

## **Cultivating Community Partnerships as ELL Advocates**

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### **ABSTRACT**

English Language Learners and their families inspired an Indianapolis charter school to examine their traditional family engagement strategies. The ELL teacher and the Community Outreach Coordinator, at this school, worked together to connect families and community partners. The goal of these partnerships was to create a sense of belonging, promote change and advocacy and make resources available for bicultural families in the school community. This practitioner piece shares the experience of one school on their quest to engage bicultural families authentically.

*Keywords: Community engagement, family engagement, community partners, Latinx, English Learners, advocacy, bicultural family engagement*

### **INTRODUCTION**

As educators who work directly with English Language Learners (ELL) it is our responsibility to learn from the students and their families and advocate for them authentically. As a middle school ELL teacher seeking effective ELL family engagement practices, it can feel overwhelming to ensure that all students meet academic targets while knowing there are other factors affecting ELL students' well-being. In order to engage families in a meaningful and

collaborative way it is essential to seek partnerships and supports. I was fortunate to experience multiple community partnerships that made engaging families feel more like creating lasting friendships and building bridges that crossed language and cultural barriers. One of these partnerships that I developed was with our school's Community Outreach Coordinator, Kate Voss.

Our school is a community-based charter school located in Indianapolis that nurtures academic excellence, social development, and civic responsibility. About 20% of our students are English Language Learners and there are an additional 5% who are considered Language Minority. This means that 25% of the students in our school have a native language other than English. In our school, at this time, all our English Learners come from Spanish speaking families.

School leaders have worked hard to educate our predominantly white middle class staff of the conditions that affect the behavior and academics of our students. We strive to foster a safe and caring environment that promotes self-regulation and healing from trauma. This includes professional development for staff, a social-emotional curriculum for students, on-site counselors that provide mental health services for students and their families, a resiliency team and a mediator. While we are proud to offer these services to the general student population, we know that many families in our ELL population have additional needs; including language services, legal advice, healthcare, learning about a new city and culture, and confronting racism and discrimination. To address these issues, we have developed community partnerships to provide resources and services specifically for our ELL families.

## **The Importance of Engaging Bicultural Families**

Bicultural family engagement is unique. It is commonplace to view bicultural families who do not fit the accepted expectations of family involvement as different or deficient. School efforts are frequently focused on changing the parents' behavior rather than the school's bias against them. While we know that family involvement can increase academic achievement, some educators and researchers feel that family engagement should also incorporate civic engagement to raise political consciousness and facilitate change on a wider scale (Olivos, Ochoa & Jimenez-Castellanos, 2011).

According to federal law, a school must provide information to parents in a language that they can understand (USD Department of Justice and US Department of Education, 2015). This means that ELL advocates serve as a bridge between bicultural parents, the school and community making their role in family engagement crucial to the success of their students.

### **A Sense of Belonging**

Part of our mission as a community-based school is to create a sense of belonging for staff, students and families. Through creating a sense of belonging we show that our families are valued and supported in order to provide a sense of ownership to our school community. We demonstrate this through the resources and services that we provide while developing trusting relationships and friendships with our students and their families. Kate Voss and I instantly formed a bond about our passion for the families that we work with. She pushed me and inspired me to continue to weave family engagement into my role as an ELL educator. For an ELL teacher who does not already have a Community Outreach Coordinator I suggest finding "your person". Locate someone in your school community who is passionate about connecting

bicultural families with resources and services. In our case, it has also been essential to have bilingual staff members on board to translate documents and interpret for meetings.

Our Community Outreach Coordinator had already solidified some powerful relationships with community partners. To support our families, we sought out a variety of community resources and programming that included the local universities and neighborhood community service centers. If you have not done so already, we encourage schools to establish partnerships with community organizations. We were so impressed to find that our community partners were just as passionate, and solution based as we were about building relationships bicultural families.

### **Assessing Needs, Facilitating Political Change, and Creating Awareness**

During the 2018 presidential election there was a lot of fear from our students and families surrounding the issue of immigration. Our first instinct was to seek out free legal advice for any parents who needed it. We held an event at our school with a lawyer who was ready to give free legal advice to families and explain legal rights. But, no one showed up. We ended up calling one family who had previously told me that they wanted to come. They arrived late and received some advice. We learned a valuable lesson here. We never consulted the parents on what they wanted or needed. We made assumptions that we knew what was best for them. In retrospect, we completely understand why they did not show up. Immigration status is an extremely sensitive and private issue.

