



# NUESTRA ESPERANZA

What Latinx Education Leaders Need to Thrive



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## I. ABOUT LATINXED

[LatinxEd](#) is an educational initiative investing in Latinx leadership to expand educational equity and opportunity across North Carolina. LatinxEd envisions culturally sustaining education systems that recognize, meet, and honor the diverse needs of Latinx students and immigrant families.

We believe that we must collectively invest in the growth and well-being of Latinx leaders to transform how education systems improve the postsecondary outcomes of Latinx students. We are investing in a movement of education leaders and advocates across North Carolina's public schools, higher education institutions, and beyond to advance Latinx student success collectively. We propel this movement forward through our three lanes of work: leadership development, technical assistance, and advocacy.

Our initiatives include the [LatinxEd Fellowship](#), our flagship leadership development program that invests in Latinx leaders who are mobilizing around issues of educational equity; [College y Consejos](#), an initiative to increase access to and support for postsecondary education for Latinx students by providing technical assistance, workshops, and trainings; and our policy advocacy work through the [Latinx Education Summit](#) and community-driven research to help guide a policy vision for how our systems must transform to support Latinx student success better. For more information and how to support our work, please visit [www.latinxed.org](http://www.latinxed.org).





## WHAT IS THE LATINXED FELLOWSHIP?

The [LatinxED Fellowship](#) is a powerful learning community for Latinx leaders eager to strengthen their voice and vision to lead positive, transformational change. Committed to a shared value of education, Fellows deepen their knowledge about North Carolina's education system and history to ensure access to critical resources for all communities. By strengthening their vision, voice, and valor, the Fellowship serves as a catalyst for breaking the chains of self-doubt and cultural isolation as these leaders step into positions of influence and impact. For this publication, we invited Fellows to participate in a voluntary survey and focus group about their experiences as Latinx education leaders.

## II. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are so grateful to everyone who contributed to this issue brief. It truly takes a village to do this work in North Carolina. A special thanks to [The Belk Foundation](#), the [John M. Belk Endowment](#), and the [Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation](#) for their generous support throughout this endeavor. A big thank you to our LatinxED Fellows whose voluntary participation brought this publication to life. We treasure the vulnerability and courage required to share your experiences so freely with us. To best collect and analyze the data collected, we were honored to work with Verenisse Ponce Soria, a doctoral candidate at the University of California, Irvine, who supported this brief as a researcher. We especially recognize Lucia Lozano Robledo, LatinxED's Program & Curriculum specialist, for her leadership in steering our team and helping us tell this story. Lastly, we acknowledge and greatly appreciate LatinxED team members who made this bilingual report possible, including Elaine Utin, Ricky Hurtado, Kiara Aranda, Carol Bono, Mirella Cisneros Perez, Alice Dolbow, Zamantha Granados, Bryan Mejia, Maria Pulido Ramirez, Douglas Reyes, and the tilde Language Justice Cooperative.





### III. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Efforts across North Carolina are exploring how to improve the recruitment and retention of educators of color to build more affirming and enriching educational environments for all students. The [DRIVE task force](#) and many others have endeavored to make the case for why we need teacher diversity for a more inclusive and equitable education landscape. Like many others who want to know the recipe to successfully and holistically support educators of color, at LatinxEd we were curious about what we could learn when we looked at the experiences of Latinx education leaders in North Carolina.

This issue brief, *Nuestra Esperanza*, explores the experiences of Latinx education leaders by centering LatinxEd Fellows' experiences as a case study. Through a survey and focus groups, we identified key challenges and motivations that Latinx education leaders face in their journey. We hope that this deepened insight will equip education advocates and institutions to cultivate sustainable conditions for the growth and longevity of Latinx education leaders. We believe that when Latinx education leaders thrive, our Latinx students and families can thrive too!

Note: For the purposes of this brief, the term Latinx is used as a gender-neutral alternative to describe an individual with roots in Latin America.

#### WHO IS AN "EDUCATION LEADER"?

This issue brief defines an "education leader" as someone who uses their power and voice to advocate for education issues that impact marginalized communities. An individual can be an education leader under this definition, regardless of job title or main field of work.





## IV. INTRODUCTION

In the face of the historical underfunding of public education, notably highlighted in the ongoing case of Leandro v the State of North Carolina, education advocates and institutions committed to equity and inclusion continue to ask: How do we increase the representation of Latinos in education? Indeed, local and statewide efforts to increase educator representation amid teacher shortages and insufficient funding for public education – including efforts such as Governor Cooper’s DRIVE Task Force – continue to amplify the challenges and opportunities in increasing diversity in education. Over the years, LatinxEd’s community of educators and advocates has grappled with the same questions.

After hosting an extensive statewide community listening tour which resulted in the #SomosNC Report, this issue brief marks the continuation of our learning journey as we get closer to comprehensive solutions. With this publication, we seek to advance the conversation by: 1) broadening who we define as Latinx education leaders, 2) asking Latinx education leaders about the challenges they face in their respective educational environments, and 3) inquiring about their motivations to continue working in the field of education. Overall, we hope to deepen our collective understanding and demand for critical investments in the conditions that will promote the well-being and longevity of Latinx education leaders, as well as leaders of all identities and backgrounds.

