



## **Liderazgo Familiar Intergeneracional: Intergenerational Family Leadership as a New Paradigm of Family Engagement**

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*Comunitario projects in Texas's Rio Grande Valley offer a community-based alternative to the traditional PTA model, fostering the participation and collective leadership of youth.*

**T**itle I schools that serve a large population of low-income students often view families through the lens of an outdated paradigm of family engagement in education, assuming parents are mostly uneducated, ill informed, and much in need of training and support to be good parents. Comments like the following by school personnel are

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not uncommon: “I’ve got to get food and door prizes, otherwise they won’t come!” “We sent bilingual notices with the children, and only ten showed up.” “If I get the kids to perform, the parents show up, but if we have a meeting afterwards . . . the children running up to the families are a great distraction.” “I feel I really succeed in parent involvement if I get thirty warm bodies in the room for the meeting.”

The old paradigm sees families as free volunteer labor for an understaffed, underfunded, and overextended school. The focus is on having families be participants in courses or hobbies. This old paradigm has little room for perceiving the poor, English-learner, rural, or recent immigrant parent as co-constructor of an excellent education for all children.

*Comunitario* projects in the Rio Grande Valley of south Texas model a new kind of family engagement in education: intergenerational family leadership, or *liderazgo familiar intergeneracional*, which values the participation and collaboration of parents, community members, and youth. The locus is the family and, therefore, requires personal outreach, home visits, multiple settings for meetings, and seeking creative ways to inform families who, because of work and other circumstances, are not able to attend an evening meeting on campus.

In this article, we focus on the ways that intergenerational family leadership recognizes the contributions of youth in family engagement, offering opportunities for them to serve as mentors to their peers as well as to adults in the community. We explore the ways that investing in true family leadership in this way has allowed us to scale up the *comunitario* approach as we have implemented our federal Investing in Innovation (i3) grant.<sup>1</sup>

1 For more on the i3 program, see <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/innovation/index.html?exp=0>.

## UNDERSTANDING INTERGENERATIONAL FAMILY LEADERSHIP

Each word in intergenerational family leadership has a special meaning in the *comunitario* programs:

- “Intergenerational” means not just adults telling youth what to think and do, but adults and youth working together. Every opinion counts.
- “Family” means that parents are just one set of key caretakers. There are grandparents, other adult kin, foster families, and non-family members who live with the family. The individuals in this circle are those who are legally, morally, and practically responsible for the children and who would most likely advocate for the best possible education for them.
- “Leadership” means that volunteerism within *comunitario* programs focuses on families advocating, bringing together, collaborating, and joining other families and schools to create excellent and equitable public schools. This leadership focuses on families taking action to improve schools. Unlike traditional PTAs, *comunitario* programs have no interest in fundraising and providing free labor for the schools.

The facilitators of our leadership process see it as collective and familial rather than a process of honing individual skills and searching for charismatic, vocal, and gregarious individuals. In our model, leadership is marked by genuine service to the community, listening, and critical dialogue.<sup>2</sup> Decisions are collective and responsibilities are shared. Elected positions rotate and everyone has tasks to perform. Small-group conversations are reported to the large group.

2 Critical dialogue means conversations that are based on issues of interest to the community about education and that use open-ended questions, allow for open dialogue with equal air time for participation, encourage authentic conversation, and have no right or wrong answer.

## THE COMUNITARIO MODEL

Comunitarios, which first developed within rural *colonias* (unincorporated communities) of south Texas, are innovative community and family partnerships with the sole purpose of collaborating with schools to improve the success of students in the community.<sup>3</sup> PTA comunitarios are affiliated with the national PTA organization but are based in a community organization rather than in a single school. Central components of the PTA comunitario model include community-based, distributive leadership that engages in school-community partnerships, spearheading educational projects using actionable data to improve schools. The PTA comunitario i3 project focuses on refining and expanding this model, establishing new PTA comunitarios within each of five South Texas public school districts.