Kate Voss approached city officials about our concerns around immigration issues that deeply impacted our families, specifically our undocumented population. It was decided at that meeting that city officials, including a police officer, would come and meet with our older

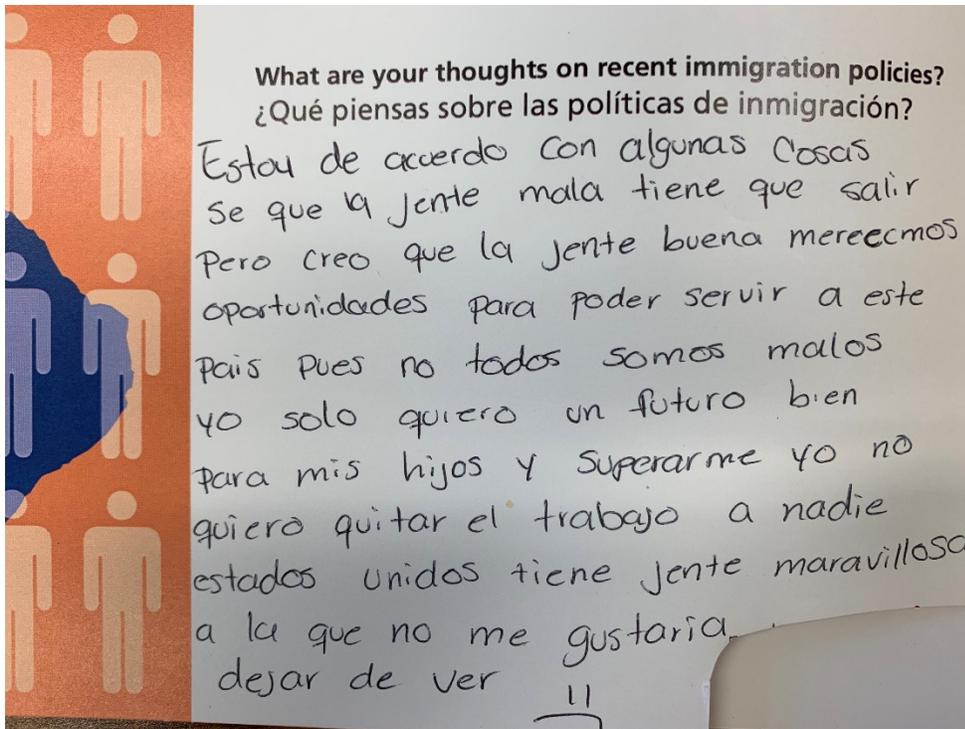
students to explain the difference between ICE and the local police department. We requested that the officer have a similar cultural background as our students. This police officer came dressed in full uniform, including a bullet proof vest and carrying a gun. When our students entered the room, they were terrified. We assured them that this was a safe place and that no harm would come to them. The officer was able to connect to our students' cultural background and explain that the intent of the local police department is to ensure safety and not enforce immigration law. He passed out bilingual documents explaining rights and what to do in case of a deportation emergency.

This experience pushed us to assess the needs of our families in a more authentic way. In partnership with the local university's design department we created two cards to capture their opinions concerning two questions:

*“How do you feel about increased police presence in your neighborhood?”*

*“What are your thoughts on recent immigration policies?”*

Cards were distributed at several school events. Families and students responded anonymously (Wolverton & Taugner, 2017, Figure 1).



*Figure 1. Example of question card and response (Response translation: “I agree with some things I know that bad people have to leave but I think good people deserve opportunities to be able to serve this country because not all of us are bad I just want a better future for my children and believe me I do not want to take jobs from anyone the united states has marvelous people who I do not want to stop seeing”).*

We enlisted the help of several middle school students to put each response from the cards on a brick image. Each image was pieced together to create one large wall. The students decided that the quotes should appear to be breaking through the wall. Our “wall” was displayed at our school’s annual art show for our school community to read (Figure 2).



*Figure 2.* Quotes from our “wall”

Our school community was moved by what they read on the “wall”. This inspired the need for more awareness about the struggles that immigrants face. We began anonymously collecting immigration stories from our students and their families. A professor from the English

department at a local university offered to compile and publish a book of the stories that we collected in both English and Spanish. The university also offered \$25 gift cards and a copy of the finished book to any family that contributed a story. This meant that Kate and I did know where the stories were coming from because we were responsible for distributing the gift cards. Our families' privacy was very important to both of us. We asked the university to take out any mention of our school name to protect our families (University of Indianapolis, 2018, Figure 3).



