

A PLACE TO **LEARN, EXPLORE AND GROW**

LATINO EDUCATION INSTITUTE

**MARCH 2020**

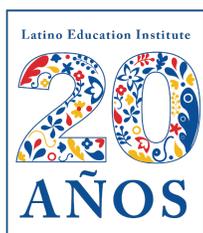
# VOICES OF LATINO PARENTS AND YOUTH OF WORCESTER PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Recommendation Summary for the Student  
Opportunity Act from the Latino Education  
Institute at Worcester State University

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**20 YEARS,  
20 STORIES.**



WORCESTER STATE UNIVERSITY  
LATINO EDUCATION INSTITUTE



# INTRODUCTION

The Latino Education Institute (LEI) **whose mission is to improve the academic achievement and well-being of Latino students (grades K-16) and their families from the city of Worcester** ran community conversations on 5 different days that included parents, students, and community members. Material was available in both Spanish and English and in some of the sessions, the meeting was conducted in Spanish with translation in English. Through this engagement and outreach the LEI gathered a unique set of voices that we believe are important to include in the conversation around the new funding stream from the state to Worcester Public Schools through the Student Opportunity Act.

Latinx voices are critical to this discussion. Consider that Latinx students comprise 43% of all students, yet Latinx's comprise only 4% of principals, 7.4% of teachers, 11.1% of guidance counselors, and 11.5% of school psychologists. Additionally, Latinx students are over-represented in school discipline measures. In 2019, just over 1,000 Latinx students received some form of school discipline compared to 336 White students and 304 African American Students. Moreover, the overwhelming majority of infractions in WPS are for non-violent and non-drug related incidents, a category that is subjective and more prone to unconscious bias. Across all leading indicators including third-grade reading proficiency, eighth-grade math proficiency, high school students graduating on time, annual drop-out rates for English learners, and young adults enrolled in postsecondary education -- outcomes for Latinx students lag far behind other subgroups and in many instances behind those of Latinx students in other parts of the state.

The growing Latinx community is a force in the cultural, economic, and political realms of the City. The SOA provides an important opportunity to ensure equity, excellence and success for all communities. Worcester's vitality and prosperity is indeed dependent on the extent to which all populations are prepared to contribute to civic life.

## MAIN FINDINGS

The common set of funding priorities voiced by Latinx families include:

Increased school time and more programming options; Smaller classrooms and more one-on-one instruction; Expanding dual language learning opportunities through increased staff and better learning options; More emphasis on social and emotional services and school counselors and less on policing; More access to technology; Better college and career readiness/application services; ESL for adult learners; Financial literacy; Hiring teachers and administrators that better reflect the student body; More and regular reporting to the community on the state of schools and greater transparency; and Culturally responsive teaching and materials.



## MEETINGS

Meetings were held at Worcester State University and in the community over the course of four weeks. In total, over 200 students and parents attended the gatherings. Each meeting began with a brief overview of what the SOA was, how funding public schools worked, and how the SOA hoped to address some of the inequities in the way schools are funded. Participants were encouraged to learn more about the Act and make sure they encouraged others, particularly parents and community members that represent the diversity of Worcester to learn about the act and attend any of the upcoming public sessions organized by the Worcester School Committee.

The forums followed a conversation about how these funds could help support the success of students. An effort was made to not influence participants' ideas so as not to limit their dreams and wishes.

Jan 25, 2020:

Level Up 2020 Youth Summit at Worcester State University

Feb 5, 2020:

Family Engagement session at Worcester State University

Feb 11, 2020

Parents, Worcester Community Connections

High School Students, Youth Civics Union Program at Worcester State University

Feb 19, 2020

Parent, Students and Community at Eager Auditorium at Worcester State University

Feb 26, 2020

Parents at Edward Kennedy Community Health Center

## RECOMMENDATIONS: THEMES FROM PARTICIPANTS

Participants in our meetings saw the mandate of the SOA in very broad terms. They saw this as an opportunity to fund very particular programs (such as Special Education and/or increased after school programs—both of which were mentioned numerous times), but equally important, participants saw an opportunity to address some of the broader structural issues within the WPS itself. This was reflected in a number of the themes around justice and policing, communication and transparency, and inclusion and equity. A common theme that ran through many of the meetings was that parents wanted a place that was welcoming for themselves and their children. They were looking for a real community school in the sense that the school engaged with them and their children as well as included them in the school decision-making process.



There was broad agreement between the issues raised by parents, students and community members. They are grouped together and where interesting differences exist they are noted in the following discussion. There were three main themes that participants spoke to:

1. Programmatic Enrichment
2. Student Support Services
3. A Culture of Inclusion

## 1. PROGRAM ENRICHMENT

Parents saw the SOA as an opportunity for increasing funding beyond the core curriculum in a number of ways.

