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## Latino Family Engagement in a Network of Catholic Bilingual Schools

Gabrielle Oliveira<sup>1</sup>, Eunhye Cho<sup>2</sup> and Olivia Barbieri<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** In this article, we examine how a Network of Catholic Bilingual Schools (NCBS) serves Latino populations by examining the leadership's narratives of the school services and outreach. By employing a survey with 16 principals in the NCBS, we argue that the rate of engagement is similar between Latino and non-Latino parents, although the nature of the activities varied. Despite the long-held belief that Latino parents are less likely to participate in schooling than non-Latino parents, we found that Latino parents committed their participation in schools across cultural, linguistic, or religious activities. We highlight how principals acknowledge and describe Latino families' involvement as highly invested in their children's education and their aspirations toward proficiency in both languages, Spanish and English as well a deep-rooted commitment to Catholic values.

**Keywords:** Latino, family, engagement, bilingualism

Catholic Education is founded on the belief that **parents** are the primary educators of their students. School A strives to foster a sense of community for all families to create a true **multicultural community faith** and **excellence**. (From the website of School ID 1001, California; authors' emphasis)

School B partners with **parents** to provide rigorous **dual language education** centered on the **faith formation** of the whole child to guide him or her in becoming global citizens in the service of others. (*El colegio se une a los padres de sus estudiantes para proveer una rigurosa educación bilingüe centrada en la fé y de formar ciudadanos conscientes al servicio de su comunidad.*) (From the website of School ID 1002, Washington; author's emphasis)

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As the United States experiences a historic degree of change in its demographic and linguistic landscape (Betti, 2018), Catholic education has the opportunity to serve an increasingly diverse range of families, students, and communities. Historically, the U.S. Catholic Church has been enriched by inclusive representation of cultures and languages that reflect the wider demographic shifts in the country (McLaughlin et al., 1996). Today, over 40% of U.S. Catholics identify themselves as Latino, with this percentage expected to continue growing in decades to come (Ospino, 2015). While the majority of Catholic Latinos were born in the United States, the Church remains at the central part of religious and cultural contact for newly arrived immigrants from Latin America. Both U.S.-born and immigrant Latino families navigate the cultural landscape of the United States, often while maintaining robust cultural and familial relationships across national boundaries (Oliveira, 2018; Skerrett, 2015).

In this article we examine how a group of principals in a Network of Catholic Bilingual Schools (NCBS) serve Latino/a families. We do that by analyzing the results of a survey distributed to 16 principals who are part of the NCBS as well as one in-person observational visit at one of the schools in the network. NCBS has been rooted in promoting Catholic education within the Latino population, and this study highlights a need to examine how bilingual Catholic schools perform outreach to Latino families in their communities. Specific attention was paid to the principals' narratives in order to understand how schools bridge their services toward the Latino community. With the decrease of student enrollment in Catholic schools (Kim, 2016; Ospino & Weitzel-O'Neill, 2016), NCBS was launched in order to cater for the educational needs of Latino populations (Ospino & Weitzel-O'Neill, 2016). Bilingual education has been known to promote better test scores, better job possibilities, and flexibility in thinking (Bialystok et al., 2012; Grosjean, 2010) while raising awareness toward Catholic identity that embraces human dignity and public good (Scanlan & Zehrbach, 2010). Also, the school network system is expected to have cultivated an innovative leadership structure, promotion of students' academic excellence through professional development, and enhancement in Catholic identity (Huchting et al., 2017). With this background, this study addresses the following research questions: To what extent, according to principals in a nation-wide network, do Catholic bilingual schools in the NCBS serve Latino populations through family engagement? How might these schools' services impact the experience of teachers and families in the program? The frameworks that inform this study are approaches in family engagement as a construct toward the understanding of Latino/a family's experiences with bilingual/Catholic schools. We situate this framework within the anthropology and sociology of family engagement in the context of Latino populations in the United States. How do family, school and Church contribute to understandings of why school-based family engagement is a crucial practice within Latino populations?

Family and community engagement with/in (with or in) schools are promoted in the literature as essential to the social and academic flourishing of students (Driscoll & Goldring, 2005; Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Henderson et al., 2007; Lareau, 1996; Nieto, 2004). When there is rupture between schools and families and there is no support for the learning and development of students, student success in school is hampered (Driscoll & Goldring, 2005). Vera et al. (2017) in their study of English Language Learners (ELL)' parental involvement in Catholic schools revealed the important role of teachers in mediating parental involvement of English Language Learners in schools. Their findings indicated that, "...Latino parental involvement may increase when teachers of ELLs are well-prepared and equipped to hold students to high expectations, invest students in educational practices, support student achievement, and create learning environments that welcome and celebrate both students and families..." (p. 16). In the same vein, our study further probes the role of principals in bilingual/Catholic schools in encouraging and reaching out to Latino families in their community.