So, who is the Latinx education leader? For LatinxEd, they are educators in the classroom and beyond. They also include your nonprofit leaders, higher education faculty and staff, and even your youth pastors. Ultimately, this issue brief defines an education leader as someone who uses their power and voice to advocate for education issues that impact marginalized communities. An individual can be an education leader under this definition, regardless of job title or primary field of work. In the absence of Latinx representation in formal classroom settings, this broadened definition of a Latinx education leader is necessary. This need is further emphasized as advocates think about increasing Latinx youth's exposure to Latinx educators and leaders in their respective communities to see positive images of teachers and mentors where they see themselves reflected.

Curious about the history and growth of the Latinx community in NC?

[Click here to view our #SomosNC Report.](#)







Using a broader definition of an education leader serves a twofold purpose: to think about how to strengthen the career pathways into specific roles in education and how to build a thriving educator ecosystem for current and future Latinx leaders.

In doing so, we are considering sustainable ways to support these education leaders who are deeply invested in advancing Latinx student success and increasing representation in education. Dr. Donzell Lee, Interim President of Tougaloo College in Jackson, Mississippi, underscored this sentiment in the institution’s efforts to diversify the educator pipeline:



The challenge of creating a robust pipeline for increasing minority teachers is not the challenge of a single institution. Clearly, this is a “village” effort. - Dr. Donzell Lee

Indeed, this village effort is necessary now as educator pipeline programs alone cannot create the ecosystem conditions necessary to recruit and retain Latinx educators successfully. It is only when education actors and other key partners across sectors collaborate and collectively invest in strengthening an equitable education ecosystem that Latinx students and families, as well as all students and families, can thrive.

This challenge only becomes more urgent to resolve when considering the evolving face of our public schools: Latinx students currently make up 19.8% of the K-12 student population, but only 4.2% of educators identify as Latinx.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, of the 1.2 million Latinx in North Carolina, over one-third of the population is under the age of 18.<sup>2</sup> This rapid exponential growth of Latinx students in North Carolina public schools and the chronic underrepresentation of Latinx educators exposes a critical need: To reimagine the conditions and investments needed to strengthen the educator ecosystem for improved recruitment, retention, and longevity of Latinx education leaders.

## NORTH CAROLINA PUBLIC SCHOOLS DEMOGRAPHICS

**K-12 LATINX STUDENT POPULATION**

**19.8%**

**LATINX EDUCATORS**

**4.2%**



## PURPOSE

This issue brief captures LatinxEd's conversations with present Latinx education leaders across the state to identify promising recruitment and retention strategies that promote sustainable conditions for these leaders in their respective fields.

While these leaders' passion for their work, students, and community rang true throughout these conversations, it is clear that passion is not enough. To build sustainable pathways and infrastructure for a more equitable education ecosystem, we need committed investments from varied institutions to cultivate thriving conditions for Latinx leadership because the future of North Carolina's children depends on it.

## METHODOLOGY

For this brief, we invited all 100 LatinxEd Fellows to participate in a survey and focus groups to gather insights on their experiences as Latinx education leaders. Given that the LatinxEd Fellowship cohorts have been intentionally assembled for diverse representation – including region, county, field, age, and identity, to name some – choosing to survey and interview them gave us a representative enough sample size to explore the needs of Latinx education leaders across North Carolina. Additionally – while the LatinxEd Fellowship provides tools, cultivates community, and offers opportunities for identity and leadership development – Fellows remain equally impacted by the inequitable conditions of the education system just as non-fellows. Due to this, we considered them a valuable and insightful sample size to explore the needs of Latinx education leaders in North Carolina. Focus group participants were asked about their motivations for entering the field, reasons for persistence, challenges, leveraged support, and reimagining of the education field.

The quotes highlighted below in the findings have pseudonyms to protect the privacy of our participants.

For additional details on the methodology, please reference [Appendix](#).





# WHAT WE LEARNED

## V. THE COSTS OF TRAILBLAZING

Throughout our conversations with Latinx education leaders, we repeatedly heard them frame their experiences as trailblazers in their educational environments. However, participants emphasized that trailblazing comes at a significant cost, with several challenges emerging as themes across educators' experiences. The identified challenges relate to:

<b>A</b> ACCESS TO OPPORTUNITY	
<b>B</b> BARRIERS TO PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT	
<b>C</b> CULTURAL ISOLATION	
<b>D</b> DETERIORATING CONDITIONS FOR SUSTAINABILITY	

The collective of these challenges creates an increasingly difficult environment for Latinx education leaders to see themselves entering the field or maintaining these positions for the long term. Understanding these challenges is the first step in developing solutions for more supportive environments for educators.



## ACCESS TO OPPORTUNITY

Barriers to accessibility in pursuing higher education and entering the field of education overall were notable concerns to participants. As many are or will be the first in their families to pursue a college degree in the United States, the hurdles towards entry and persistence can feel insurmountable without adequate guidance and support. Navigating the maze of college and scholarship application processes – on top of language diversity, cultural differences, immigration status, and financial concerns – inhibits Latinx youth’s ability to dream of higher education. As Daniel expressed in his interview:

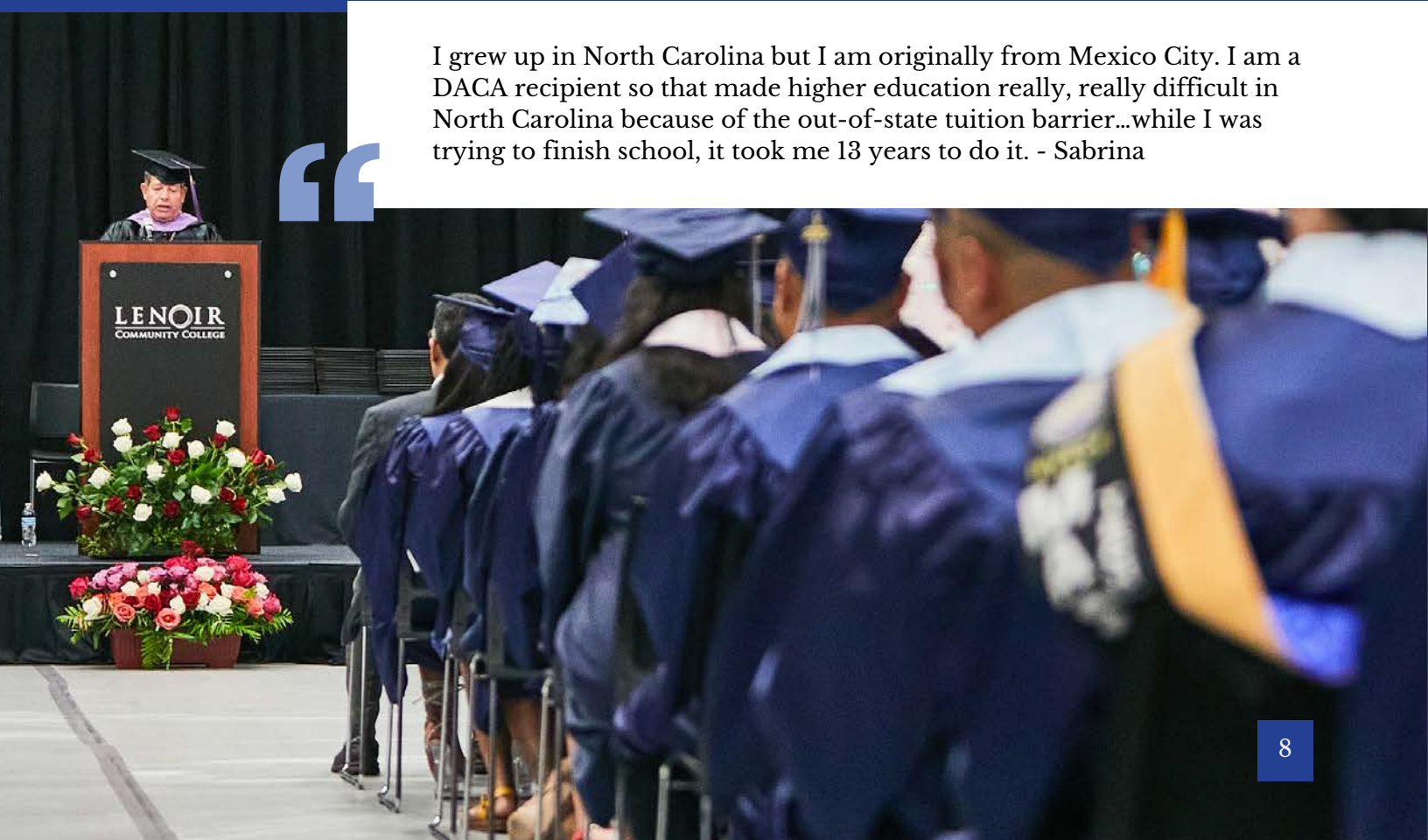


No one in my family has gone to college, so I would be the first one. There’s a lot people don’t tell you that you have to do...there’s so many deadlines. I’d say [this] made me doubt getting into higher education and also being able to pay for it all if it’s not what my family can pay...it can be overwhelming, especially if you’ve never done it before. - Daniel

Daniel’s candid response illustrates the all-too-familiar experience of Latinx youth who undergo compounding challenges when pursuing higher education. For other aspiring education leaders, the intersection of education and immigration status is an enormous concern when navigating their education and career journeys. In North Carolina, DACA recipients and immigrant students without documentation have to pay out-of-state tuition. As Sabrina plainly shares:



I grew up in North Carolina but I am originally from Mexico City. I am a DACA recipient so that made higher education really, really difficult in North Carolina because of the out-of-state tuition barrier...while I was trying to finish school, it took me 13 years to do it. - Sabrina





Whether participants cited affordability, a complex application process, or immigration status-related concerns, simply gaining the credentials necessary to consider pursuing a career in education felt like an uphill battle. This process serves more as a deterrence than an incentive to enter the field of education, [a reality backed up by research across the country](#).

For Latinx education leaders who have persisted and found their pathway into higher education and the education field, concerns with accessibility remain vast. Even when they have overcome an overwhelming amount of barriers to entering the profession, they still face challenges in accessing key decision-making conversations where they can advocate for issues relevant to the Latinx community. Gloria reflects on her missed opportunities to directly advocate for the Latinx community:



Why is it that I'm not there if I am the only one who can actually advocate for what exactly they need?... Some things you might not [understand] because you're not Latino, you're not Hispanic. Sometimes, you don't understand the culture. So I'm not saying you're not enough. I'm saying why not invite those who know and who walk the line right to the table so we [add] our input? - Gloria



Accessing the decision-making spaces that influence key levers of change at educational institutions remains out of reach for many Latinx leaders. Educational institutions often overlook opportunities to meaningfully include multilingual and multicultural leaders in key conversations about serving the Latinx community; as shown in Gloria's remark. Reminiscent of the disability rights movement slogan, "Nothing about us without us," Gloria shares a similar sentiment that questions Latinx voices' absence in educational spaces that shape their experiences as students, parents, educators, and community members.