### A: INCREASED SCHOOL TIME AND MORE PROGRAMING OPTIONS

Many wanted to see a school program that was fully funded in the areas of arts, drama, music, and sports. They wanted this same enriched program to extend to after school as well, saying they wanted a “fully funded” after school program that was staffed by a diverse staff. Some wanted increased experiential learning and more funds for field trips. Others hoped for summer classes. Numerous parents wanted civics courses added and financial literacy and life skills available for students (particularly for those who were getting ready to go to college). Many of the students wanted to see more money go to sports, which was something that did not come up with parents as much.

### B: INCREASED TIME WITH TEACHERS

Along with enriching the curriculum, many parents talked about classroom resources that gave students more access to quality time with teachers. They saw this through decreasing classroom size, especially for special education. They also had ideas that included increasing student teachers and mentors in the classroom, especially from communities represented by the student body. These suggestions were often included in comments about an enriched classroom overall—mentioned above—such as one parent who hoped for, “Smaller classrooms, richer curriculum, serious ongoing professional development, more technical education, drama, arts, shop and gym.”

### C: ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING SUPPORT AND BILINGUAL EDUCATION

Many of our Spanish speaking parents wanted a broader set of resources for their children. Many parents talked about how they like the bilingual programming at schools and they asked for “more bilingual teachers.” They also wished there was more bilingual education for all students, so that there was not just the opportunity for Spanish language speakers to learn English, but opportunity for Spanish to be taught and learned broadly in a truly immerse school setting. Numerous Spanish-



language parents wrote that they wished there were ESL courses available for parents at the school so that they could help their children with their schoolwork. One parent expressed their frustration at the disconnect between their children and themselves because of the language barrier.

## 2. STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES

Participants all noted the need for more student support services and focused on two main areas: support to students (and families) in order to help students get to college and increased social and emotional resources.

### A: SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL SERVICES

Parents noted that school is stressful, one said that students needed “less school work and less stress,” another talked about needing “adjustment counselors”. Many spoke about the need for more wrap around services that might include free breakfast for all. A few wanted more training available to teachers and guidance counselors so they can assist students. A number of parents tied the lack of counselors to the increase in policing at the schools and wanted that balance to go back to counselors.

### B: RESOURCES FOR COLLEGE

One thing both parents and students wanted was more access to technology and training on it. They often mentioned it within the context of going to college. They also talked about having more books available, and as was already mentioned in the programmatic section, they wanted financial literacy courses so students could understand what the costs of attending college were and how to prepare for them. They also asked about more orientation about a college path that could be opened to parents as well. A number of students talked about the need for more college counselors at the schools.

A common theme that came up in many of the conversations in relation to college, and which we will spend some time talking about in the next section, is communication. Parents wanted options about college communicated to students. Participants wanted teachers and administrators to listen to students about what makes them interested in learning. They also asked for teachers and administrators to recognize that not all students may want to go to college, but it is still important to be supportive of the multiple paths students may take.

## 3. A NEW CULTURE OF INCLUSION

One of the more interesting results that came from our community discussions is the broad way in which participants viewed the mandate of the SOA when it came to questions of equity. It wasn't just an opportunity to address historic inequities in funding, but also to address long-felt discrepancies between



schools (teachers and administrators) and parents and students, particularly for communities that have been underserved by underfunded schools. The way this came out in their conversations was around the importance of creating a culture of inclusion in schools and increasing the transparency and communication between WPS and the community.

## **A: CULTURALLY RELEVANT TEACHING AND TRAININGS**

Participants in a meeting on February 19th were very open about the need to have broader work on “truth telling...about racism” and a “decolonized classroom”. They wanted more culturally relevant material available. And many noted the need for cultural competency and diversity training for teachers and administrators.

## **B: HIRING MORE DIVERSE TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATION**

People spoke regularly and often about the need for more diversity in WPS from teachers to administration and the need to retain people of color. One said “hire more teachers of color, diversify the administration, school committee, and city hall.” Another participant spoke about the need for more role models for “our young men of color...to interact with men that look like and care about them”. A number of community members wanted training for teachers around culturally responsive communication.

## **C: INCLUSIVE COMMUNICATION AND A SENSE OF BELONGING**

A broader issue that came up within each of the prior themes was the desire to see more regular communication from WPS, and for parents to be included in the decision-making process. Parents asked for more engagement, another suggested, “Quarterly reports to the public that are advertised”, and many called for greater transparency over all.

Parents and students wanted to know they belonged to a community. This is consistent with much research that shows the importance of community for Latinx families. One parent said, “Students need to be in schools where they feel they belong and their voices are valued” and another talked about the need for “giving students a say in their schooling.” A school that values its students and parents is not just beneficial for Latinx students, but is a key ingredient in the success of other frontline groups (including low-income students and students of color more broadly).

A culture of inclusion is not only a vague set of ideas, it can and should be a set of specific practices and broader institutional changes. And if we look to parents’ comments, we see many practical suggestions. Changing the way schools communicate with parents and making that a priority is one such example. But schools also reflect some of the practices of the district itself. So, if communication is broken between the district and the schools, parents and students will feel that disconnect at the ground level.