## Mama, Why Are You Packing?

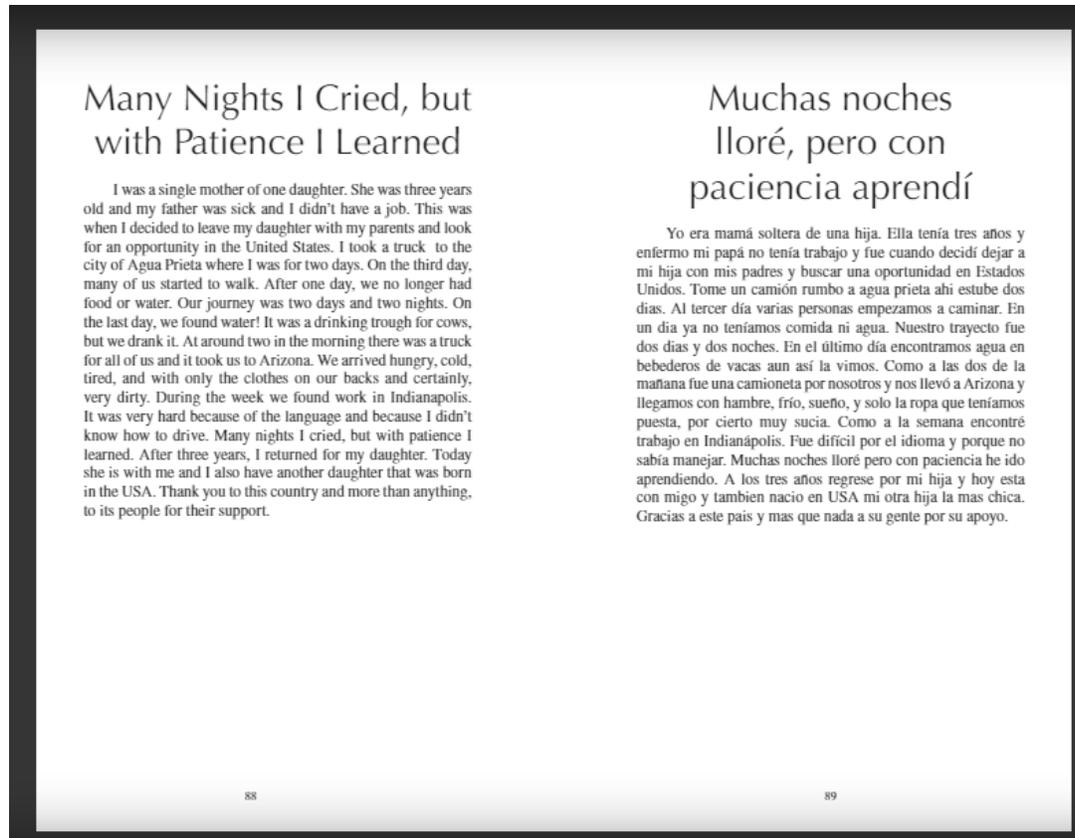
"Mama, why are you packing?" I asked. "We are going somewhere," she responded. I started thinking about all of the places where I wanted to go. I asked my aunt if she knew where we were going. She said that she did, but it was a secret. Early the next morning, my mom woke my brother and I up to go to the airport. "Ma, are we going to fly on an airplane? I've never been on one before," I said. When we started flying I was afraid that the plane would fall from the sky. We landed in Tijuana and they locked us in a room for four days with about fifteen people. We never knew what time it was because we couldn't see outside, and we didn't have our phones. They brought us food two or three times a day. One morning they brought us a van to take us to the border so that we could cross into California. We went to the airport and took another plane to Chicago. My aunt was waiting with her car in Chicago and she brought us to Indianapolis. I felt alone because everyone was speaking English and I missed my family. But, I remembered that my uncle told me to work hard at learning a new language so that I can have a better future.

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## ¿Mamá, porque estas empacando?