## BARRIERS TO PROFESSIONAL ADVANCEMENT

In addition to the mental cost of cultural isolation, participants discussed educational and professional barriers that hindered their opportunities for advancement, mentorship, and recognition in the workplace. For many, racially coded biases about their leadership capacity as Latinx professionals led to them doing more work than their peers in an attempt to earn equal recognition for their contributions and still falling short of growth opportunities, as demonstrated by Emilia's experience:

“

A lot of times administrators, policymakers, and other educators who are not persons of color...don't think of us as being capable of leading the department. They don't think of us as being innovative in our pedagogy, in our approaches. And that's taxing on teachers of color - doing more work than everybody else to even be considered as professional. When I was in the classroom, I had to go above and beyond to just be considered on par with everybody else in the eyes of certain folks. I worked my behind off. You know, I was volunteering for clubs and started clubs and doing this and that. And I never got considered for the instructional lead positions. Nobody asked me to be department chair. Nobody even recognized half of the stuff that I was doing. - Emilia

This frustration shared by Emilia is consistent with emerging research illustrating that Latinx educators feel devalued and disrespected in their jobs, despite feeling like they exert more time and energy into their work than their peers. It is a reality that many participants voiced in one way or another: navigating a workplace that does not fully value or recognize their work and expertise consistently led to discouragement, poor mental health, and attrition.







Many educators struggle with the following representation dilemma. They believe having a shared identity with many students in their classroom is helpful, as they view their experiences and background as a value-add to their learning environment. At the same time, they feel that these same assets prevent them from gaining leadership opportunities in their workplace. Many emerging leaders have overcome this dilemma by gaining access to professional growth opportunities and socio-emotional supports like mentorship or coaching. Maya's story highlights the importance of mentorship in this environment:



“I’ve spent my entire career, being the only Latina, the only person that speaks Spanish... In one case, I was the only person of color in the entire building, apart from, like, the custodian. So [it’s essential to create] affinity groups or networks of people where [we] feel like [we] can unburden and talk with people who are experiencing some of the same things that [we are] experiencing. And then through that, there is kind of like enveloped mentorship, both formal and informal professional development.” - Maya

Maya's remark underscores a reality many Latinx leaders face: a vast underrepresentation in education makes it difficult for leaders to find others with shared identities and experiences as they are the first ones with their background to navigate educational and professional spaces. This introduces another obstacle: the lack of Latinx representation in education leadership positions creates a vicious catch-22 cycle where limited culturally relevant mentorship opportunities stunt the growth of future leaders.







## CULTURAL ISOLATION

Beyond the barriers to opportunity that make accessing a career in education challenging, education leaders also cited the toll on their mental health that came with being one of the few – if not the only – Latinx education leaders in their respective workplaces. Without peers to relate to or culturally diverse and inclusive work environments, Latinx leaders dealt with isolation and loneliness in the workplace. Confronting language barriers, deficit-based perspectives, and pressures to leave one’s cultural authenticity at the door posed significant obstacles for Latinx leaders to find a sense of belonging and solidarity. Participants struggled to connect with others on a deeper level, leading to feelings of loneliness and stagnation, as Alberto expresses below:

[Someone asked me,] ‘How many people are at your institution that also speak Spanish or are Hispanic?’ And I said, ‘I’m the only one that really does this work.’ And he’s like, ‘If you want me to be frank with you, it’s going to be nearly impossible to get anything done and to get people to understand where you’re coming from by yourself.’ That is a challenge for me because it really can be such an isolating island where I work. - Alberto





Alberto was not alone in sharing the sentiment of working on “an isolated island.” Other participants spoke of the mental load that comes from being one of the few Latinx or Spanish-speaking individuals in their workplace, if not the only one. With limited cross-cultural understanding among their peers, Latinx leaders struggle to experience a sense of belonging, solidarity, and support as they advocate for Latinx students and family success. Additionally, participants cited instances of both explicit and implicit discrimination by their peers or leadership based on their racial-ethnic identity, as Nicole expresses below:



Whenever I said something in meetings, something that is important for Hispanic students, they would look at me like, ‘Okay, yeah, let’s move on to the next point.’ No feedback, no nothing. And I have to let the others, my coworkers, know that I AM a teacher. I’ve come from another country, but I went to a different college and got my degree. I have my license. I have experience. And I CAN bring something powerful to the table...and that is something I’ve had to, you know, fight for, like, hey, I AM a teacher. - Nicole



As Nicole illustrates, this dismissive behavior invalidates and devalues Latinx education professionals who have a wealth of experience, leading to mental and emotional strain. While a multicultural, multilingual, and cross-national experience should be regarded as an asset to enriching the diversity in educational environments, Latinx educators are not often recognized and respected for their expertise and added value to a learning environment. Ultimately, having to prove their worth to peers and supervisors often creates a toxic work environment for these Latinx educators in which being culturally isolated and devalued begins to cost them their mental and emotional well-being.