## Literature Review

### Catholic Education and Latino/a populations

In the United States, over 40% of Catholics are Hispanic. Over half of the school-age Catholics in the United States are Hispanic, but only 4% of Hispanic school-age Catholics attend a Catholic school. In the 2013-2014 school year, only 15% of students in Catholic schools were Hispanic. Due to this, it is important that Catholic schools do more to increase Latino involvement and enrollment (Ospino & Weitzel-O'Neill, 2016). Catholic elementary schools have been found to underserve Latino families in general, especially those with limited English proficiency (Scanlan & Zehrbach, 2010). With the growing Catholic Latino population in the United States, it is important that they are represented in Catholic schools (Fraga, 2016).

Despite lower enrollment in Catholic schools among Latino families, there is a strong connection between Latino family values and the values of Catholic schools. Many Latino cultures place a strong emphasis on family life, which is in line with the Catholic education's mission of caring for the whole person and its strong emphasis on relationships and the familial bond (Ospino & Weitzel-O'Neill, 2016). Latino parents often want their children to remain Catholic and grow their faith, which strengthens parents' desire to send their children to Catholic schools (Crea et al., 2015; Suhy, 2012).

However, one challenge to Latino families sending their children to Catholic schools is the high cost of tuition (Fraga, 2016; Scanlan & Zehrbach, 2010; Suhy, 2012). In one study done in Dallas, TX, Latino parents expressed that they felt Catholic schools were not affordable, although they did want their children to attend. All participants in this study said that if Catholic schools were free, they would send their children to them (Suhy, 2012).

## **Family Engagement in Bilingual and Catholic Schools**

In order to make Latino families feel more welcome in Catholic schools, it is important that teachers and staff reach out to form connections and establish communication, as Latino parents are more likely to be involved in the school when they feel welcomed by teachers. Some Catholic schools even use community parishes to reach out to parents through social events after Mass where teachers and parents can communicate with one another (Vera et al., 2017).

However, there are some barriers to Latino family engagement in Catholic schools. One main challenge is the language barrier that may exist between families and schools (Crea et al., 2015). Another challenge is the perception by Latino parents that Catholic schools are not welcoming to Latinos, especially to lower income Latino families (Scanlan & Zehrbach, 2010; Suhy, 2012). Latino families may not feel welcome due to schools not having bilingual programming, having a limited number of Latino teachers, or by not reflecting a multicultural community (Scanlan & Zehrbach, 2010). However, bilingual Catholic schools can help offset some of these challenges that Latino families face.

Two-way Immersion (TWI) programs within Catholic schools can help increase Latino enrollment as well as family engagement within a school. TWI programs provide an inclusive way for Catholic schools to reach Latino students, can help attract more Latino families to the Catholic school, and can help eliminate the language barrier that may exist in the school (Scanlan & Zehrbach, 2010). One study found that TWI programs helped increase Latino access to Catholic schools, and helped parents see Catholic schools as providing their children with unique learning opportunities (Fraga, 2016). It has also been found that TWI Catholic schools in Spanish and English have high numbers of bilingual and bicultural faculty and have higher levels of Latino family engagement than Catholic schools without TWI programs (Ospino & Weitzel-O'Neill, 2016).

It is also important to note that even when a Catholic school is not bilingual, having resources and outreach in Spanish helps increase Latino enrollment and family engagement within a school. For example, Latino enrollment increased in one school due to marketing materials in Spanish, tuition assistance, and Spanish language outreach (Fraga, 2016). It is also helpful for schools to have a parent coordinator or a bilingual-bicultural liaison between Latino families and the school to help support Latino families and facilitate communication between parents and the school staff (Crea et al., 2015; Fraga, 2016).

## **The Role of School Leadership in Family Engagement in Bilingual Catholic Schools**

Principals and school leaders play an important role in Latino family engagement in Catholic and Catholic bilingual schools. In order to increase Latino family engagement, it is important that principals make this a priority. For example, in one TWI Catholic school, the principal sought to create mixed groupings of parents through informal coffee groups to support each other and

encourage them to support their children at home (Scanlan & Zehrbach, 2010). To increase family engagement, it is important that principals work with families to build trust and acceptance, while fostering a sense of community (Marasco, 2016).