"¿Mamá, porque estas empacando?" le pregunté. "Vamos a ir a un lado" me respondió. Me quede pensando en todos los lugares que yo quisiera ir. Pregunte a mi tía que si sabía dónde íbamos a ir. Dijo que sí, pero fue un secreto. Entonces muy temprano en la siguiente mañana mi mamá levanto mi hermano y yo para ir hacia el aeropuerto. "Ma, vamos a ir en un avión, nunca me he subido en uno" le dije. Cuando subí el avión y empezó a volar en el aire yo tuve miedo de que el avión iba a caer del cielo. Bajamos en Tijuana y nos encerraron en un cuarto por cuatro días con casi quince personas. Nunca supimos la hora que era porque no pudimos ver afuera y no tenemos celular. Nos trajeron comida dos o tres veces al día. Un día por la mañana nos llevaron a una camioneta para poder cruzar la frontera y entrar a California. Fuimos al aeropuerto y subimos un avión para Chicago. Mi tía nos esperó con su camioneta en Chicago y nos trajo a Indianápolis. Sentí solo porque todos estaban hablando en inglés y extrañé a mi familia. Pero recordé algo que dijo mi tío de echarle ganas en aprender un nuevo idioma para tener un mejor futuro.

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*Figure 3. “We Are Your Neighbors: The Untold Stories of Latino Immigrants in Indianapolis”*

In a meeting with the university we brainstormed ways to keep the momentum going after the project had been completed in order to continue bringing awareness to our community about the struggles that our immigrant neighbors face. Several important ideas sprang from this meeting. First, the university had a connection to our local Telemundo affiliate. This affiliate created short video announcements for our book and read excerpts that were broadcasted to the homes of our community (Telemundo, 2018, Figure 4).



*Figure 4.* YouTube Telemundo Clip: “Somos Sus Vecinos”

Our students came to school eager to share that they had heard their stories read on the local news station. Our parents felt valued and appreciated that their stories were being honored in this way.

Next, the professor from the university, in partnership with the local Telemundo affiliate, held a read-aloud on campus of the stories from the book. This event was a bilingual event and all members of the community were invited to attend. Some families, whose stories were included in the book, attended the read-aloud and mentioned being moved to tears that their stories were being shared with a larger audience.

Another project that resulted from this meeting was a collaboration with the local coffee shop (Wolverton, 2018, Figure 5). Another university professor was moved to create an art exhibit after reading the book. The art piece she created was a large chain link fence with the words taken from the Statue of Liberty, “Give us your tired and poor” wrapped around the fence

like barbed wire. The exhibit also included excerpts from the book in Spanish and English along with yield signs depicting children being pulled from their families. This art installation took place during the month of November exhibiting art that was created for the purpose of bringing awareness and inspiring activism as it relates to immigration. At this installation our “wall” was on display as well as our book.