## DETERIORATING CONDITIONS FOR SUSTAINABILITY

These barriers to career advancement are only part of the tax imposed on Latinx educators. Participants also widely shared experiencing excessive stress, anxiety, and exhaustion from being expected to go above and beyond their job responsibilities, all while navigating culturally isolating educational environments and a lack of appropriate financial compensation for the multiple roles they play. As Enrique shared:

I'm a teacher, I'm an interpreter. I'm translating documents. I'm wearing many hats within my building. Well, I'm only being compensated for one hat, not for the three. [If] someone shows up at a front office that doesn't speak English or limited English... they walk him down the hall [to me]. But not valuing, acknowledging, compensating people for that? That's taxing. - Enrique





The experience of “wearing many hats” in their workplace without appropriate compensation and recognition was widely shared by participants. The underinvestment in Spanish-speaking personnel and culturally relevant resources at educational institutions often leaves Latinx education leaders responsible for doing it all at their institutions. While some may learn to navigate the “wearing of many hats,” [research shows that this underinvestment coupled with cultural isolation is likely to take a toll on the health and well-being of Latinx leaders over time, including leading to burnout](#). As this Title I Latinx teacher shares:



“

I would work about 12-hour days pretty regularly. I didn't take lunch breaks. [By] the time I was 28, I had already ruined my bladder because I did not go to the bathroom. As a teacher, I did not believe in work-life balance and I ended up having some medical issues because of it. - Title I Latinx teacher

This situation is becoming all too common in educational settings: a lack of work-life balance and sustainable conditions in the workplace negatively affects the physical and mental well-being of Latinx leaders. This has pushed many to reconsider their career choices. [National polls and data collected after the COVID-19 pandemic reveal that burnout is increasing at alarming rates for Black and Latinx educators, leading to educators leaving the profession and retiring early](#). In turn, any strides made in representation are narrowed by the lack of sustainable conditions that support education leaders.

Overall, our research on the challenges faced by trailblazing Latinx education leaders shows a staggering toll associated with pioneering in a field with little Latinx representation. These narratives unveil a daunting reality marked by profound personal sacrifice and systemic barriers. The pervasive challenges related to access, professional advancement, cultural isolation, and unsustainable conditions cast a shadow on the brilliance, expertise, and potential of our Latinx education leaders, students, and families. As we confront the urgency presented by our participants' testimonies, it becomes clear that meaningful change requires both individual resilience and a collective commitment to dismantling systemic barriers, fostering inclusivity, and championing equity to reimagine a more diverse and supportive educational landscape.



# WHAT WE LEARNED

## VI. HARNESSING HOPE FOR MOTIVATION AND RETENTION

We found that the most common motivations for Latinx education leaders in entering and staying in the field of education were connected through one encompassing force: hope. Participants repeatedly highlighted the relationships, aspirations, and knowledge they have leaned on throughout their education journeys as they sought to sustain their efforts in challenging work environments. The better we can understand these educators' incentives to enter and persist in education-related career pathways, the deeper insight we gain into foundational elements needed for successful recruitment and retention strategies. The named motivators connect to:

1

THE POWER  
OF CULTURA



2

THE POTENTIAL OF  
CHILDREN



3

THE PRACTICE OF  
COLLECTIVE CARE



4

THE POSSIBILITY  
OF CHANGE





## THE POWER OF CULTURA

When explaining what motivated them to take on their education mission, a common theme across participants was their origin stories. Latinx leaders often described their heritage, family, and immigrant roots as key influences in their career aspirations and sense of purpose. From an early age, many recalled the significance their families placed on obtaining an education. In several cases, access to education was a deciding factor for many families to move to the United States from Latin America. This great sacrifice motivated them to pursue higher education and inspired them to hope and dream of a world where younger generations of immigrants and marginalized youth do not have to struggle to access educational opportunities. Sophia's story embodies this motivation:



I'm a daughter of immigrants and so my parents...they really influenced me to go to school, get an education, focus a lot on my academics. They moved to the U.S. from Honduras and, you know, they were not able to pursue their education in Honduras, much less in the U.S. They worked really hard. And so a lot of their influence on making sure that I got my education here, a lot of that push, although they didn't know how to like guide me to get to college or get through college, I had to do that part [on] my own. But them pushing me to get there was a big influence. - Sophia







This first-generation immigrant experience is not unique, as many participants in these focus groups could relate to that story. The reality is that for many Latinx leaders, their cultural roots and connection to family often lay a critical foundation for them to manifest a vision for the future of education. It even pushed them to be part of the change they want to see in education, passing on their achievements to the next generation. Similarly, for second-generation immigrants, familial stories of great sacrifice and resilience are sources of inspiration, as Diana shares below:

My father is an immigrant, came to the U.S. at the age of 16 with no English. He didn't speak it whatsoever. [He] graduated high school, got his bachelor's degree, his master's, and even got a doctorate in ministry, all while juggling full-time employment and children, grandchildren... He set the bar high. Like, if he can do it, then I can't give up and I can't quit. And so that was kind of my motivation and to make them proud. - Diana



The motivation to honor family members' sacrifice and model after their resiliency against great odds is one many Latinx leaders can relate to. At the intersection of immigration and family are vibrant oral histories of a community that often re-sources its energy, or *ganas*, in this collective storytelling. For Latinx leaders, their heritage, family, and immigrant roots not only motivate them in their educational journeys. They also shape the collective identity and memory of a cultura that strives towards equitable opportunities for generations to come.