Additionally, in order to effectively communicate with Latino families and increase Latino enrollment and family engagement in Catholic schools, principals must receive training in cultural competency in relation to Latino communities. It has been found that principals of Catholic schools who speak Spanish or have participated in a cultural competency training are more likely to ensure that their schools are welcoming to Latino families (Ospino & Weitzel-O'Neill, 2016). In one Catholic school, a new principal who attended a cultural competency training was able to triple enrollment in three years. This was done partly by speaking about the school in English and Spanish at Masses, and by organizing community events sponsored by the school. Another principal of a Catholic school recognized that the school must be more culturally welcoming and that Latino parents should be on the school board to help give this population a stronger voice in the school (Ospino & Weitzel-O'Neill, 2016). Additionally, some principals have even participated in door-to-door visits with families in order to immerse themselves in the culture, connect with families, and offer them support (Fraga, 2016; Marasco, 2016). In Catholic schools, the most effective school leaders accept the diversity of the community and recognize the need to participate in the community (Marasco, 2016).

## Methodology

### Research Site

The data for this study were drawn from a larger one-year exploratory case study in collaboration with NCBS. There are 19 total member schools of NCBS located in 10 different US states. Of the member schools, 16 participated in this study, a response rate of 84.2. Fifteen schools had Spanish-English bilingual programs, while one school had a Mandarin-English bilingual program. Eleven schools served Pre-Kindergarten to 8th grade (PK-8), two schools served Kindergarten through 8th grade (K-8), and one school served Transitional Kindergarten to 6th grade (TK-6). Two schools did not report the grade levels they serve. The locations of the schools were evenly dispersed: four schools were in the Midwest; four schools were in the Southwest; three schools were on the West coast; two schools were in the Northeast and one school was in the Southeast. The average percentage estimate of Catholic population by state is approximately 22%, ranging from 17% to 31% (Pew Research Center, 2014).

The Latino student population in the schools who are part of this network (NCBS) is quite high at 74%, which is significantly higher than the average percentage estimate of Latino students enrolled in public schools in the same area (16%) (National Center of Education Statistics, 2017). In addition, there is a large gap between the percentage of Latino students in NCBS schools compared

to other schools in the same district, as shown in Table 1. This implies that Latino families chose to come to a school that is part of NCBS. Regarding the usage of Spanish as the home language, all the schools who answered exhibited a higher percentage than the one of its district, apart from the two schools, implying that the parents of the NCBS tend to value using Spanish at home.

**Table 1***Research Participant Schools*

ID	School Name	Grades (From- To)	Bilingual Language	State (Region)	Catholic Population in State*	Latino Population of School (of District)**	Spanish as Home Language at School (at District)***
1001	School A	TK-6	Spanish	CA	28%	76% (59%)	52% (47%)
1002	School B	PK-8	Spanish	WA	17%	N/A (11%)	N/A (7%)
1003	School C	PK-8	Spanish	WA	17%	67% (7%)	N/A (4%)
1004	School D	PK-8	Spanish	TX	23%	86% (43%)	43% (35%)
1005	School E	K-8	Spanish	AZ	21%	100% (51%)	50% (37%)
1006	School F	PK-8	Spanish	TX	23%	97% (45%)	34% (42%)
1007	School G	PK-8	Spanish	TX	23%	85% (79%)	24% (52%)
1008	School H	PK-8	Spanish	FL	21%	60% (36%)	60% (26%)
1009	School I	PK-8	Mandarin	NY	31%	38% (29%)	N/A (24%)
1010	School J	PK-8	Spanish	MD	15%	60% (5%)	60% (4%)
1011	School K	PK-8	Spanish	NE	23%	65% (17%)	28% (14%)
1012	School L	PK-8	Spanish	NE	23%	55% (17%)	39% (14%)
1013	School M	K-8	Spanish	MN	22%	95% (10%)	95% (8%)
1014	School N	PK-8	Spanish	IA	18%	N/A (13%)	N/A (9%)
2001	Anonymous 1****	N/A	Spanish	N/A	N/A	60% (N/A)	60% (N/A)
2002	Anonymous 2****	N/A	Spanish	N/A	N/A	90% (N/A)	90% (N/A)

*Note:*

\* Catholic population estimates: Religious Landscape study by Pew Research Center <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/religious-tradition/catholic/>

\*\* Latino population of the school district that school is affiliated with: 2018 US Census Data <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/>

\*\*\* Spanish as Home Language at the school district that school is affiliated with: 2018 US Census Data <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/>

\*\*\*\* The principals of the two schools (pseudonym) did not provide their school names in the survey so their school districts are not identifiable.

