand different families' contexts?
- 2** How can I better grasp families' experiences with the education system and their comfort in how and when they engage?
- 3** What information do families need to know to be supported?

“The education system here is very different from the country where I’m from. I learned about the system of grades leading up to college, the assessments they give to assess growth...and about achievement data for different schools.”

*—Mom, Wright Middle Prep School
(Nashville, TN), Spring 2016*

ABOUT THE HQAP : HIGH-QUALITY ASSESSMENT PROJECT

Between 2013-2017, the High-Quality Assessment Project—a pooled grantmaking fund created by the Bill & Melinda Gates, Hewlett, Lumina and Schusterman foundations as well as the Helmsley Trust—provided resources to policymakers and advocates around the country to support them in making the transition to higher quality state tests. Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors and Education First managed the fund.

Using grants and technical assistance from HQAP, these state and national leaders engaged in reviews of state test quality, developed materials for better engaging parents and teachers, and commissioned research into public opinion about the importance of testing. Across the country and more deeply in 17 states over HQAP’s four years, grantees educated state boards, legislators, governors and the media, and engaged parents as new tests were adopted and administered and score reports issued.

With the sunset of HQAP, Education First has been working to take stock of lessons learned from this initiative and to make sure the field continues to give access to the varied and helpful tools and information grantees created about test quality.

As part of this work, HQAP commissioned case studies from three grantees—the National Network of State Teachers of the Year, Partnership for Learning/Ready Washington and UnidosUS—to share their work influencing the debates about states tests and their advice for advocates and policymakers. Each of these organizations engaged their constituencies—parents, teachers and students—in different and innovative ways, and it’s worth thinking about how these efforts could be replicated in more states and communities.

Complementing these case studies, Education First has prepared a report summarizing the work of HQAP and lessons learned for continued advocacy on the quality and usability of state tests.

Finally, the Education First website now includes a permanent “best of” library of resources from many HQAP grantees, including rubrics for reviewing the quality of tests, communications tools and infographics to discourage “opting out” and model materials for engaging both parents and policymakers. The case studies and the Education First final can be found at this online resource as well.



Education First is a strategy and policy organization that helps policymakers design and accelerate policies and plans that help all young people succeed in college, careers and life.



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