Critical elements of the comunitario approach include:

- Valuing all families and assuming intelligence, high expectations for their children, and the will to take action in support of the education of their children.
- Intra- and inter-family collaboration, cooperation, and relationships.
- Intergenerational family leadership, where families gather as families, children are part of most events, and youth gather to have critical conversations about school and education.
- Building positive image: when we see a child from the barrio, we see a child with potential – intelligent, creative, having dreams and desires – not as hopeless.

The comunitario approach aligns with the U.S. Department of Education’s new Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships (Mapp & Kuttner 2013), which takes a strengths-based approach to building

skills and relationships with educators and families. A formal comunitario begins in the community where families live to focus on the “capabilities, connections, cognition, and confidence” described in this framework. The comunitario model has also been enriched by the work of Henderson & Mapp (2002), Epstein (2011), Hong (2012), and Weiss and colleagues (2014).

## COMMUNITY ROOTS: IDRA AND ARISE

Comunitarios, by definition, must be based in an existing community organization both for sustainability and for the trust and connection to their communities. The comunitario model itself is the product of a collaboration between two community organizations in south Texas: the Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA) and ARISE (A Resource in Serving Equality).<sup>4</sup>

IDRA is an independent nonprofit organization whose mission is to achieve equal educational opportunity for every child through strong public schools that prepare all students to access and succeed in college. IDRA’s family leadership in education approach evolved through work with families since the early 1980s, focusing on aspects of parent engagement that followed a different path than such traditional approaches as developing parenting skills or securing volunteers for schools. IDRA’s role as the comunitario innovator and backbone organization involved several key elements:

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3 See [http://www.idra.org/IDRA\\_Newsletter/June\\_July\\_2014\\_Actionable\\_Knowledge/Armed\\_with\\_Data/](http://www.idra.org/IDRA_Newsletter/June_July_2014_Actionable_Knowledge/Armed_with_Data/).

4 See <http://www.idra.org> and <http://www.arisesotex.org/>.

- conducting training-of-trainers;
- co-planning with grassroots organizations;
- responding to community requests for information on education issues;
- providing family-friendly materials in English and Spanish on policy, research, and practice;
- mentoring emerging leaders;
- offering training and technical assistance to groups and networks that focus on education;
- assuring that meetings, trainings, and workshops are asset-based and value the ideas and experiences of all participants; and
- shifting perceptions of participants as passive receivers of information to assertive actors who can fully engage in critical conversations.

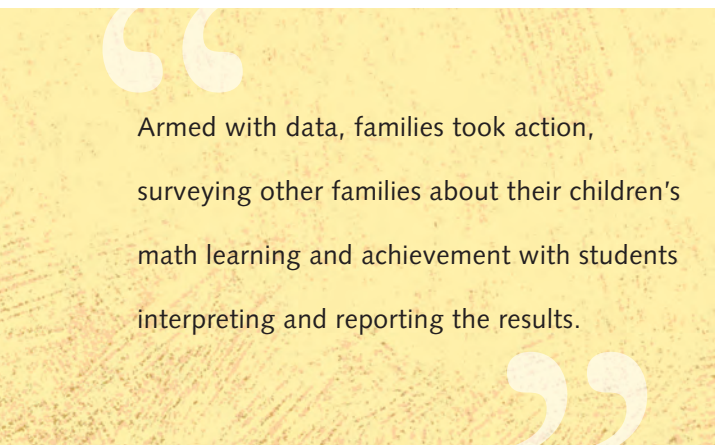
ARISE is a woman-centered organization that works with families in four colonias in South Texas, offering educational programs and workshops for youth and adults that focus on personal development and leadership in order to strengthen their communities. Many characteristics of the community-based organization ARISE made it perfectly aligned to launch the comunitario model:

- location in the community;
- strong community connections;
- clear commitment to education;
- inclusion of families and youth working together;
- emphasis on family strengths;
- valuing the assets of all participants;
- focus on family and youth as active participants;
- nurturing leadership of women; and
- goal of sustainability.