\*\*\*\*\* N/A: N/A denotes data not available either at the school level or at the district level.

**Catholic Bilingual School Principal Survey**

The data for this study were collected using the Catholic Bilingual School Principal Survey (CBSP), a tool developed by Gabrielle Oliveira’s team at Boston College to examine how Catholic bilingual schools facilitate family engagement by identifying the types and magnitude of practices used to support family engagement in the context of school. The CBSP was built from the previous literature that contributed to family engagement in school (Lowenhaupt, 2014; Povey et al., 2016). Lowenhaupt (2014) sorted parental engagement into the two categories of access (school-led services that were intended to increase parents’ accessibility to existing practices) and participation (the activities that parents actively led, or partnered with schools in planning and organizing). We augmented Lowenhaupt’s (2014) analytical tool of access and participation by involving three axes: timeline, degree of involvement, and Catholic values. Given that parents, especially Latino/a immigrant parents have different stages of adjustment to school systems compared to non-immigrant parents (Han & Love, 2015), our analytical framework consisted of three axes (Figure 1): (1) Stages of the engagement process: enrollment and onward engagement; (2) Degree of involvement: access and participation; (3) Catholic values: equity and a sense of community.

**Figure 1**  
*Analytical Framework for the Study*

Axis	Stages of the engagement process	Degree of involvement	Catholic values
Component	Enrollment Onward engagement	Access Participation	Equity A sense of community

The CBSP measures principals’ perceptions of the school’s role in family engagement; it also measures principals’ perceptions of how and to what extent Catholic bilingual schools facilitate family engagement by incorporating cultural and spiritual experiences of the Latino population. The data from the present study are drawn from CBSP items focused on school support for Latino family engagement, including:

1. Political and societal context (8 items)
2. Successful activities for enrollment and engagement (2 items, open-ended)
3. Linguistic inclusion (3 items)
4. Religious connection (6 items)



5. Outreach and cultural understanding (1 item)
6. Offering services and connection to services (4 items)
7. Volunteering (3 items)

### **Sample**

The Catholic Bilingual School Principal Survey (CBSP) employed a total population design targeting the 19 member schools of the Network of Catholic Bilingual Schools (NCBS) in 10 states in the US. During the spring of 2018, 16 administrators answered the survey (84%): 15 principals and one assistant principal. Among the administrators who identified their demographic information, 86.7% were female (n=13) and 13.1% were male (n=2). Roughly one third were in their 30s (n=5, 33.3%), followed by 40s (n=4, 26.7%), 60s (n=3, 6.7%), 50s (n=2, 13.3%) and 20s (n=1, 6.7%). Most of them had more than 10 years of work experience in an education sector, except one principal having less than 10 years work experience: 10-19 years (n=5, 33.3%), 20-29 years (n=3, 20.0%), 30-39 years (n=1, 13%), 40-49 years (n=1, 6.7%). Nearly 87% identified their race as White (n=13) and the remaining two principals identified themselves as American Indian or Alaska Native (n=2, 13.3%). Regarding ethnicity, eight principals self-identified as Latino (53.3%). Nearly 86% (n=12) identified they were born in the US, whereas 14% (n=2) migrated from Latin America. Apart from one principal, all participants spoke Spanish (n=14, 92.7%) and 10 participants perceived their Spanish proficiency as proficient or fluent.

### **Analysis**

The survey data were analyzed to answer the research question about how the school made institutionalized efforts to increase access and participation of the Latino parents in the process of enrollment and onward engagement. First, the political and societal context-related items were analyzed to understand how these contexts impact the way that each school supports parental engagement. Second, the two open-ended items related to the successful activities for enrollment and engagement were quantified based on the frequency and types of the activity reported as successful. The data formation was conducted from the qualitative data (open-ended answer) to the quantitative data. This process allows for forming the central support that the school provided for Latino parents by timeline of enrollment and onward engagement: Enrollment (religious connection; Linguistic inclusion; Outreach and Cultural Understanding) and Onward Engagement (One Stop Shop Approach; Parent-Teacher Organizations; Event Planning by parents. Volunteering.)

