



 **LATINXED**

#**SOMOSNC**

Findings and Recommendations to
Support Latinx Education in North Carolina

FEBRUARY 2023

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ABOUT LATINXED

LatinxED is an educational initiative in North Carolina investing in Latinx leadership to expand educational equity in North Carolina.

LatinxED envisions culturally sustaining education systems that recognize, meet, and honor the diverse needs of Latinx students and immigrant families. LatinxED works to foster a new generation of changemakers in North Carolina's public schools, colleges, and beyond.

For more information, please visit latinxed.org.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Executive Summary

North Carolina's public education system is at a crossroads. Currently, lawmakers continue a decades-long debate over meeting their constitutional obligations of funding public education in the state. Other education stakeholders, led by MyFutureNC, are working towards a north star that will uplift the state's workforce and fulfill its bright economic future: ensuring that two million North Carolinians have a postsecondary degree by 2030. At the same time, the faces of students and families in North Carolina's schools continue to diversify in racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic origin, with Latinx students and families leading that change. These families face significant equity gaps in educational outcomes, from kindergarten readiness to postsecondary attainment. Now more than ever, the Latinx community is seeking to be heard, included, and a part of education efforts that will expand opportunities for their families.

Seeing pockets of opportunity across the state to lift up the voices of the community, LatinxEducation ventured into a statewide listening tour, #SomosNC, to listen and learn from folks closest to educational pathways Latinx families are currently navigating. After a year and a half of engaging with over two-hundred individuals about their experiences, #SomosNC identified major challenges facing Latinx students and families, innovative solutions that are sowing seeds of change, and recommendations to local and state stakeholders on advancing Latinx student success.

WHY DO WE USE "LATINX"?

Latinx is a gender-inclusive alternative to Latina or Latino, which describes one's heritage or roots belonging in Latin America. Globally, folks are choosing to use the term to resist historical exclusions by way of race, gender, and sexuality through the symbolic "X". LatinxEducation uses the term in alignment with our values as an inclusive organization, and uses Latina/e/o interchangeably. LatinxEducation honors how folks choose to describe themselves, and their identity.





Executive Summary

The following report details LatinxEd’s findings from the listening tour, including:

- Chronic underinvestment in bicultural and bilingual workforce in education
- Cultural isolation and mental health challenges facing Latinx families
- Severe lack of educator diversity in schools
- Limited opportunities and advising support for postsecondary education

Lastly, this report aims to provide a roadmap of potential future actions for education stakeholders across North Carolina, including:

- Local recommendations to build support for Newcomers Schools, more inclusive learning environments, teacher diversity in public schools, and innovative programs to invest in local community assets to provide postsecondary resources;
- State policy recommendations to invest in greater language access in schools, tuition equity for immigrant students, and drivers' licenses for immigrants to mitigate transportation challenges for students;
- Other statewide recommendations to ensure all education stakeholders—including the Governor's office and philanthropic institutions—have skin in the game and actively working towards advancing educational outcomes for Latinx students across the state.

The #SomosNC Listening Tour focused on bringing community and education leaders to the table to shine a light on the challenges and opportunities facing Latinx students and families. While the team at LatinxEd listened, it was also inspired. This report should serve as a learning opportunity and a call to action to embrace the urgency of this moment. The changed demographics of the state *can* be destiny and lead NC towards a brighter future—but only with the proper time, energy, and resources invested into this issue. LatinxEd looks forward to continuing this dialogue with committed partners and communities to ensure North Carolina expands educational opportunities for *every* child across the state.



Introduction

A [2022 local news report](#) highlighted a reality for North Carolina that has held true for over five decades: “...the state’s **Latino** community has been growing consistently and now represents a population of more than **1 million people**, according to the census.”

Despite this consistent growth in the Latinx community, few education organizations, school boards and leaders, colleges and universities, philanthropists, or statewide political leaders have moved beyond a conversation that sounds something like this: “Demographics are shifting. What should we do?”

Hispanic/Latinx NC Residents in 2020

1,118,596

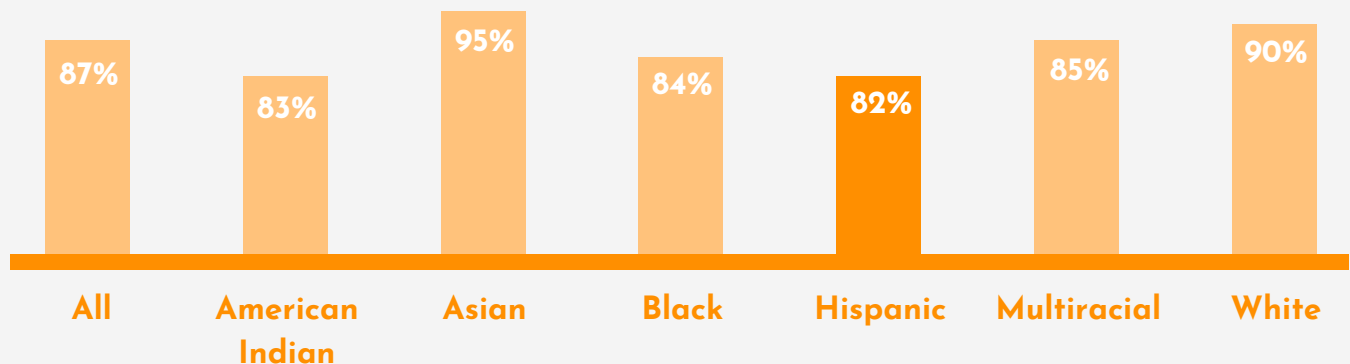
Source: U.S. Census Bureau

North Carolina, it’s time to face it: demographics have shifted. And the conversation needs to change from admiring the challenge to crafting solutions for a new reality in our educational institutions and communities.

Latinx students less likely to complete high school on time

4-year cohort graduation rate, by race/ethnicity, 2017-18 entering NC 9th graders.

Source: NC DPI, Data analysis courtesy of Carolina Demography





Introduction

Here’s the reality: in North Carolina, Latinx students make up a growing part of the student population and are almost [100 percent of public school enrollment growth since 2000](#). Nonetheless, equity gaps persist across the education continuum: Latinx students are less likely to complete high school on time and are the most likely to identify as a first-generation college student in NC.