## THE POTENTIAL OF CHILDREN

Beyond their personal stories serving as motivating factors to enter the field of education, many educators found hope in supporting the next generation of learners and leaders. While the challenges that Latinx educators and other educators of color face are mentally, physically, and emotionally exhausting, the struggle to navigate this education survival complex begins when you enter the classroom as a student. This is a reality that many Latinx educators hold onto as a core motivating factor for their involvement. Because of their experiences navigating the education system, many Latinx education leaders can empathize with the unique challenges that drown out hope for many students. Because they relate at a personal level, becoming the representation they needed growing up in their educational journeys arose as a key motivator for many participants, as Sara illustrates below:

“

As I went into my [doctoral] program, I realized that I’m one person and I could possibly do more in teaching others. And [be] that representation. [I] didn’t have a teacher who looked like me until I was in my master’s program. And it was only one teacher and she was so instrumental...I love being able to do that and pay it forward to my students.” - Sara

For many Latinx leaders, the commitment to pay it forward for future generations comes from personally understanding the significant impact of having an educator whom you can relate to. Representation matters in the classroom as it’s associated with improved classroom engagement, motivation, social skills, and attendance for Black and Latinx youth when they have an educator who looks like them.<sup>3</sup> As Latinx education leaders are stepping in to nurture the potential of youth, our research also revealed a collective desire to cultivate future leaders to ensure growth and opportunity for Latinx youth, as Fernando shared:

“

A good leader creates more leaders. And so for me, I have to find someone who’s going to take my place... So that means for me, I have to grow future leaders... creating this [Latinx] pipeline is what I hope to do in this district. That’s the long-term vision for our culture, for our people, and our staff. - Fernando

Fernando’s remark demonstrates the visionary leadership of Latinx education leaders as they think of “passing the baton” to future leaders for the continued advancement of the community. In creating this “pipeline” of leadership, Latinx leaders often serve as bridge builders and architects in the education system to connect families to the educational lives of their youth. Grounded in the desire to protect the potential of children, many participants shared this forward-thinking vision to nurture the leaders of tomorrow, knowing it has and will require a cross-generational commitment to cultivating an equitable future for all children.



## THE PRACTICE OF COLLECTIVE CARE

Latinx educators also found hope in community. The majority of participants focused on building community in both formal and informal settings with those of shared cultural background as a sort of antidote and protective factor to working in silos and isolation, challenges to their wellbeing, and persistence of working in the field. Latinx leaders find unity and solidarity not just within the Latinx community, but across racial, ethnic, and geographic lines with other historically marginalized communities. As Rebecca illustrates below:

From the top to the bottom and every platform where decisions are made that are going to impact Latino teachers and students, that's where we need to be. There's no shortage of people doing the work. There are people doing the work. The reason why we are so slow to grow when it comes to advancing our movement, the Latino civil rights movement, is because we are all working in silos... If we could unify what we're doing, we would find so much more power in that. - Rebecca



Grounded in the power of coming together across the intersectionality of identity and experience to advance an ongoing movement for Latinx civil rights, Latinx leaders seek culturally affirming spaces to find a community to belong to and be in solidarity with. For their longevity and persistence in the field, it is essential for these leaders to find a community where they can: receive emotional support, nurture a sense of belonging, receive mentorship, engage in collaborative learning, and support peers. Many participants also expressed the desire to share their own resources, strategies, and expertise to support their students, community, and each other. As Daniela describes:







We are a very hard-working community, but we need to support and empower each other...yeah, we have the system in schools that doesn't work...but at the same time, even though these [inequitable] policies are being created, more leaders are also emerging and growing every day who want to come out and help others in our community who are disadvantaged. - Daniela

Beyond support, community serves as a multifaceted support system: reducing isolation, fostering resilience, and providing crucial resources for persistence. As Luis Valdez's poem *In Lak'ech* says, "Tú eres mi otro yo" or "You are my other me," many Latinx leaders see themselves in their peers, emergent leaders, and students. That serves as a powerful motivator for building the support and structures for future generations to succeed.

## IN LAK'ECH

*By Luis Valdez*

**Tú eres mi otro yo.**  
 You are my other me.  
**Si te hago daño a ti,**  
 If I do harm to you,  
**Me hago daño a mi mismo.**  
 I do harm to myself.  
**Si te amo y respeto,**  
 If I love and respect you,  
**Me amo y respeto yo.**  
 I love and respect myself.

## THE POSSIBILITY OF CHANGE

In each focus group, participants fueled each other's hope throughout our conversations by exchanging personal stories about how they found their purpose in this work. In clearly articulating their "why," many participants demonstrated a steadfast commitment to education equity even in the face of great challenges in their educational institutions. With the fervent belief that positive change is possible, Latinx leaders continue to dare to imagine a world where intergenerational mobility is catalyzed for immigrant families through their work in education. One education leader, Elena, captured this sentiment perfectly:



**I'm here for my community.** No, it's not the money...the salary is not the highest. I've been offered jobs where I get paid more, but the reason I'm here is because I have such a close connection to the community, to the parents, and to the students. Because I see myself when I look at them. I remember when I was 15 years old and I was trying to navigate the whole system. It broke my heart when I found out that there are students here who are U.S. citizens, they qualify for financial aid, but they don't fill it out because they're afraid. The parents are afraid because the parents kind of get stuck and let themselves fall. So for me, the reason that I'm still in this job, the reason that I'm here specifically in [my city], is because of the connection, because of the community, because of the family, and because of the need. - Elena