### **Observational Data Collection and Analysis**

For in-depth analysis of parental engagement, two authors visited one selected site, School ID 1007, Texas. This is a Catholic dual language, co-educational PK-8th grade school. This school

was selected based on the survey response of its principal and consultation with the funder of the Network of the Bilingual Catholic School with the goal of identifying the site that provided variation in terms of geography, student population, and relative success with immigrant family engagement. The school is located in the city near the Southern border where Latino population accounts for 79% of the total population (n=323,048) which makes sense of the percentage of the Latino students of this school (85%) (Kids Count Center, 2020). Twenty four percent of the school students use Spanish as their home language, and its percentage is lower than the one of the school district (52%). This school strives for its mission to engage students in dynamic academic experience preparing them for college and heaven. Dual language programs are one of the tools for this mission. The school sees benefits of dual language with the five points (5 C): Cognitive, Career, College, Cultural and Catholic.

### Findings

Catholic bilingual schools offered various activities to engage families pre- and post-enrollment. The activities schools reported as successful for family engagement were similar across Latino and Non-Latino subgroups. However, schools reported Latino parents were more likely to be engaged in activities that were either cultural or religious in nature. When schools were trying to recruit new parents and students, they promoted the accessibility of the schools' services to Latino/a populations by translating materials and hiring bilingual staff. In order to recruit Latino/a families, schools contacted Catholic churches and organizations where Latino parents would get information about schooling. Latino parents took an active role in inviting more students to their school through the schools' parent organization. Once parents enrolled their children in school, schools emphasized active participation of both sub-groups of parents such as leadership roles in parent meetings to integrate and empower families. In this regard, our data demonstrated that the rate of engagement is similar between ethnic subgroups, but the nature of the activities in which they engaged differed.

In the following section, we begin with a sketch of the context of schools, specifically, how schools have changed under the influence of the federal government, state, local entity, and diocese. The explanation of the contexts of the Catholic bilingual school may enable us to understand how and why the schools organize parental involvement in some ways. Next, we present how school facilitates enrollment of Latino families with focus on three components: (a) Religious connection for Latino families; (b) linguistic inclusion; and (c) outreach and cultural understanding. Then, we describe how schools made efforts to engage Latino parents once they enrolled in school and how Latino parents engage in the school activities. This section, onward engagement, consists of four components: (a) One-stop shop approach; (b) parent-teacher organization; (c) event planning by parents; and (d) volunteering.

## Grounding the Context

The social contexts have appeared to influence how schools organize parental engagement. Table 2 shows the results of the items in which the principals were asked about the impact of the federal government, state, local entity and diocese on their school's abilities to serve immigrant families. The results allow us to compare the impact of four different exterior levels that the respondents perceive. From the table, it is clear that the "no influence" is the most frequent answer across the four different levels of agencies. This implies that Catholic bilingual school principals perceive that their schools are quite insular from outside influences. With this result, we can assume that each individual school has its own established system to deal with expected and unexpected influences to some degree.

**Table 2**

*Influences on Schools' Ability to Serve Immigrant Families (n = 14)*

	Federal Government N (%)	State N (%)	Local N (%)	Diocese N (%)
Very positive influence	0 (0%)	1 (7%)	1 (7%)	2 (14%)
Somewhat positive influence	1 (7%)	3 (21%)	2 (14%)	3 (21%)
No influence	5 (36%)	6 (43%)	7 (50%)	6 (43%)
Somewhat negative influence	4 (29%)	1 (7%)	2 (14%)	1 (7%)
Very negative influence	2 (14%)	1 (7%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
I don't know	2 (14%)	2 (14%)	2 (14%)	2 (14%)

Despite the results that Catholic bilingual schools are seemingly insular, when taking a closer look at the open-ended answers, some patterns are shown allowing for deeper understanding of how these contexts influenced serving immigrant students. First, the schools have reported that federal-level anti-immigrant rhetoric has negatively impacted their school's abilities to serve immigrant families (n=6, 43%). The schools addressed anti-immigrant tenor fueled by the current administration as the current challenges they faced in fostering the school enrollment of Latino population. One principal commented that "With the current federal political tone being as it is, we have experienced our Latino families pulling back and not wanting to be as engaged" (School ID 1011, Nebraska).