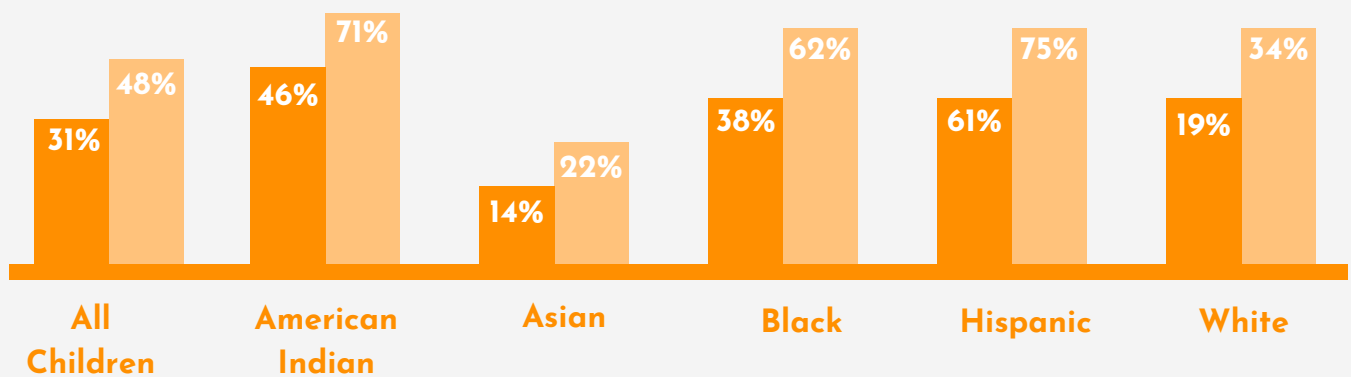
What’s more, Latinx students are rarely a focus of educational equity conversations; indeed, the unique barriers to opportunity facing Latinx families in North Carolina go largely undiscussed at decision-making tables when planning local and state investments and policy-making. There are persistent gaps in the field of education that prevent these strategic planning processes from being truly representative of the changing face of education in this state – specifically, a lack of representation of Latinx educators, non-profit, community leaders, students, and caregivers at the decision-making table. Across [the state's 78 rural counties](#), these barriers and gaps run deeper still.

Majority Latinx children would be first-gen college students

Parental attainment for NC children in households, 2019.

Source: American Community Survey, IPUMS-USA, data analysis courtesy of Carolina Demography

■ High School or less
■ No Postsecondary Degree



Over the last two years, LatinxEducation ventured out to begin a new conversation. One that honors that those closest to the problem are closest to the solution.

The #SomosNC Listening Tour was born as an opportunity for the Latinx community to proudly stand up and say, “We represent NC, too—and this is what we need for our students to succeed.”



Introduction

This listening tour consisted of virtual roundtable discussions, interviews, and in-person visits throughout the state. LatinxEd staff spoke with educators, school leaders, community leaders and members, caregivers, school district representatives, college administrators, leaders and staff, and students. As one participant was quick to point out during the tour: “I don’t think the answers are difficult to find or out of reach. The people who have been doing this labor, caring for and supporting our Latinx community, have been worrying about their children for generations. They have been telling us the answers, we just have to listen.”

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These conversations centered the voices of those directly impacted by educational inequities and those actively working towards expanding educational opportunities for Latinx immigrant families in North Carolina. The ultimate hope is that these conversations can provide insight into how schools and communities can be better equipped to improve Latinx student success.



Methodology of the #SomosNC Listening Tour

The #SomosNC Listening Tour consisted of roundtable discussions, interviews, and in-person visits within each of North Carolina’s eight [prosperity zones](#): North Central, Northeast, Northwest, Piedmont Triad, South Central, Southeast, Southwest, and Western. The tour engaged students, caregivers, community members, educators, school leaders, school district representatives, and college administrators. High-level questions guided each conversation around three key areas: challenges, opportunities, and actions.

Through these conversations, LatinxEducation endeavored to:



IDENTIFY

Identify barriers and opportunities to high-quality education for every Latinx student in North Carolina



LEARN

Learn about promising programs and practices from educators and leaders who support Latinx families



ENGAGE

Engage with local organizations, educators, and families to promote collaboration and advocate for education equity

Conversations were recorded and transcribed. While most conversations were conducted in English, a number were conducted in Spanish and some included both Spanish and English. Preliminary themes were attained through a thematic analysis conducted by bilingual, biliterate data reviewers. Discussions, interviews, and in-person visits were facilitated by LatinxEducation staff. On occasion, LatinxEducation partnered with organizations or institutions within a prosperity zone, including: 30th Alliance, Blue Ridge Community College, Catawba Valley Community College, Central Carolina Community College, Durham Technical Community College, El Vínculo Hispano, OpenDoors of Asheville, Pitt Community College, UNC Greensboro, and the YWCA Latino Family Center in High Point.

#SOMOSNC BY THE NUMBERS AND PARTICIPANTS

10

IN-PERSON STOPS

34

STUDENTS

18

VIRTUAL
ROUNDTABLES

191

COMMUNITY
LEADERS

51

COMMUNITY LEADER
INTERVIEWS

51

CAREGIVERS

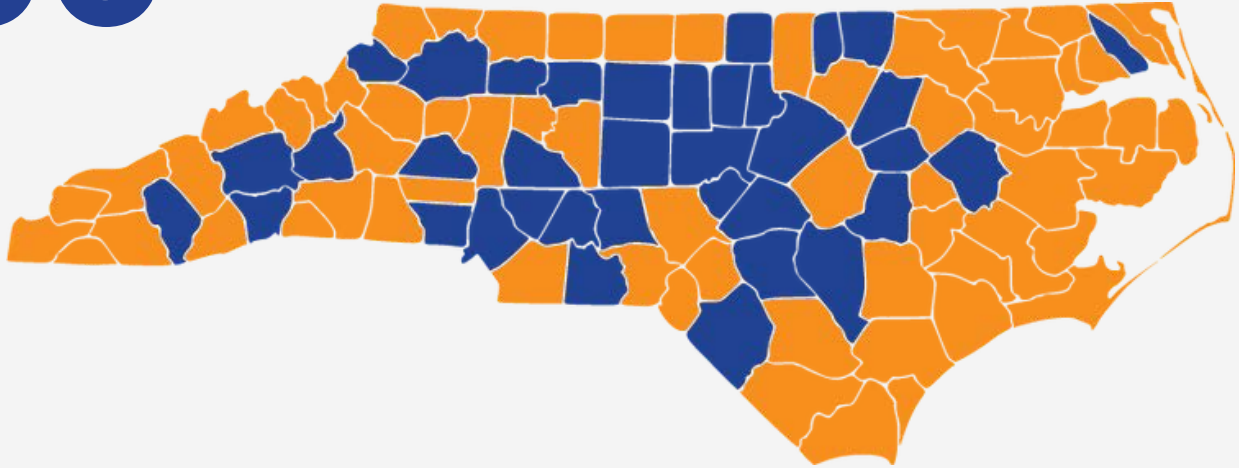
250

TOTAL PARTICIPANTS



#SOMOSNC County Participants

36 NC COUNTIES REACHED



MAJOR THEMES

The following report centers around four major themes, listed in the table below. What follows within each section includes an overview of the challenges identified throughout the listening tour, strategies to support Latinx students and families, and the dreams shared by the #SomosNC participants for the future of Latinx education in North Carolina.