As is true for Elena, Latinx leaders consistently and courageously advocate for greater access and opportunities for Latinx students and families in the face of extensive challenges related to accessibility, professional advancement, cultural isolation, and sustainability. Daring to envision a future where Latinx students can thrive in their education journeys and are fully honored by educational institutions was at the core of many participants' commitment to expanding education equity, as Manuel shares below:

I'm doing something in my community and for the community. I think what I have gained is just this fiery passion that can't be put out. That's the reason why I've stayed and will probably stay because sometimes I'll look around the room or I look around the table and there are no people that look like me. And so to imagine, like, what 10, 20, 30 years would look like, what curriculums would look like...it really keeps you grounded, [in that] even if the work that you're doing will be actualized even long after you [are gone], just the idea and the notion of that...it's exciting." - Manuel



The fervor and passion that Latinx leaders embody fuels their commitment to transformational change, even if they may not fully see the fruits of their labor in their lifetime. Nevertheless, our participants illustrated the intergenerational commitment that many Latinx educators show as they sow the seeds of transformational change dreaming that, one day, future generations may experience equitable, culturally relevant, and nourishing education systems. To imagine that these conditions are possible and will be achieved is to tend to the collective hope necessary to energize a movement of Latinx families, advocates, and allies.





## VII. CONCLUSION

Throughout our conversations with Latinx education leaders, it is abundantly clear that: 1) there is a high cost for being a trailblazer in education, 2) Latinx education leaders are looking for respite through formal and informal networks to lift them up and keep going, and 3) in the face of under-resourced environments, most leaders leverage their cultural and community assets to sustain their efforts and advance education equity.

Understanding the power of community and what drives Latinx education leaders offers insights into what is missing in our current educational landscape to cultivate the sustainable recruitment and retention of Latinx education leaders across the state. However, it is important to recognize that these insights are only part of the puzzle. Many educators in our interviews and focus groups, as well as many studies and editorials across the state, have cited the lack of competitive compensation and the overall devaluing and disinvestment in public education from public officials as primary reasons they hesitate to enter or stay in the field. The motivations highlighted in this issue brief should be considered in tandem with education policy concerns, namely higher educator pay, as well as plenty of research that asserts that diversity in education is critical to the educational outcomes of all of our students.





These findings underscore the urgent need for increased representation of Latinx education leaders, mirroring the rapidly growing Latinx student population. These narratives highlight the importance of systemic changes to promote inclusivity and equity across educational institutions. However, at this moment, it is also important to grapple with the national education climate that is increasingly hostile toward diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. What our Latinx education leaders need to thrive is becoming harder to advocate for, implement, and invest in. We must consider how hostility is growing after the fall of Affirmative Action, as extremist education activists attempt to dismantle all efforts to advance equity, and education policy divests from public education. [Our collective work towards advancing educational equity is a target within K-12 public schools, higher education, and beyond.](#) This reality means there continues to be a chilling effect on implementing promising practices related to sustainable recruitment and retention of a more diverse and representative workforce in the educational field.

In considering Nuestra Esperanza, our call to action to education philanthropists, institutional leaders, lawmakers, parents, students, and community members is clear: In the face of resistance to these efforts, commit to listening to our educators and invest in what we know works. To Latinx education leaders, we must remain steadfast in hope for one another and future generations, so that we may continue sowing the seeds of transformational change through our collective valor, voice, and vision. Together, we can ensure that one day our public education system will honor and preserve the humanity and potential of all children.







## VIII. APPENDIX

### REFERENCES

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## METHODOLOGY CONT.

Fellows were invited in September 2023 to fill out a preliminary survey about their experiences as Latinx education leaders and were offered a \$10 gift card in exchange for their participation. In the survey, participants were asked about their willingness to participate in a follow-up focus group in exchange for an additional \$40 gift card. All who expressed interest in attending a focus group were invited to sign up for a two-hour focus group. Focus group participants were asked about their motivations for entering the field, reasons for persistence, challenges, leveraged support, and reimagining of the education field. The survey had a 51% response rate and the focus groups had a 39% participation rate from participants who opted in.