The federal government's impact on school differs from where a school is located. The schools near the US-Mexico South border tend to take this situation seriously. The principals reported that they are worried about their school parents' job loss, parental detention and deportation of the families which may disrupt their children's learning and living. The principal of the school at the border summarized the federal impact by saying "SB1070, The election of the President, DACA"

(School ID 1005, Arizona). Compared to the schools at the border, the schools in other regions such as the Midwest or Northeast are more likely to mention financial difficulties caused by federal title funds as the negative impact at a federal-level: “Changes to how federal title funds can be spent have created difficulties in providing the services that students need” (School ID 1013, Minnesota).

For the state-level impact, nearly 43% of the principals reported that there was no influence from the state on their abilities to serve immigrant populations. However, two principals addressed the state’s financial support for managing their schools: “State provides funding for public school students to attend private schools” (School ID 1010, Maryland), “There is a wonderful, state scholarship fund that keeps us afloat (but is threatened to end each year)” (School ID 2002, State not identified). However, for local-level impact, there was no additional description of how schools get impacted.

In contrast to the results for federal-level impact, results for the diocese level show that the principals felt a positive impact from the diocese (35%, n=5). The three schools reported specific support that they have received from archdiocese in low income populations which included immigrant families. One school principal contrasted how dioceses support immigrant families as opposed to federal agency: “I have not noticed a change in helping to serve immigrant families based on policy changes in Washington or nationally. Our [school] has created initiatives that have helped us to better serve immigrant families” (School ID 1003, Washington). According to one school (School ID 1009, New York), the diocese’ ways to support schools varied. For example, the diocese can designate a school as an “Embassy” school to support lower income families. The principal explained, “also the diocese pays support funds with a certain period of agreement (e.g. a 3-5 year financial commitment to our school)”. Other schools (School ID 1010, Maryland) provided a different example for funding such as money to be used for additional staffing.

## **Enrollment**

The principals were asked to report the successful activities that they organized to improve enrollment of Latino populations (Table 3). The principals reported various outreach strategies and content used for advertisement of the school. With regards to the outreach strategies, the school-organized advertisement event was reported as successful by nearly 31% of the respondents (n=8). The schools held a school tour, open house, information session, and a social event. The schools were also linked to various preschools or Catholic organizations (n=3, 13%). Some schools issued newsletters and flyers and spread the enrollment plan through SNS, TV, newspaper, and their schools’ websites (n=2, 8%).

The content that has been reported as successful for increasing the enrollment of Latino families are: Catholic values of school (n=5, 19%), linguistic inclusion (n=3, 12%) and outreach with cultural understanding (n=3, 12%). In other words, principals reported that Latino parents want to send

**Table 3***Resources and Activities for Recruitment of Latino and Non-Latino Families (%)*

Activity	Schools using resource/ activity to recruit Latino families n (%)	Schools using activity to recruit Non-Latino Families n (%)
School-organized advertisement event (tour, open house, information session, social event)	8 (31%)	10 (48%)
Connection to Catholic church and organizations	5 (19%)	1 (5%)
Bilingual staff and Latino outreach coordinator	3 (12%)	1 (5%)
Word of mouth & Connection to linked preschool and facility	3 (12%)	3 (14%)
Parental organization's recruitment activity	3 (12%)	0 (0%)
Materials (newsletters & flyers) and media (SNS, TV, newspaper, website)	2 (8%)	4 (19%)
Financial aid	2 (8%)	1 (5%)

*Note.* As some schools specified more than one activity, the total number of activities reported is above the total number of principals who responded to the survey.

their children to Catholic bilingual school and participate in parental activities at school because the school emphasizes Catholic values, provides various language support, and encourages some parents to take a lead for recruitment activities in respecting those parents' cultural experiences. The following section provides more detailed information about how these three contents, religious connection for Latino families, linguistic inclusion, and outreach and cultural understanding, helped to increase Latino families' enrollment in school.

### **Religious Connection for Latino Families**

As mentioned above, the Catholic bilingual school principals viewed their religious connection as one of the factors which increased enrollment of Latino population. The schools reported to what extent school activities are organized based on Catholic faith. They also reported to what extent schools incorporate Latino families' faith values and customs. In all items, mean ratings are between 4 (Often) and 5 (Always), which demonstrates Catholic bilingual high school's strong commitment to religious connection for Latino families. Most of the principals always focused on the faith development of students ( $M=4.6$ ,  $SD=0.6$ ) and they made school-based activity decisions rooted in the Catholic faith ( $M=4.6$ ,  $SD=0.5$ ). Considering the school's emphasis on Catholic values, it seems reasonable for principals to report that the students in their schools are likely to know the value of attending Mass or other prayer services as part of Catholic/Christian school ( $M=4.4$ ,  $SD=0.8$ ).