**Sin Semillas: Chronic Disinvestment
in Latinx Education**

**En el Margen: Cultural and Social
Isolation in Schools**

**Ausente: The Absence of Latinx
Educators and Leaders**

**Puertas Cerradas: Barriers to
Postsecondary Opportunities**



THE CHALLENGE

In 1990, Latinx students accounted for [less than one percent](#) of North Carolina's public schools. Today, Latinx students comprise over [eighteen percent](#) of the student population in North Carolina's K-12 public education system. However, despite this reality in North Carolina's public schools, there was strong agreement throughout this listening tour that funding and other resources have not grown equitably to support this student population.

**Before you serve anybody, you have to know who they are.
And you're not only serving that student who walks through
the door - you're serving their family and community.**

One of the primary themes that arose from conversations with participants was the impact of chronic disinvestment on outcomes for Latinx students. As one participant from Winston-Salem said, "I don't think that our school systems are equipped with the bilingual infrastructure and the cultural competency needed to address the needs of Hispanic students as they're even entering the school system." Indeed, this sentiment was repeated across the state by students, caregivers, and educators alike on issues such as existing gaps in knowledge and resources for Latinx students, a deficit in language immersion and [English Learner \(EL\)/Multilingual Learner \(ML\)](#) programming and supports, and the topic of parent and family education and engagement.

To be clear, this chronic disinvestment isn't only the perception of tour participants; funding for education continues to be a challenge across the state and nation, impacting all learners. Compared to other states, North Carolina faces additional equity and distribution challenges as it recently ranked 48th out of the 50 states and D.C. for per-pupil funding level, according to the [Education Law Center's 2022 report on K-12 public school funding](#). This report also ranked North Carolina lowest for the percentage of GDP allocated to fund public education, with 2.32 percent. In fact, this reality has been the center of a decades-old education case, [Leandro vs. the State of North Carolina](#), where several judges have found that the state has not met its constitutional duty to fund public education in our state.



Sin Semillas: Chronic Disinvestment in Latinx Education

Ultimately, the undervaluing and underinvestment in bicultural/bilingual representation in the education workforce and the lack of vision and prioritization by local and state leadership results in a lack of culturally responsive and equitable educational experiences for Latinx families.

BUILDING THE VILLAGE: FINDING SUPPORT FOR IMMIGRANT FAMILIES DESPITE CHRONIC UNDERINVESTMENTS

Positive relationships between children, their families, and educators help children feel supported, and families feel prepared to help their children adjust to school environments and expectations. Participants acknowledged this reality and the fact that language access and cultural competency play a crucial role in building these relationships in and out of the classroom. One parent commented, “It would be ideal to have someone... a communication link for Latino parents, to keep everyone aware of what happens at school.” Indeed, this was one of the most repeated sentiments throughout the tour: “We can dream big about having someone in every institution to communicate with Latino parents; that way, everyone can access the same information.”

Specifically, caregivers expressed feeling dismissed by school personnel and having limited lines of communication with their children's schools due to the lack of multilingual resources, including:

- Interpreters, translators, and bilingual school support staff;
- Multilingual signage in schools and digital communication to families; and
- Spanish-speaking front desk staff or voicemail

Participants also cited concerns about funding and general support for Multilingual Learner/English Learner (ML/EL) education. As one Hickory-based educator pointed out, “Special Education programs are federally mandated; there are mandates that say for this many kids, you have to have this many teachers. With the ESL program, there is not.”

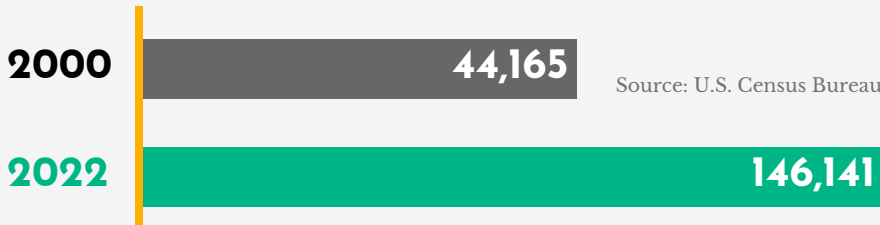




Sin Semillas: Chronic Disinvestment in Latinx Education

This educator continued to describe the scope of the challenge in her school: “When I first started here, there were three ESL teachers, and now there's just me. So for one hundred and thirty-two students, all taking four different classes. And so. Unfortunately, that is definitely affecting language acquisition and progress.”

Over **140,000** students identify as ELL in NC's Public Schools.



This example resonated with many on the tour; there is a reason for this growing concern in the Latinx community. In North Carolina, English language learners are one of the fastest-growing demographic groups in our schools, currently at over [146,000 students](#), and they face a number of challenges and barriers, including a [burgeoning achievement gap](#). A [2019 report by the NC Justice Center](#) reaffirms the sentiment expressed by participants that the needs of NC’s English Learning students are being drastically undermet and underfunded.

Even when best practices are incorporated into the public education system, such as dual language immersion programs—[the most effective form of foreign language instruction for K-12 students](#)—parents expressed frustration not knowing about these programs or their enrollment opportunities.



The Dream

Despite the challenges and frustrations expressed during these conversations, #SomosNC Tour participants had plenty of dreams on how to create better support for Latinx youth in North Carolina. The following dreams rose to the top as investments participants wish to see in their schools and communities:

- Intentionally recruit interpreters and translators, especially those from their local community.
- Invest in strengthening ML/EL learning opportunities, resources, and systemic support.
- Expand community education and access to dual language immersion programs for ML/ELs.
- Strengthen family engagement programs, including parent education programs to ensure awareness of the resources and learning opportunities available to students and to build relationships and establish a culture of trust.
- Implement supports that empower parent voice in schools to ensure the support and integration of Latinx caregivers within formal education settings so caregivers are positioned as partners in their children's education.

The Dream In Action

[THE SYLVIA MENDEZ NEWCOMERS SCHOOL](#)

[The Sylvia Mendez Newcomers School](#) is the first public school in North Carolina named after someone of Latinx descent, and it is the second newcomer school in Guilford County. [Newcomers schools](#) are critical to thoughtfully assisting students in developing their confidence, second language acquisition, and sense of self in their new country. These schools develop and invest in intentional, tailored support to welcome and prepare children who have recently immigrated to North Carolina.

[BURKE COUNTY SCHOOLS PARENT EDUCATOR PROGRAM](#)

Administrators at [BCPS](#) recognize the critical need to uplift bilingual parents as leaders in their schools. By honoring parents as experts in their kids' lives, they have cultivated a community of support (FUTURES: Families United to Resources and Education through the Schools) and equipped family support specialists to build bridges with the diverse local community. Parent educators serve as interpreters and guides to others on the American education system and their educational trajectories.