The collaboration between ARISE and IDRA provided a solid platform for building the sustainability of intergenerational family leadership in education. Because ARISE is a community organization rooted in strong family connections, it was the ideal context for comunitario work. As entire families gathered to discuss educational issues in the comunitario meetings at ARISE, the intergenerational family leadership model was strengthened. IDRA developed tools, such as the Our School portal in English and Spanish, to provide families with actionable data.<sup>5</sup> Armed with that data, families took action, surveying other families about their children’s math learning and achievement. Students led in interpreting and reporting the results. Such actions and others became the inspiration for further youth-adult collaborations on educational issues.

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<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.idra.org/ourschool/>.



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## **BUILDING YOUTH CAPACITY FOR MENTORSHIP, LEADERSHIP, AND COMMUNITY ACTION**

Intergenerational family leadership values and supports the participation of the entire community. While many traditional family engagement programs view children as the passive recipients of the benefits of parent involvement, our model sees youth as assets who can inform, lend expertise, and lead community efforts to improve their schools.

### **Youth “Tekies”: Supporting Positive Youth Image**

*“No, sir. I’m dumb and very poor in math!”*

This statement is at the heart of why intergenerational family leadership is critical. The story begins more than a decade ago, when the ARISE Community Center’s youth group became a support team for adults who had little or no experience with technology. Some old computers had been donated to the center, and the youth “tekies” became the technology bridge for the families. This youth project had evolved from the IDRA family leadership sessions set up to introduce families to online education resources.<sup>6</sup> These young people from those same economically disadvantaged neighborhoods of the colonias had already become the English language bridge for their families. Now, they also were their technology bridge. One high school junior was especially adept at guiding the ARISE ladies who were hesitant to hit the keys, imagining they would break something in the process. When one lady was ecstatic as she saw

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<sup>6</sup> See [http://www.idra.org/IDRA\\_Newsletter/March\\_2006\\_Student\\_Engagement/Eruption!\\_Bridging\\_Language\\_and\\_Technology\\_-\\_Educational\\_Leadership\\_Across\\_Generations/](http://www.idra.org/IDRA_Newsletter/March_2006_Student_Engagement/Eruption!_Bridging_Language_and_Technology_-_Educational_Leadership_Across_Generations/).

her name appear on the screen, we told the young tekie, “You’re a brilliant technology teacher.” She replied, “No, sir. I’m dumb and very poor in math!” When adults repeated the praise, she responded that they were prejudiced because they liked her, which must have been a good feeling.

The support given to youths in these centers is sometimes in stark contrast to the harsh environment they experience in school. IDRA has seen over and over that all children can learn and master high school course requirements with appropriate and effective support. Likewise, with appropriate support, they can take on leadership and carry out community projects for the betterment of their community and their education. Some of those early Youth Tekies are now teachers and in other professional fields. One is a staff member at ARISE.

### **Pedro: The Development of a Youth Leader**

Our intergenerational family leadership model helps to foster the development of youth leaders who continue to give back to their communities. For example, Pedro Nepomuceno began volunteering at ARISE when he was 12. He was part of the youth cadre that mentored little ones as part of ARISE’s summer program, which provides activities for young children who wouldn’t otherwise have any summer activities because of the isolation and poverty of their communities. The intergenerational leadership begins with these opportunities for cross-age mentoring. When he was 17, the summer before his freshman year of college, he participated in the IDRA-sponsored meeting, ¡Ya! Es Tiempo, as a youth tekie, guiding adults in how to use the OurSchool portal to get information about their schools. Based on what they learned, the families would later lead projects

focusing on curriculum, instruction, and college preparation in their local schools.