## PARTICIPANTS PER COUNTY

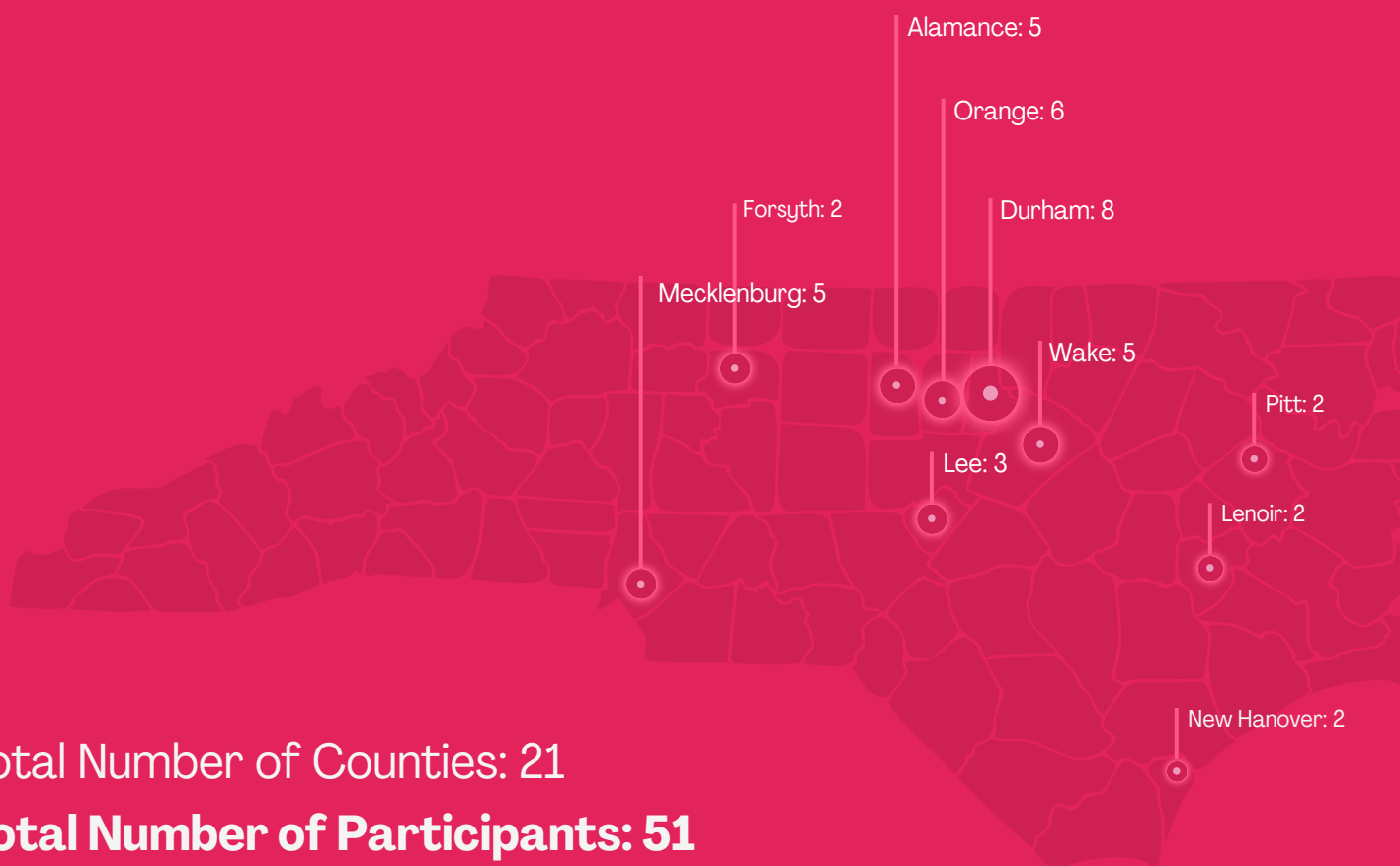
### Full Breakdown of Participants per County:

Durham County: 8  
Orange County: 6  
Alamance County: 5  
Mcklenburg County: 5  
Wake County: 5

Lee County: 3  
Forsyth County: 2  
Lenoir County: 2  
New Hanover County: 2  
Pitt County: 2  
Cabarrus County: 1

Chatham County: 1  
Gaston County: 1  
Guilford County: 1  
McDowell County: 1  
Montgomery County: 1

Sampson County: 1  
Union County: 1  
Watauga County: 1  
Wayne County: 1  
Wilson County: 1



Total Number of Counties: 21

**Total Number of Participants: 51**





## PARTICIPANT GENDER IDENTITY

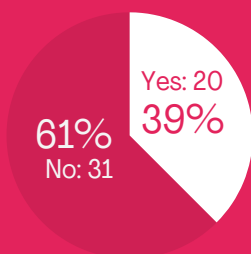


Male: 12

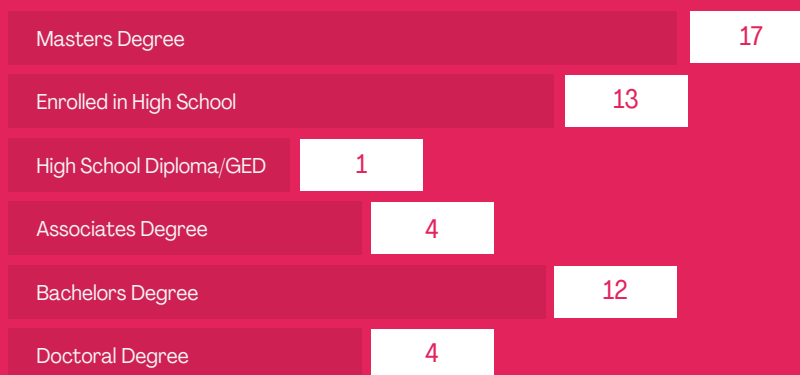


Female: 19

## FORMAL TEACHING EXPERIENCE



## HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATION ATTAINED



## CURRENT POSITIONS

# 13

Enrolled in High School

# 9

Work in K-12 Schools

# 8

Work in Four-Year Universities

# 7

Work in Non-Profit Organizations

# 5

Enrolled in Associates or Undergraduate Degree

# 4

Work in Community Colleges

# 3

Work in Business

# 1

Works in Policy

# 1

Enrolled in a Graduate Degree