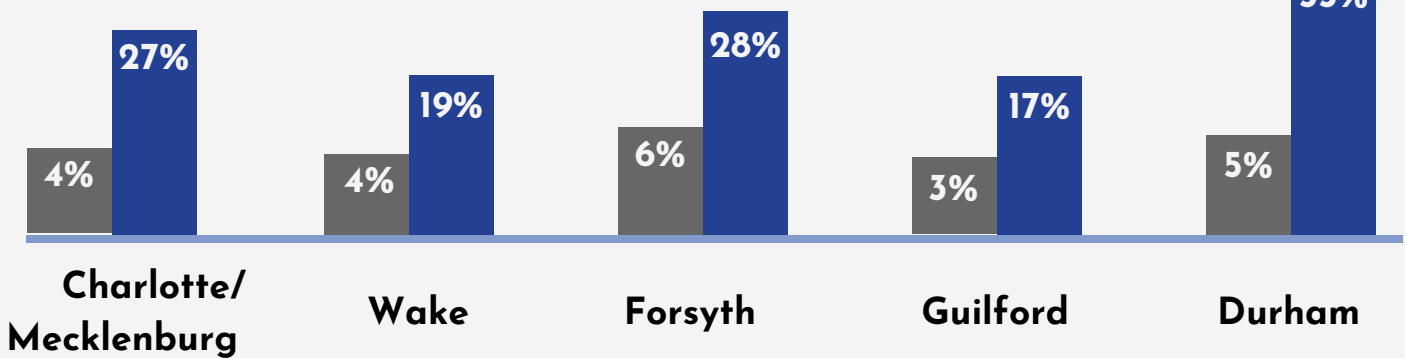
THE CHALLENGE

In the last twenty years, many school districts have seen the makeup of their student population change significantly (see figure below). What does this shift mean for school climate, culture, and support systems for a diverse student population? While school demographics may have shifted, policies and practices reflecting this new multicultural reality in schools have not kept up. And families have noticed. As one caregiver observed: “there's that missing part where you don't really feel understood culturally...” Indeed, caregivers and students across the state often cited this gap between their lived experience and their educational experience as one of their biggest challenges in schools.

TOP FIVE SCHOOL DISTRICTS - LATINX STUDENT POPULATION

■ 1999-2000 ■ 2020-2021

Source: NC Statistic Profile Year 2000 PG. 22
NC Stat Profile Year 2020



Regardless of whether the cultural indifference experienced by Latinx families is a feature or a bug of our current educational system, it detrimentally impacts how Latinx students and their families navigate academic and social spaces. As participants described it, indifference towards their lived experience and cultural diversity can quickly turn into a feeling of isolation from peers, educators, and the school community.

To further exacerbate this situation, pandemic isolation damaged school culture for everyone—especially for socioeconomically disadvantaged students and families—further eroding the mental and socioemotional health support for many students. From these conversations, it’s increasingly clear that the community is facing a mental health crisis exacerbated by cultural isolation—one where they feel alone, misunderstood, and with nowhere to turn to for help.



LA CULTURA CURA: COMBATING ISOLATION THROUGH COMMUNITY CULTURAL WEALTH

The cultural and social isolation students and families experience in schools contribute to a broader sentiment held by Latinx families: due to a history of exclusion from various public institutions, there is significant mistrust of these institutions within the Latinx community, including the education system. Students and parents noted feeling unwelcomed and uncomfortable approaching teachers and school leaders. As one student commented, “I wasn't sure how to express the things that I was seeing and experiencing. I didn't have a space where people allowed for those conversations to happen and gave me the opportunities to learn how to express that.”

At the same time, school leaders remarked having trouble engaging families and parents in their schools, often leading to deficit thinking: the notion that students of low income and/or a racial/ethnic marginalized background fail in school as a result of internal deficits within their families that disrupt the learning process. Many participating educators recognized this mindset being present in their own school, even stating that “I think we educators need educating...”





En el Margen: Cultural and Social Isolation in Schools

Furthermore, this isolation can harm students' mental and socio-emotional health as they navigate their educational journeys with a weakened social support system and hesitation to reach out for resources from counselors, social workers, and other professionals available in their schools and community. Even in cases where students do reach out for help at school, underinvestment in support staff at schools means limited to no access to bilingual, bicultural school-based mental health support that can create safe and supportive spaces for all students.

Despite this looming challenge in many schools, participants exercised their agency by taking matters into their own hands. As one community leader stated, “how often are people perceiving our community from a deficit and focused on what we're missing? Instead of leading the conversation with: what are the best parts of our community, and what do we bring to the table?”

What participants wanted to be sure everyone heard was exactly that: what they brought to the table. In one emotional testimony recalling their immigration history, a parent proudly stated: “...in our stories there is a lot of strength. I take what I have experienced, what I have been through, how I got here [to the United States] to give me the strength to continue with my goals, moving forward, working hard, and I believe that many, many of us do the same. No, we don't just share our story so that people say, well, look how he got there, right? But so they feel that behind my story there is strength and I have taken that and I have done things...I have not let what happened to me...define me and stop me.”





En el Margen: Cultural and Social Isolation in Schools

By focusing on their stories, cultural capital, and strengthening their own social networks, their community cultural wealth mitigates the challenges created by the cultural isolation felt in their schools and communities. Latinx and immigrant families noted developing strong peer networks to share information, resources, and lessons learned to better navigate different communities and institutions.



In addition, they noted the importance of celebrating their customs, holidays, language, and history, and passing this along to their own children and community. Students cited learning from older peers and the siblings of their peers as they sought out educational opportunities after high school. One Latinx community leader offered this observation: “when schools have challenges communicating with parents, parents are looking and finding those answers at their churches, at their community centers through whatever means necessary. When students have questions, they're leaning on that first-generation college student. That's their cousin or brother or sister, whoever it may be, and asking them for the answers.”

Throughout the listening tour, one idea became very clear: *la cultura cura*, or that embracing one's culture, history, and community heals and strengthens the resources and social support systems available to students and families alike. As many in the community turn to native roots, practices, and wisdom for healing and well-being - participants called for systems and educational institutions to commit to their holistic inclusion through policy and practice.



The Dream

#SomosNC Tour participants believe there is a path forward to integrate their own community practices into the education of Latinx children in schools and beyond. To combat the negative impact that cultural apathy and isolation are having on our community, participants dreamed of these solutions to improve the educational outcomes of Latinx youth:

- Implement culturally responsive pedagogy and culturally inclusive curriculum that reflects North Carolina's schools' cultural and linguistic diversity.
- Prepare educators and school leaders in a better way through cultural humility and competency training, also cultivating inclusive and affirming school environments that mitigate deficit thinking, implicit bias, and discriminatory behaviors.
- Offer professional development opportunities for educators to learn from and incorporate Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth framework to approach Latinx students and caregivers through an asset-based framework.
- Establish formal peer mentorship programs between local community colleges, universities, and school districts to empower Latinx youth and provide leadership development opportunities.