After receiving his bachelors' degree from Texas A&M University, Pedro spent some time working for ARISE.<sup>7</sup> While there, he accompanied a team to San Antonio to present on the ARISE comunitarios at the IDRA's annual *La Semana del Niño* Parent Institute, with an audience of parents and educators from across the state. Pedro was the translator for the presenters who made their entire presentation in Spanish. The session was live-streamed, making it possible for several groups in south Texas to participate. Part of the power of intergenerational family leadership comes from allowing youth to participate and lead in efforts to inform the community about their experiences in school.

### **MOBILIZING THE COMMUNITY: INTERGENERATIONAL FAMILY LEADERSHIP IN ACTION**

Our efforts to cultivate youth leadership and mentorship can have a deep impact on community engagement and activism. In the spring of 2015, the comunitario members and their network were very concerned about recent changes in the graduation requirements in Texas. The legislature removed the 4x4 requirements (four years of math, English, science, and social studies) that had previously resulted in over 80 percent of high school graduates having the necessary courses to be ready for college. Certain courses, such as Algebra II and English IV, are no longer required for high school students. While proponents of the weaker requirements claimed they were giving students more “choices,” the data show students had higher achievement under the old 4x4 plan. “College is not for everyone” became the mantra of those who praised these changes. Families, especially families

in rural colonias, feared that their children would be tracked into paths that, rather than preparing them for college, would return to the old days of vocational education.

In response, the education working group of the Rio Grande Valley Equal Voice Network<sup>8</sup> – a formal network of eleven community organizations, including ARISE and IDRA – decided to conduct a survey on the graduation requirement and college track issues, canvassing ten school districts and resulting in over 1,600 responses. The community members designed the questionnaire, collected the data, and interpreted the results with assistance from IDRA. In August of 2015, community members held a *Mesa Comunitaria*, a valley-wide meeting to report the results to more than 150 community members and school administrators.<sup>9</sup> The major findings were that most families were not informed and most did not know if their children were on a college track. Each participating comunitario and community group pledged plans of action as a follow-up.

Locally, the two comunitarios sponsored by ARISE planned a mini-Mesa Comunitaria in collaboration with IDRA and the Pharr-San Juan-Alamo school district (PSJA), which has recently undergone a transformation from a district with low achievement and expectations to one that prioritizes college readiness and completion for all students (Boroquez 2014). But rather than simply informing the community about graduation requirements as had

7 For an interview with Pedro about his experience in college, see [http://www.idra.org/IDRA\\_Newsletter/November\\_December\\_2015\\_Student\\_Voices/College\\_Students\\_Describe\\_What\\_a\\_School%E2%80%99s\\_/](http://www.idra.org/IDRA_Newsletter/November_December_2015_Student_Voices/College_Students_Describe_What_a_School%E2%80%99s_/).

8 See <https://www.facebook.com/rgvequalvoice/>.

9 See [http://www.idra.org/IDRA\\_Newsletter/November\\_December\\_2015\\_Student\\_Voices/Our\\_children\\_could\\_get\\_lost/](http://www.idra.org/IDRA_Newsletter/November_December_2015_Student_Voices/Our_children_could_get_lost/)

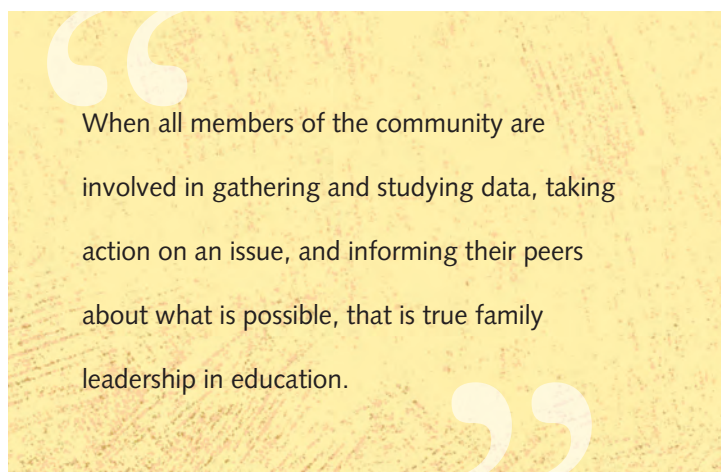
been done in the valley-wide meeting, local comunitarios chose to have presentations made by students who were participating in particular programs that spoke to the issues of graduation requirements and college preparation. Students who were on college tracks related what the benefits are, their experiences as students in these classes, and what challenges they face. A student who had dropped out talked about her college experience as a result of the drop-out recovery efforts of the school district.