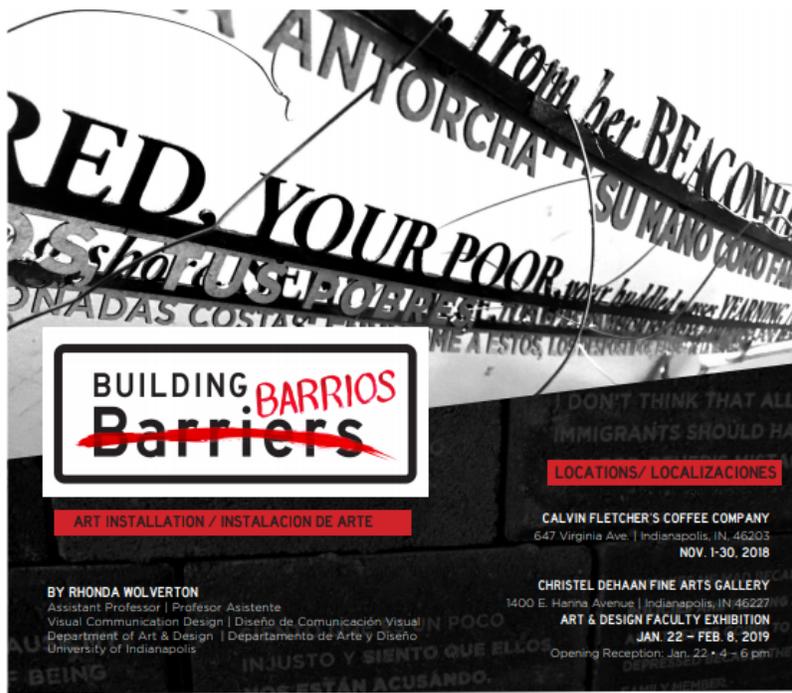


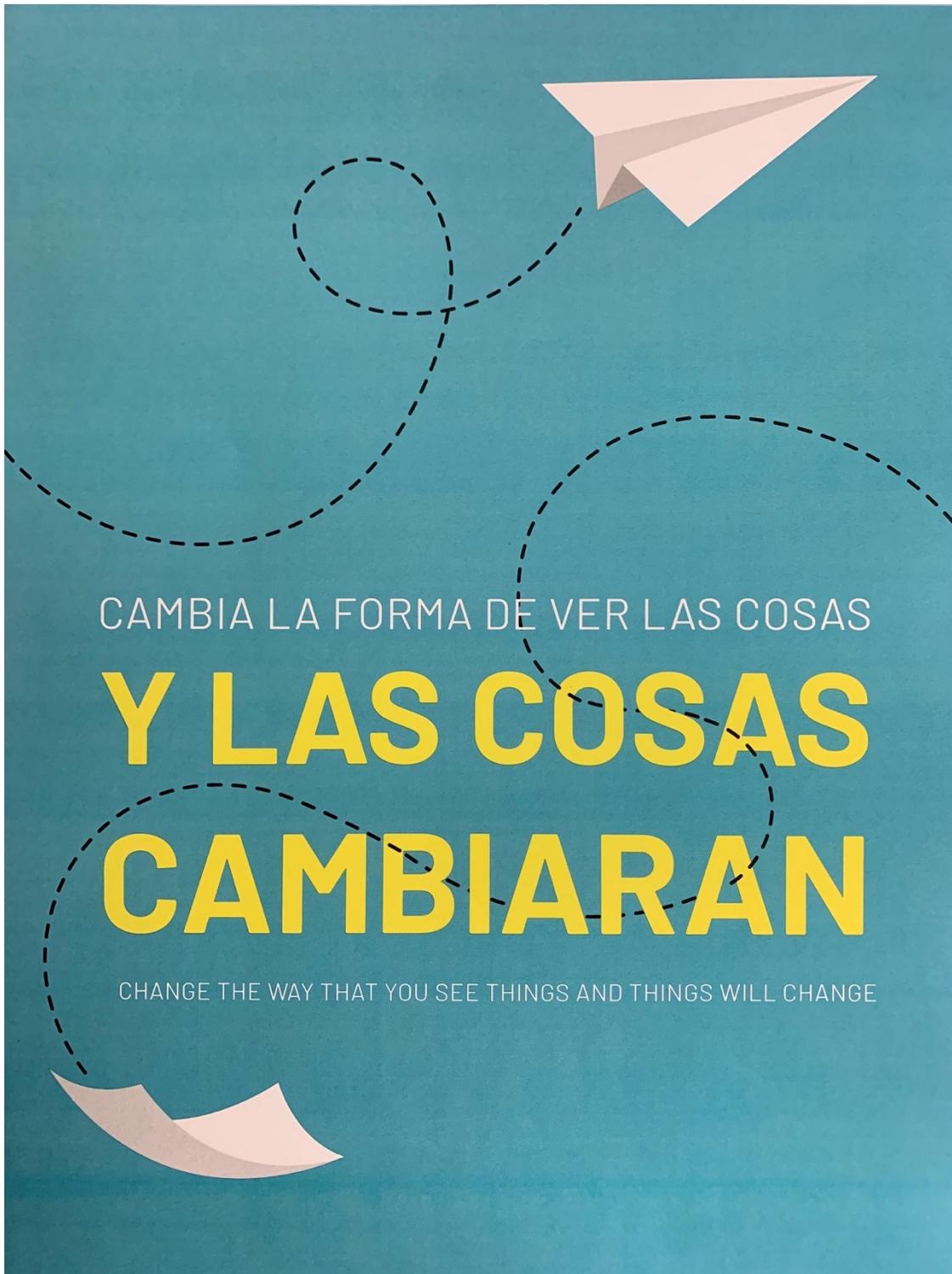
Figure 5. Flyer for “Building Barrios” Art Exhibit

Finally, during our meeting we created a “Future Goals” list of ongoing and future projects that we would like to accomplish. This list included continuing to collect immigration stories for future publications, reviving Hispanic Day at the State Fair, developing resources and providing aid for local immigrants and creating continuous engagement opportunities for families at our school.