The Dream In Action

SUNRISE-AMANECER INC.

[Sunrise-Amanecer Inc.](#) is a mental health clinic located in Greensboro, NC serving Latinx, LGBTQIA+, and diverse populations struggling to find adequate mental health support. They help individuals connect to culturally responsive and humble mental health services, addressing the equity gap in mental health care for the Latinx community. By centering health equity, community care, and educational opportunities, they help families feel supported and less isolated in their mental health struggles.

ISLA NC

[ISLA NC](#) builds community and leadership through Spanish language and cultural immersion programs for primarily low-income, Spanish-speaking students. They seek to lessen the academic opportunity gap for Latino students by increasing their literacy in Spanish, promoting Latin American cultural heritage, and providing Spanish-language resources for parents and caregivers. Framed as assets, promoting bilingualism and multiculturalism combat the social and cultural isolation Latinx families often face in educational institutions.

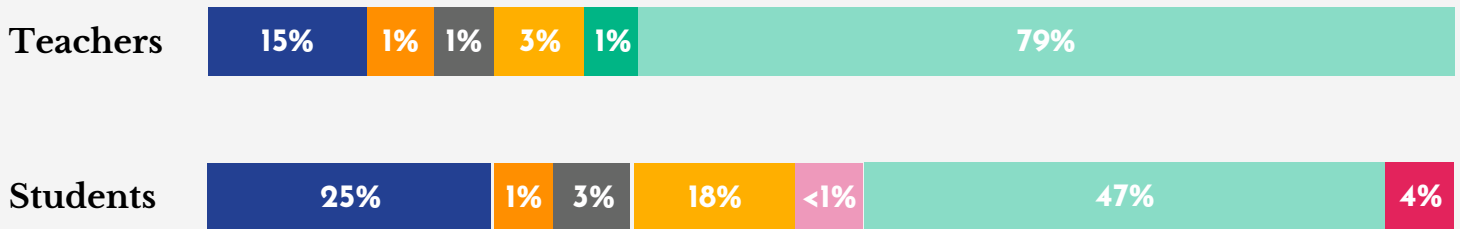


Ausente: The Absence of Latinx Educators and Leaders

THE CHALLENGE

High-quality educators in our classrooms matter. Indeed, [it is well documented that teachers are the most important school-based factor for student growth and achievement](#). However, school districts in North Carolina are [struggling to fill vacancies](#). Similarly, research affirms that representation matters, too—[a diverse teaching workforce benefits](#) everyone and disproportionately benefits students of color. Unfortunately, the educator workforce [does not reflect the diversity](#) of the state’s students—especially when it comes to Latinx educators and support staff. While Latinx students make up nearly eighteen percent of the K-12 student population, only [three percent of teachers](#) are Latinx. Meanwhile, among [professional staff](#) in the state, including guidance counselors, over 95 percent identify as White or Black.

North Carolina Student and Teacher Demographics (2018-2019)



Source: The Hunt Institute based on data from the Department of Public Instruction.

With education leaders from across the state reporting difficulties hiring bilingual staff and students and families reporting limited access to bilingual educators, school leaders, and support staff, it’s clear that the underinvestment in bicultural and bilingual representation within the education system continues to disrupt and harm educational experiences and outcomes for Latinx student and families.



ESTAMOS AQUÍ: TACKLING THE CHALLENGE OF LATINX UNDERREPRESENTATION IN EDUCATION

Across the state, students, caregivers, and educators alike want urgent solutions for the issue of teacher diversity and representation in learning environments. From Henderson to Pitt county, the #SomosNC Listening Tour witnessed how communities understood the weight of this challenge all too well and worried that there was not enough urgency to address this issue. As one resident from Alamance wondered out loud: "What futures are we possibly eliminating because [Latinx] representation is lacking?" Another educator expanded on this concern: "when we don't see that support in our schools, then it's really difficult for our students to see themselves in different positions or see themselves as professionals in the future."



Participants also pointed out that the lack of representation in the field of education also created another critical challenge for bilingual and bicultural educators: existing resources are severely taxed and overworked. The burden of responsibility often falls on a small number of bilingual counselors and educators to support a growing population of Latinx students in their respective school districts. However, this added responsibility also spills over to other teachers as well. One teacher raised this concern: "My biggest challenge is I am the only teacher in the entire school that does speak Spanish. And so I feel like I kind of have to be the voice. I myself am not Hispanic. I was born and raised in Sampson County, but I majored in Spanish in college, love the language, love the culture. And so I'm just trying to do everything I can to help those kids that do need that voice at my school."



Ausente: The Absence of Latinx Educators and Leaders

The reality of the consequences Latinx students face due to the absence of representation in their schools is what drove one educator to be part of the solution: "I didn't know my inner child was that hurt from not seeing [Latinx] representation... it motivated me to become a teacher so [Latinx] students can see me as a mirror." However, despite the interest in becoming an educator, many Latinx students and education professionals do not see or feel the intentional, explicit support (financial and professional) from educational institutions and other organizations to create pathways and retention strategies for Latinx educators. The challenge to many was clear: "...we need a pipeline of diverse leaders who are going to take up our seats...we need to signal that these opportunities are available, and we need to be more intentional in making a pipeline for diverse leadership."

Overall, whether it was language access, mental health support, college access resources, or cultural competency, many of these conversations led back to the reality that these challenges will not be solved until all education stakeholders get serious about increasing Latinx representation in classrooms, school leadership, and in the field of education at-large.





I didn't know my inner child was that hurt from not seeing [Latinx] representation...it motivated me to become a teacher so [Latinx] students can see me as a mirror.

While participants were clear-eyed about the scope of the challenge when it came to representation in education across North Carolina, it did not stop people from exploring a bold vision for the future. Our community shared the following dreams related to increasing Latinx representation in education:

- Intentionally recruit Latinx educators, school leaders, paraprofessionals, and administrative staff.
- Offer professional development opportunities for Latinx educators to pursue leadership roles and foster inclusive school environments.
- Invest in Latinx educator support networks.

The Dream In Action

ALAMANCE SCHOLARS PROGRAM

[The Alamance Scholars Program](#) is a partnership between the Alamance-Burlington School System (ABSS), Alamance Community College, and Elon University to recruit the next generation of diverse educators in the local Alamance community. By creating an accessible pipeline for local students from diverse backgrounds to become educators in ABSS, this partnership supports and ensures a generation of highly qualified, diverse, and equity-minded teachers stay in the local community.

DREAM

[The Diverse and Resilient Educators Advised through Mentorship program \(DREAM\)](#) focuses on recruiting students from diverse populations and retaining teachers that help increase representation and can motivate aspiring Latinx students to become educators themselves. This Master of Arts in Teaching program, in partnership with the UNC School of Education and Durham Public Schools, provides \$35,000 in financial support and on-the-job mentorship for graduates beginning their careers in Durham Public Schools.