More than 180 adults and 30 students participated in the mini-Mesa Comunitaria, and these stories had a great impact. The middle school students – who served as ambassadors guiding the participants to the sessions – were in awe as they heard the high school students’ presentations. The adults, some of whom had not heard about dual-credit courses and advanced classes, were moved to have their own children follow the lead of the students presenting. Some who came from neighboring districts wanted to have a comunitario in their area. This mini-Mesa Comunitaria shows the impact of intergenerational collaboration and leadership, where all members of the community are involved in gathering and studying data, taking action on an issue, and informing their peers about what is possible: true family leadership in education.

### SUCSESSES AND CHALLENGES THUS FAR

Regardless of economic situation, language ability, educational background, or neighborhood, families have the motivation, intelligence, and power to influence their local public schools and act on policy and practice to have an excellent education for all the children. We’ve seen the successful implementation of the comunitario approach manifested in many ways:

- Youth and adults spread word about the early comunitarios. Sister organizations appreciated what they heard and adopted the model. Since then, the RGV Equal Voice Network has been actively transmitting and promoting the comunitario model.
- All comunitarios, intergenerational and bilingual, learn about issues of critical interest to families in family-friendly language.
- A key part of the comunitario process is for members to take on an education project to effect change in their local school(s). Currently, all of the comunitarios have adopted education projects focusing on graduation requirements and college preparation tracks.
- Meetings, sessions, and workshops are participatory and include small-group conversations about critical education policies, programs, and practices.
- Intergenerational projects emerge from experiences and conversations and become opportunities for action.
- Adults and youth share information online for conducting meetings and making live-streamed presentations.
- Both youth and adults emerge as leaders.



When all members of the community are involved in gathering and studying data, taking action on an issue, and informing their peers about what is possible, that is true family leadership in education.

There are also many challenges. Work in the community is not a linear, step-by-step process. For the early comunitarios, one lesson learned quickly was not to elect officers too soon. Leadership needs to emerge after the group gets to know each other and has started to work on their educational project. Otherwise, elections are often based on personality or friendship rather than on commitment to the actionable data project. We do not want to repeat the mistakes of traditional parent organizations where the “super mom” or “super teen” become gatekeepers and elitist about their positions.

Typical school campuses have prejudices about families. There may be resistance, at first, to having families in advocacy roles. It takes time to work with school leadership to build trust. Young people can bridge the connection to families and help the school be more aware of the strengths of families. When students are allowed to be in leadership positions or be the presenters, it puts educators in the role of listeners, which nurtures mutual respect and understanding.

Time constraints are a constant challenge. Some families and schools want to see immediate change, but the comunitario process takes time. It is not a one-day event with a deliverable. Results are not quick; a more realistic span of time to see very concrete results in schools and communities would be five to ten years. You have to be committed for the long haul. We are collecting formative information and are involving families and youth in the debriefing and evaluation. Projects that result in families having a voice in improving schools motivate the community for continued action.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR OTHER COMMUNITIES

Important recommendations for replicating IDRA’s south Texas comunitario approach include:

- Identify a community organization, civic group, or church that is willing to sponsor and organize an intergenerational group of adults and youth from a specific community who want to have excellent public neighborhood schools.
- Partner with a grassroots organization that has real, ongoing, and personal contact with both adults and youth.
- Have a core group of both adults and youth who are in touch with their neighbors interested in belonging to such an organization.
- Build community and relationships through personal home-visits and one-on-one communication in the language of the community, conducted by comunitario members, the sponsoring organization staff, and – if there is access and a good relationship – the schools’ Title I family liaisons.
- Do not suggest electing officers or becoming a formal organization until the group has solidified and its members view themselves as a group.
- Bring together about twenty adults and youth who commit themselves to the organization and to the goal of excellent schools for all children.
- Facilitate a conversation to have the initial group identify their common vision and goals.
- Identify data sources on schools, preferably from a state education site. Ideally, an intermediary organization accesses data about schools and presents it or makes it accessible to community groups. IDRA helps to make information family-friendly

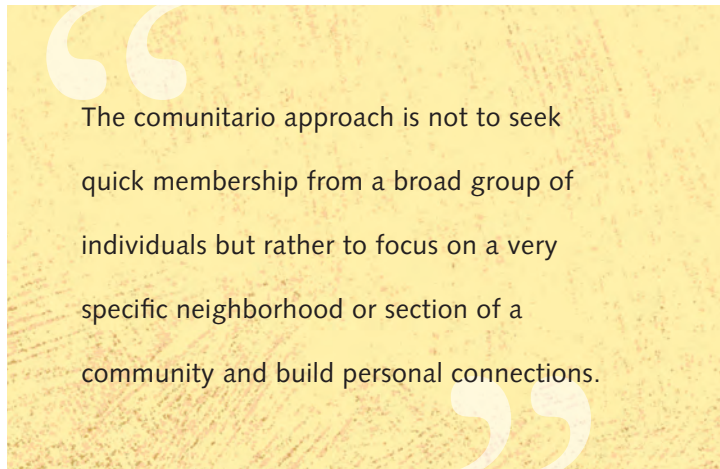


and translate it into Spanish. It is also important to have facilitating and training approaches to review and analyze data that allows for critical analysis and dialogue by the families.

There are, of course, caveats to these steps:

Do not start by trying to sell a parent-teacher organization to the initial group. Many of those we are approaching aren't interested in the traditional mode of a campus-based organization and in the traditional functions of such a group. You may mention that the ultimate goal is to form a community education organization, but the group must emerge with its own vision, mission, and goals around the focus on having all children having excellent neighborhood public schools.

Do not shoot for large numbers, speed, or scope of organization. Some excellent organizations have been formed that are regional or statewide, and those have their own place and function. The comunitario approach is not to seek quick membership from a broad group of individuals but rather to focus on a very specific neighborhood or section of a community and build personal connections. Mass media, printed fliers, or online communications cannot replace ongoing, authentic outreach and personal contact. The comunitario approach is given life and continuity through labor-intensive outreach, but it rewards the community with continuity and emerging leadership from parents who were previously marginalized.



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### POSSIBILITIES AND QUESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

If small community centers in colonias, with limited resources, can be the hosts of successful family-student-school education projects, there are great possibilities for many schools. When the starting point is the family, drawing on the assets and funds of knowledge in the community, the results can change the future of education for vulnerable students. Key questions for the future include:

- How do we identify community organizations that could sponsor comunitarios, and are there a significant number in the country?
- How do we maintain the strength-based, asset-valuing approach toward poor and disenfranchised families when the deficit or condescending attitudes permeate our institutions?

*For more youth-centered stories of intergenerational family leadership, see IDRA's May 2016 newsletter: [http://www.idra.org/images/stories/Newsltr\\_May2016.pdf](http://www.idra.org/images/stories/Newsltr_May2016.pdf).*

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## YOUTH VOICES AND ACTIVISM IN THE PTA COMUNITARIO

### Lupita Perez

*Lupita Perez is an animator at ARISE (A Resource in Serving Equality) in Alamo, Texas*

I got involved in ARISE because of my mother. My mother would participate in the meetings for ARISE, and she would come to the community PTA, and she would bring me. And then I started being a volunteer in ARISE, and that's how I got involved – about six years ago, when I was sixteen. When I started volunteering, I started participating in the summer program, and from there I started being a volunteer animator with kids from first and second grade at this program called *Lectura de Verano* – “Summer Reading.” And then from there I just started getting involved in ARISE, and now I'm on the staff at ARISE. My role is called an “animator,” and it involves being around the community, coordinating meetings, and going to the community door-to-door to show the kinds of programs we have. We animate women, children, and youth from the community to participate in our program and to be leaders of their own community.