We received a lot of positive feedback from families about our book, but we realized that we also needed to focus on fostering a sense of belonging on a smaller scale in the school. Our local community service center offered small grants to teachers that wanted to collaborate with their organization to provide resources and educational opportunities to our students and families. I applied for a grant to purchase food and drinks for an ELL Family Night. I was awarded the grant with the expectation that the community service center could present at the meeting. They wanted to ensure that families were aware of the opportunities that were available to them through their organization (i.e.; resume assistance, English language classes, utility assistance, job hunting).

Our ELL Family Night also included information on how students qualified for English language learning services, the state language assessment and score reports, individualized learning plans, parent rights and strategies to avoid “summer slide”.

Finally, we presented another project that was achieved through collaboration with the graphic arts department at the local university. My newcomer students submitted inspirational quotes in Spanish. The students worked to translate these quotes into English as part of an assignment. These bilingual quotes were submitted to the design team who created posters and buttons with colorful graphics. Each parent that attended the ELL Family Night received the button of their choice. The posters were framed and are on display throughout the halls of our school (Wolverton & Taugner, 2019, Figure 6).



*Figure 6.* Inspirational Quote Poster in English and Spanish

By providing food and childcare, our families felt supported and welcomed to attend our meeting. We asked that they fill out a reflection survey after the meeting in order to better understand their needs and to give them an opportunity to voice their opinions (Galicia, 2019, Figure 7).

**ENL FAMILY NIGHT SURVEY ANSWERS  
MAY 17, 2019**

**What are some examples of positive experiences here at SENSE?**

- My experience of SENSE is everything that my child tells me from day to day; everything he has learned and that his teachers are always on top of his academics. He has learned so much!
- My daughter's teachers have voluntarily helped me in moments of extreme difficulty. This is a special school.
- Extra tutoring and help with English as a Second Language
- My family has been at this school for a long time and it's great!
- SENSE offers tutoring and help with learning English.
- I love being able to communicate with my child's teacher through Class Dojo and through text messages.
- I love the great efforts of all of the employees at SENSE.
- Personalized and immediate attention.

**What are some challenges?**

- Helping my child at home with schoolwork.
- That there would be more bilingual support so that the students learn Spanish.
- To be able to participate in the school when I can.
- Communication with the staff that speaks English.
- To be certain that my daughter feels her best at school.
- My challenge is that SENSE prepares my child well and leaves victoriously from here so that he can see the world from a different perspective.
- Communicating with parents who speak another language.
- To make sure my child finishes their studies.

**What are some resources that you need to support your family (housing, immigration, food, etc.)**

- immigration
- food and immigration
- housing
- immigration
- have more meetings at school
- immigration

**Do you feel comfortable at SENSE? What can we do to make your family feel more comfortable?**

- More meetings like this at this same time.
- A thousand thanks!
- For me, everything is very good and I really like the environment here.
- Yes, thank you!
- Yes, I feel great and my daughter, too.
- Everything is very good, thank you!
- Yes, we feel very comfortable. More meetings with the theme of supporting the Latino community (in Spanish, like the meeting today).
- Yes. We need more clubs like: playing violin, piano, dance. And, we need more communication with the teachers. We need to have more meetings like this in Spanish.

**Would you like to attend more meetings like this in the future?**

- Everyone who filled out a survey answered: YES

*Figure 7. Parent Responses to Reflection Survey*

### **Next Steps**

The relationships that have formed as a result of our parent engagement efforts are lasting and fruitful. We have solidified meaningful relationships with our community in a way that promises future involvement. Most importantly the relationships with our families have blossomed in a way that has fostered trust and given them an opportunity to be active in the school. We have laid the foundation for a sense of belonging and community for our bicultural families. Our work is far from over. According to scholars and researchers, the crux of parent engagement is “having underrepresented parents become vigilant and active participants in school-related matters such as school-policy, decision making, and accountability (Olivos, Ochoa & Jimenez-Castellanos, 2011).

We have plans to continue our parent engagement with family nights to continue to build connections with our families and address needs. We are continuing to gather stories for a future book project. The local university will work with us again to create an art exhibit from the contents of the new book. Our school plans on providing cultural competency professional development for the entire staff. The ELL team has purchased a lending library that will provide bilingual books for students and families to foster a life-long love of reading.

We are excited to see where this work will lead us. We feel hopeful that the fruits of our labor will lead to our students’ academic success and overall well-being.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

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**Kate Voss** has been a Community Outreach Coordinator at an Indianapolis Charter School for 8 years. She been doing community outreach for 14 years. She received a BA in Graphic Design, Masters of Journalism and a Masters of Fine Arts from Indiana University in Bloomington, IN.

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