Puertas Cerradas: Barriers to Postsecondary Opportunities

THE CHALLENGE

Access to and attainment of educational opportunities is central to immigrant families’ fulfillment of the “American Dream.” [Indeed, Latinos are more likely than other groups to identify education as the path to achieving the “American Dream.”](#) Increasingly, postsecondary educational attainment is becoming a core part of that dream of economic mobility and success. That is certainly the case in North Carolina, where [former UNC President Margaret Spellings even referred to higher education as the next frontier of civil rights.](#) Organizations like [MyFutureNC](#) have also boldly stepped into this arena, working with government, business, and education stakeholders to set an ambitious goal for educational attainment: to have [2 million people ages 25 to 44 with a meaningful, high-quality credential beyond high school by 2030.](#)

LATINX ENROLLMENT NUMBERS IN THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE



Source: EdNC, UNC System Fall Enrollment Report Fall 2021

However, at the current rate, the state will fall short of its ambitious goal by 400,000 students without intentional steps to change the trajectory of current trends. Within the Latinx and immigrant community across the state, it’s clear that progress is falling short: Latinx students are less likely to complete high school on time and are the most likely out of any racial/ethnic group to identify as a first-generation college student in NC, with over seventy-five percent of Latinx children identifying as potential first-generation college students. This challenge is seen in postsecondary enrollment figures as well. Despite Latinx students representing almost twenty percent of NC’s public schools, they only represent eight percent of UNC system enrollment and fourteen percent of first-time, full-time students in NC community colleges.



Puertas Cerradas: Barriers to Postsecondary Opportunities

These systemic challenges of recruiting and retaining more Latinx students in postsecondary opportunities are acutely felt by students and families in the community. Many more voice frustration in getting lost in a maze of inaccessible information and bureaucratic systems. As one college advisor during the tour pointed out: “information is not always in Spanish, so it makes it challenging to understand the process. Also, just the knowledge of how to even apply to college, go to college. And then when you add in the students that are undocumented, they don't know that they can even go to college there. There are opportunities for them, but they just don't know that information or how that's possible.”

While participants expressed gratitude for the privileges American residency and citizenship affords them for greater opportunity, many voiced concerns around access, affordability, and realistic expectations of career placement—particularly for their siblings, elders, and other loved ones who are undocumented or [DACAmended](#). Given the challenges facing so many immigrant families pursuing postsecondary opportunities, many participants acknowledge that a path forward can feel insurmountable for students: “the argument that you persist and work hard because this is what happens next doesn't exist for a lot of Latinx students and other immigrants.” In short, while many believe the “American Dream” is still within reach, others can feel it slipping away-or waking up to the reality that it was never attainable to begin with.





NAVEGANDO POR UN LABERINTO: NAVIGATING THE MAZE OF POSTSECONDARY PATHWAYS

Throughout the tour's many stops, students, caregivers, and educators underlined the issues of navigating early career exploration, workforce development, access to higher education, and post-graduation opportunities. Despite naming several challenges navigating the many pathways that exist for postsecondary attainment in North Carolina, one sentiment rang true in almost every conversation: parents' longing and determination to provide their children with college access resources, enrichment, and career opportunities. One discouraged but determined parent commented: "no one told me, look, your daughter has to start thinking about college from such a date...so I would like to learn from my mistakes to help someone else. When is it too early? When is it not too late?" However, despite this determination to support their children's success, parents often shared that they were unaware of the programs, resources, and general information about life after high school available to their families. Overall, parents felt unprepared to support their children as they entered high school and expressed a desire to know more about the offerings in their student's schools, including advanced placement (AP) courses, the early college model, career and technical education (CTE) offerings, and youth apprenticeship programs.

No one told me, look, your daughter has to start thinking about college from such a date...so I would like to learn from my mistakes to help someone else. When is it too early? When is it not too late?

Layered onto the dizzying maze of college access pathways and overwhelming amounts of information are the compounding challenges immigrant families face when considering postsecondary opportunities. Participants in every region cited the unique barriers faced by immigrant families. These included:

1) The structural barriers that exist for immigrant youth in North Carolina wanting to go to community college and a 4-year university. In North Carolina, undocumented students, as well as DACA recipients, [must pay out-of-state tuition when attending a public postsecondary institution](#) and cannot access the state's financial aid resources. As one community college administrator put it: "Nothing is going to get better until undocumented students and DACA students are eligible to pay in-state tuition. That is the main barrier." Indeed, this challenge looms large for many in the Latinx community. One parent in Durham described her challenging journey: "[my daughter] is now in a community college, and it was very difficult for me to help her when she was in the process of starting university because first I was doing research on my own so that she could study because she has DACA."



Puertas Cerradas: Barriers to Postsecondary Opportunities

2) The challenges mixed-status immigrant families—a family whose members include people with different citizenship or immigration statuses—face in successfully completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and Residency Determination Service (RDS). Since parents without any documentation are not classified as residents, even students who are U.S. citizens often get stuck in the system and flagged as “out-of-state” residents, creating additional hurdles in the college admissions process. Beyond documentation challenges, language access also proves to be a challenge to all families navigating this system for the first time. As one college advisor described it: “RDS is a huge barrier for particularly undocumented students, but Latino students as a whole because it's very difficult to get translated documents...” This system can cause many students and families to give up in the middle of this process, opting instead to try their luck at a private college or university or forego postsecondary education altogether.

3) Beyond the formal college admissions process, many students and families cited the challenge of transportation to and from college—whether it be in their local community or a commute away—[due to the inability of undocumented immigrants to obtain a driver's license in North Carolina](#). With many immigrant youth locked out of DACA due to numerous court rulings freezing the program and many immigrant parents unable to obtain a license themselves, getting to and from college becomes an additional burden families have to navigate. An educator describes how these challenges play out in their local community college: “One of the problems in the area is people are afraid, especially with the Hispanic community that we work with... some of our students have no documents, and some of them don't have a driver's license. And they need to just try to find somebody who can drive them to the community college.”

Peeling back the layers of this complex college enrollment process for immigrant families, it becomes clearer how the myriad of challenges along the college journey can deter many from getting to the finish line of postsecondary attainment.





The Dream

As participants cited the many challenges to attaining postsecondary credentials, many also debated on what solutions could move the community forward to secure greater educational opportunity. #SomosNC participants discussed the following changes and opportunities:

- Intentionally recruit Latinx students in AP, Honors, CTE, dual enrollment, and apprenticeship programs, where Latinos are currently underrepresented.
- Incorporate culturally responsive and bilingual college and career services staff, resources, curriculum, and programming beginning in middle school with intentional parent engagement components to bring families along their children’s educational journey
- Improve the student-to-counselor ratio in every public school so students can receive on-demand support and appropriate attention, and access to resources. In addition, provide implicit bias, cultural competency, and humility training to school counselors and staff to cultivate self-awareness, unlearn deficit-based assumptions about students, and learn asset-based approaches to supporting all students.
- Implement tuition equity policies in North Carolina so undocumented and DACAmented youth who graduate from North Carolina public schools can access in-state tuition and state financial aid resources.