The Catholic bilingual schools also reported supporting parents for the spiritual mission of the school ( $M=4.2$ ,  $SD=0.7$ ). Moreover, the schools had specific considerations for Latino families' cultural and spiritual experiences. The schools reported that their values and goals are aligned with those of Latino families and the Catholic church ( $M=4.4$ ,  $SD=0.8$ ). They shed light on faith customs of different Latino groups in religious celebrations, which may fulfill the specific demands of different Latino groups for schools ( $Me=4.2$ ,  $SD=1.0$ ).

That the Catholic bilingual schools accommodate cultural and spiritual experiences of Latino families was also observed in the answers to the open-ended question that asked how schools engaged in practices to include Spanish-speaking families. Some of the schools held bilingual Masses and religious possessions popular in Latino families. In this regard, there was an evidence showing the Catholic school's commitment to foster Latino families' enrollment by accepting their cultural and spiritual experiences:

Our school is very strong on cultural, social events which are part of different Latin cultures. These events bring our community together to celebrate, and the non-Spanish speaking parents also embrace them. Since we are next door to a very large Latino church, we also participate in religious celebrations. (School ID 2001, State not identified)

### **Linguistic Inclusion**

The Catholic school principals cited their linguistic inclusion for Latino families as a successful factor for enrollment of Latino families in school ( $n=3$ , 12%). The schools provided assistance to help the enrollment of Latino families who prefer to speak in Spanish. Out of the 16 schools, 10 schools (63%) reported that they always provide assistance for enrollment in Spanish, followed by 3 schools (32%) that answered they sometimes provide assistance for enrollment in Spanish.

The schools have a sufficient number of teachers who speak Spanish and can assist the Latino population's school enrollment. Table 4 shows that 11 out of 14 schools (83%) reported that more than half the teacher populations in their schools speak Spanish fluently. With regards to ESL certification, 80% of the schools have equal to or less than 50% of the teacher population who are certified in ESL. This means that in the remaining two schools, more than 50% of teachers are certified in ESL. The Catholic bilingual schools also have teachers who are certified in bilingual education. 67% of the schools ( $n=10$ ) reported that they have less than 25% of the teacher population who are certified in bilingual education. Interestingly, not only teachers but also staff members working for the schools are reported to speak Spanish fluently. 10 schools (67%) reported that more than half of their school staff can speak Spanish fluently. These results show that the schools have a Spanish-friendly environment that may enable Latino families to access a school in which there is less convenience conducive to language barriers.

**Table 4***Language and Certification of Teachers in Schools (N=14)*

Percentage of Teachers	Speak Spanish Fluently	Certified in ESL	Certified in Bilingual Education
0-25%	1 (7%)	9 (60%)	10 (67%)
26-50%	2 (13%)	3 (20%)	1 (7%)
51-75%	8 (53%)	1 (7%)	3 (20%)
76-100%	3 (20%)	1 (7%)	0

### Outreach and Cultural Understanding

Some of the principals regarded additional linguistic support as successful, for example, the employment of bilingual staff members and Latino outreach coordinators as well as the translation of materials and flyers. Five schools (34%) had a staff member whose task is dedicated to parental outreach. One of the principals provided a detailed explanation about why they hired a Latino enrollment coordinator and what benefits that staff brought to the school in relation to the enrollment of Latino families:

The Archdiocese hired a Latino Enrollment Coordinator about 4-5 years [ago] to address the decline of Latino enrollment in Catholic Schools. Since then we have been able to increase our ability to welcome and retain families with immigrant backgrounds. Our coordinator knows our families and their needs. However, due to Federal influence, families are scared and unsure which has contributed to a decline in the last two years. (School ID 1012, Nebraska)

The Latino coordinator has knowledge about Latino family needs and guides them to receive the appropriate support given the current anti-Latino climate. Not only did the schools adapt their existing services for Latino parents (access), they also encouraged Latino parents to engage in outreach (participation). For instance, a program called *Madrinas* paired up Latino parents with prospective parents as a mentor-mentee relationship to help recruit other parents. One principal stated that this program has been effective, and another principal concurred, stating,

*Madrina* program component of pairing up the parents with another returning Spanish parent as a mentor has been really helpful, as well as having them in the *Madrina* leadership role. (School ID 1004, Texas)

Forty-four percent of the schools (n=7) reported that Latino families often or always want to do outreach activities, followed by sometimes (n=4, 25%), rarely (n=2, 19%), and never (n=2, 13%). The degree of willingness to do outreach activities quite varies according to the principal, but some of the schools provided meaningful activities organized by Latino parents as shown above. Overall, in the stage of enrollment, Catholic bilingual schools emphasized the importance of providing services regardless of parents' ethnic groups, yet, in some schools, Latino parents proactively

contributed to recruitment for prospective family enrollment with their linguistic and religious assets.