When there's a PTA meeting, we go door-to-door and explain what a comunitario PTA meeting is, and we go and animate the community to come to our PTA. When parents hear “PTA,” they think it will be in English, because when the school's PTA invites them, the community basically doesn't go because it's just in English. Our community PTA is based in the language of the community, which is Spanish. If we bring in speakers who speak English, there is someone who will translate for the community. And when we tell them that the point of the meeting is to hear from our community, they get interested. And what I've seen is that the community actually comes to the community PTA meetings, and they advocate, and they learn.

When I was in high school, my mother didn't speak very much English. She wouldn't attend any of the PTA meetings at school, and she wouldn't even go and ask how I was doing at school, because she didn't know any English. And now, going to PTA comunitario meetings with my mom is motivating me to do what she couldn't do with me, with my brother and sister. Now my mother has learned a little bit more, and we actually go to the schools and we go and check up on my sister, now that she's in high school, how she's doing on her credits. Even though I work at ARISE, I still like coming to the PTA meetings. It has shown me how not to be nervous, how to ask questions, and learn a little bit more about my sister and her school.

When I was in high school, I didn't take the college prep classes because I didn't know that it was for my own good. I always thought it was really hard taking those classes. And one of the things I remember in one of the PTA meetings: they said that as Latinos, we don't take those classes because we don't want to struggle or we worried it's too much for us. From there, I learned that it was fine for my sister to take those college classes. My mom and I talked to her about it, and at first my sister didn't want to take the college classes because she was scared that it would be too much, and we pushed her and animated her to get those classes. And now she's actually in college classes and she's doing really well.

The youth are involved in the community PTA too. They are actually members of the PTA, and when we have meetings with families, the youth come with their parents, and they hear about the school credits, things that they know, and the youth try to explain to the community, too. I guess in one way, our youth tell their parents what goes on in school and the problems that they have in school. When I go to the community PTA meetings, I sometimes hear the parents bringing up problems that their kids are having in school, and I'm, like, “Oh, I had that problem, too.” And maybe this way, we can help each other.

And it's not just the meetings. We have trainings for the youth every month. And we have a week of retreat for them in the summer. That's when they plan a project that they want to do during the year to help the community. We ask them, what are the problems that you see in your community? What are the things you want to change? They're the ones who actually plan what project they want to do. At ARISE, we might help them, but it's all based on them.

This year, it was the wastewater treatment plant that they wanted to change. They have educated the community on how to advocate on rights. They actually made this community meeting, and they educated the community on the problem that we've been having here in the community, which is a really bad odor – they wanted to stop the smell. Some people in the community say that they have complained, but there hasn't been any change. A group of youth leaders started passing out flyers door-to-door to the community, and started giving a little bit of information about what's causing the smell, and as a community member what they could do. And one man from the community said it was a really good thing that the youth were taking action on a community problem, and that he was going to assist at any of the community meetings that the youth could make. We've been working in collaboration with the city, trying to find grant money to buy a mechanical wastewater treatment plant. We've been working with the EPA and a lot of other different organizations, and the youth have actually gone and presented the project at the courthouse, and they have shown it to the city, to the commissioner.

There are younger kids from our community that see our youth volunteers, and those kids have said that they want to be a volunteer when they grow up. They want to be volunteers and they want to help other kids. And some of our youth go to college, some start working, but they still come, any chance that they have, they still come. And they come over and they still help with our kids from the community. That's what they love – they love seeing the kids from the community happy.