The Dream In Action

CENTRO UNIDO LATINO-AMERICANO & COMMUNITY COLLEGE PARTNERS

A partnership between Centro Unido Latino-Americano, McDowell Tech Community College, and Isothermal Community College has increased Latinx student enrollment. By coupling the college’s workforce development programs, tuition-free college, and enhanced support from workforce partners, they have established a comprehensive model that successfully integrates Latinxs and immigrants into their local community and economy.

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO (UNCG)

UNCG is a Minority-Serving Institution (MSI) with one of the fastest-growing Latinx student populations in the state. They demonstrate a deep commitment to Latinx students through exemplary culturally sustaining education efforts and pathways such as UNCG Chance (Latinx summer program), UNCG Alianza (Latinx Faculty and Staff Association), and CAMINOS Lab (research lab informing community-based prevention and intervention).



In service to the community's determination to create solutions to the inequities faced in education today, the LatinxED team compiled recommendations that can advance efforts to create greater educational opportunities in the areas identified by #SomosNC Listening Tour participants.

LOCAL RECOMMENDATIONS TO ADVANCE LATINX STUDENT SUCCESS:

This set of recommendations is directed at local stakeholder groups interested in taking concrete steps to address many challenges mentioned throughout this report. Ideally, local elected officials (i.e. school board members and county commissioners) work closely with local Latinx-serving organizations, K-12, and community college leaders to create an ecosystem of support for students across their communities.

■ BUILD SUPPORT FOR NEWCOMERS SCHOOLS

[Newcomers schools or programs](#) are targeted supports for newly-arrived immigrants and refugees, focusing on creating “low-anxiety” environments for language acquisition, cultural adjustment, and overall academic success. With immigrant and refugee populations growing at select school districts across the state, local communities should consider these types of proven strategies to set up these students for success in college, career, and life. School districts in NC are starting to notice and implement this strategy for their multi-language learners. For example, Guilford County Schools now has two Newcomers Schools: the Doris Henderson Newcomers School and the [Sylvia Mendez Newcomers School](#).

■ CREATE MORE INCLUSIVE, DIVERSE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS FOR LATINX YOUTH

To make this a reality, local education leaders should work towards creating and delivering adaptable, bilingual, culturally sustaining curricula and pedagogy that are relevant to Latinx youth, education leaders, and caregivers. This may be a resource-intensive exercise, so education leaders can begin by creating partnerships with local Latinx-serving organizations to provide resources and programs that foster a school climate that celebrates the cultures, identities, and interests of Latinx students. These may include bilingual and bicultural in-school and afterschool programs, student clubs, and other resources that help promote a more culturally diverse environment, similar to the many programs hosted by [ISLA NC](#). In addition, schools should invest in professional development opportunities to help educators recognize, honor, and uplift the knowledge and strengths of their Latinx students rooted in their [community's cultural wealth](#).



■ ENCOURAGE YOUTH TO BECOME EDUCATORS THROUGH LOCAL PARTNERSHIPS

Local partnerships should be proactive in building low-cost pathways to education careers. This strategy begins by building intentional investments between K-12 school districts, community colleges, and local educator prep programs to create “grow your own” initiatives that invest in local talent to retain local talent. Partnerships like the [Alamance Scholars Program](#) are investing in these types of strategies to build and sustain a diverse teacher pipeline locally.

■ CREATE LATINX PARENT EDUCATION PROGRAMS AND BETTER INTEGRATE THEM INTO SCHOOLS

This listening tour made it clear that parents and caregivers are longing for better ways to build relationships with their local schools and to learn about the K-12 and postsecondary systems in NC. Local school districts, colleges, and universities have opportunities to partner with local community groups and non-profit organizations to set aside dedicated resources for bilingual parent education programs, especially to provide greater support for college access resources. In addition, schools should strongly consider creating dedicated spaces for Spanish-speaking immigrant caregivers, including 1) physical space, like a family resource center, where caregivers can host and gather for after-hours meetings, interact with teacher liaisons through office hours, and build a school community; and 2) community space, such as a Spanish-language Parent Teacher Association or subcommittee of an existing initiative to allow caregivers to have a greater voice in school activities and bring them to the decision-making table.

■ TAKE LESSONS FROM COVID-19 RESPONSE STRATEGIES AND INVEST IN LOCAL COMMUNITY ASSETS TO PROVIDE POSTSECONDARY RESOURCES

Over the last few years, The North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (NCDHHS) worked with select community organizations to hire and manage over 400 [Community Health Workers](#) across 55 targeted counties to connect people affected by COVID-19 with needed services and support. Educational institutions can learn from this model of investing in frontline public health workers to distribute important resources and information through home visits and visiting community events, local stores, churches, and any other location where communities frequently gather. By investing in local, bilingual, and bicultural “community education workers,” educational institutions can provide resources and technical assistance on FAFSA and RDS completion and generally improve the cultural competence of service delivery, all while creating employment opportunities and building trust with local communities.



Sembrar para Cosechar: Opportunities for Latinx Education

Beyond local partnerships and programs, it is critical education stakeholders reimagine the role statewide policy can play in creating better support and investment for local, regional, and statewide initiatives advancing Latinx student success. In addition, other important stakeholders, such as the Governor’s Office, statewide philanthropy, and advocacy organizations, should play an important role in laying a solid foundation for future investment.

STATE POLICYMAKER RECOMMENDATIONS:

■ ADDRESS TUITION EQUITY FOR IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

By far the most frequent challenge cited throughout the listening tour was the fact that undocumented and DACA students do not have access to in-state tuition in North Carolina even if they graduate from public school in the state. In the North Carolina General Assembly, various versions of legislation have been introduced to address this for almost twenty years. [With over 30,000 DACA-eligible residents currently living in NC surpassing a combined spending power of over \\$532 million](#), passing tuition equity legislation could help move this state forward in achieving its postsecondary attainment goals for 2030 and help continue powering a rapidly growing economy.



■ RE-GRANT DRIVER’S LICENSES FOR IMMIGRANTS ACROSS THE STATE

Educational opportunity is stunted in NC for many immigrant families due to limited safe mobility in their communities. This is due to immigrants not having access to driver’s licenses in NC without the proper documentation. This was not always the case: before [2006](#), immigrants were able to access and legally drive across the state, with many policymakers citing this ease of access as a public safety issue. In fact, [over nineteen states currently allow immigrants to have access to driving privileges regardless of immigration status](#). North Carolina lawmakers should revisit this issue and reverse their ban to not only improve educational outcomes for immigrant families but to promote better public safety for everyone in NC.



■ REVISE LEP ALLOTMENT AND FUNDING FOR DUAL LANGUAGE PROGRAMS

Chronic underinvestment in public education in general, but particularly in resources supporting Latinx students, was a core theme of this listening tour. During this tour, a frequent desire was having more funding for bilingual support and resources. One way to move this issue forward would be at the state level by passing legislation that would provide equitable funding for students with limited English proficiency (LEP). [House bill 409 introduced in the 2021-2022 biennium provided a starting point by having the state board of education study this issue and revise the allotment appropriately.](#) In addition, this bill would create an avenue for the state to create a recommended plan to foster more bilingual education programs in the State. While this would not fix all language access challenges in public education, it would certainly go a long way in providing equitable resources to multilingual learners.

■ FUND DRIVE TASK FORCE POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

[Governor Roy Cooper's Developing a Representative and Inclusive Vision for Education \(DRIVE\) Task Force](#) studied the issue of educator diversity in North Carolina and produced a [statewide plan](#) to recruit more educators of color. This report recommends expanding entry points into the educator pipeline based on models with proven success in recruiting racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse educators and providing sustainable investments in educator preparation programs at the state's Historically Minority Serving Institutions (HMSIs). [Given the body of research indicating that increasing teacher diversity and school leadership improves educational outcomes for all students,](#) it's important for state lawmakers to study these recommendations and work toward developing legislation and funding sources to create a more representative educator workforce.





OTHER STATEWIDE EDUCATION RECOMMENDATIONS:

■ LAUNCH A TASK FORCE AND/OR COMMISSION TO SUPPORT CURRENT AND FUTURE HISPANIC SERVING INSTITUTIONS (HSIS)

While it is crucial for state lawmakers to fund North Carolina's public education systems to meet the current and future needs of the state, it is also important for state leaders to be proactive in creating a roadmap for future success. This future planning includes identifying, supporting, and investing in the state's HSIs, or [educational institutions with an enrollment of undergraduate full-time equivalent students of at least 25 percent Hispanic/Latinx students](#). Emerging HSIs include institutions with more than 15 percent Hispanic/Latinx students. [Currently, there are two HSIs, nine emerging HSIs](#), and several more institutions with a rapidly-growing Latinx student population in NC. Governor Cooper and statewide education leaders should work together to launch a task force and/or commission in a similar fashion to the [DRIVE Task Force](#) or the Commission [on the Governance of Public Universities in North Carolina](#) to advance the conversation on strategies and investments to best support institutions with growing Latinx student populations.

**Policymakers need to reimagine our funding model.
We need to create targeted support for districts
(that's not based on taxes).**

■ INCREASE PHILANTHROPIC INVESTMENTS IN LATINX LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATIONS

Nationwide, [1.3 percent of all philanthropic dollars granted between 1999 and 2009](#) were awarded in support of Latinx communities, while those same communities now represent 18 percent of the U.S. population. [In the South Atlantic region of the country, just over \\$70 million was granted to Latinx issues in 2020, compared to almost \\$180 million in the Pacific region of the country](#). Across North Carolina, Latinx-focused organizations experience a similar disparity in philanthropic support. A dedicated, collective strategy towards intentional, equitable investment is needed among funders in order for more Latinx leaders and organizations to dedicate more time and resources to education issues.



■ CREATE SHARED DATA PRACTICES TO IMPROVE TARGETED STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT

Many organizations are utilizing data to implement informed strategies to advance postsecondary attainment. One north star they follow is the statewide attainment goal, stating that NC needs 2 million people to obtain their postsecondary credentials by 2030. However, many people inquired about one key data point: "how many more Latinx students need to complete their credentials to reach this goal?" To disaggregate this goal and forecast trends and targets by race and gender, education stakeholders can collaborate in co-creating shared data practices that will sustain and support data sharing and disaggregation. This can strengthen the information ecosystem at the local, state, and national levels by facilitating trust-building, transparency, and data exchange for addressing the equity gaps persistent in postsecondary access and attainment. Additionally, it begins to lay the foundation for further integrations of data systems and even shared investments in data infrastructure.

■ ENCOURAGE GREATER COLLABORATION WITH HISTORICALLY BLACK COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES (HBCU)

North Carolina has the most public HBCUs in the country and ten total institutions across the state. In recent years, HBCUs have entered a renaissance, experiencing record levels of interest and funding from both the public and private sectors in response to racial injustice across the country and the historic underinvestment in these institutions. Parallel to these trends have been dedicated efforts by HBCU leadership to understand how these institutions can better attract and serve Latinx students. Universities such as North Carolina Central University have set up Latino Advisory Committees; North Carolina A&T has created mentoring and cultural programs for Latinx students as they actively search for culturally inclusive programming to recruit and graduate more Latinx students. These and similar efforts must be established and ramped up at all of North Carolina's HBCUs as they continue to be a force for graduating students of color across the state and nation.



Moving from Dreams to Action

The #SomosNC Listening Tour demonstrated what can happen when one centers the voices of those directly impacted by the education programs and policy decisions made every day across the state. LatinxEd’s year-long tour captured hundreds of conversations and opinions on what challenges existed for Latinx families in NC’s education systems. Ultimately, participants focused on the following themes:

- Chronic underinvestment in bicultural and bilingual workforce in education
- Cultural isolation and mental health challenges facing Latinx families
- Severe lack of educator diversity in schools
- Limited opportunities and advising support for postsecondary education

It quickly became apparent that people were not just satisfied with admiring these challenges—they wanted to get to work.

One of the common refrains heard at the end of every interview, roundtable discussion, or Zoom session was, “Well, what’s next? What can we do to tackle these challenges?” It quickly became apparent that people were not just satisfied with admiring these challenges—they wanted to get to work.





Inspired by the momentum and engagement of the Latinx community with the *#SomosNC* Listening Tour, the team at LatinxEd also adopted this spirit of turning dreams into action. In addition to developing the set of recommendations included in this report, LatinxEd has also joined forces with the Hispanic/Latino Action Coalition (HLAC) to engage students, caregivers, and advocates to build a coalition dedicated to expanding pathways for community members and cross-sector leaders seeking postsecondary opportunities, workforce development, and leadership development in education. On top of that, LatinxEd hosted its inaugural [Latinx Education Summit](#) in the fall of 2022, a space dedicated to lifting up the themes heard throughout this tour and building a community of educators and changemakers ready to reimagine what educational equity for Latinx students can look like in NC.

Despite the systemic barriers slowing down progress for Latinx and immigrant communities, their determination to succeed in the face of opposition has never been greater. The team at LatinxEd knows it stands on the shoulders of many community and education leaders that have come before us locally and nationally, providing present leaders with the tools and resources to continue this conversation.

As Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor said, “until we get equality in education, we won’t have an equal society.” The *#SomosNC* Listening Tour underscored this reality and LatinxEd is ready to continue pushing forward. Hopefully, you are inspired to spring into action, too.

Sí, se puede.