**Onward Engagement**

Once families enrolled their children in the school, schools provided a wide range of services including linguistic inclusion and academic support as well as medical and legal needs (access). Concurrently, schools encouraged parents to participate in parent-school organizations and to volunteer at school events (participation). Among the aforementioned activities, all the principals reported that the activities with higher degrees of parent participation were more successful (See Table 5). For example, parent-school organizations and meetings got the highest success ratings by the principals.

**Table 5**  
*Successful Engagement Activities for Latino and Non-Latino Families*

Activity	Schools using activity to engage Latino parents n (%)	Schools using activity to engage Non-Latino parents n (%)
Parent organization and meeting	12 (50%)	11 (65%)
Event planning	8 (33%)	2 (12%)
Volunteering	4 (17%)	3 (18%)
Others (i.e. conversation about the importance of Two-Way Immersion Programs)	0 (0%)	1 (6%)
Total	24 (100%)	17 (100%)

*Note.* As some schools specified more than one activity, the total number of activities reported is above the total number of principals who responded to the survey.

**“One Stop Shop” Approach**

The Catholic bilingual schools in the NCBS have a “one-stop shop” model for service provision to their Latino populations. On the items asking the principals about how frequently the Catholic bilingual schools provide each service to Latino families ranging from Never (1) to Always (3), six services of the seven recorded the mean ratings above 2 (Sometimes). It presents that the schools offer or connect to various services inside and outside school: Summer camps/academic support (Mean = 2.6, SD = 0.5); Services interpreting letters or other legal documents (Mean = 2.5, SD = 0.7); Services outside of the school (Mean = 2.5, SD = 0.7); After-school/tutoring programs (Mean = 2.4, SD = 0.7); ESL classes (Mean = 2.1, SD = 0.8); Training resources (Mean = 2.1, SD = 0.7); and services studying for citizenship exams (Mean = 1.7, SD = 0.8). With these variety of services, the parents are more likely to have opportunities to communicate with school personnel.



The principals were also asked to illustrate additional services that they provided for Latino families if any. The results showed that the schools at the US-Mexico border provided more proactive immigration-related services than others. The schools near the border identified health care and education, legal services for immigration, financial services, including tax preparation, and services provided by Catholic Charities as the main needs for the Latino families in their schools (School ID 1004, Texas; School ID 1005, Arizona; School ID 1006, Texas).

### **Parent-Teacher Organizations**

Sixty-four percent of the principals who responded to the survey stated that their schools have an organization where parents and teachers participate together (n=9, 64%). All the schools have at least one parent-teacher organization meeting per semester: 1 time (n=2), 2 times (n=2), 3 times (n=2), 8 times (n=1) and every other month (n=1). This result presents that a school has an organized event where parents can meet a teacher through formal procedures.

Principals evaluated that the schools' parent organizations and meetings were successful for Latino families. The participation rate of Latino families in parent-teacher organizations varied across the schools ranging from 10% to 75%.

An open-ended question probed the positive and negative feedback principals have received about their school's Parent Teacher Organization. Only five principals out of the 16 principals responded. One principal stated that "Parents are very active and involved with planning events and fundraisers. The parents on the Board are great planners and implementers, and do their best to engage parents, teachers, and students in the events. (School ID 1012, Nebraska).

The schools provided the Spanish translation at all the parent and teacher meetings. However, the three school principals said some Latino parents are reluctant to be in charge of school events and communicate with other parents due to lack of English proficiency. The principal of School ID 1004 (Texas) stated, that the Spanish-dominant parents at their school "don't like to plan [meetings] and don't like agendas" and noted that they support Spanish-speaking parents "with planning/communication when they are in charge of events." Similarly, providing translation was not enough to overcome barriers to participation for Spanish-dominant Latino parents at School ID 1012, where the principal noted "We do translate but it is still difficult to bring in more Latino families to help plan or attend meetings." (School ID 1012, Nebraska)

To reduce barriers to parental participation, one principal reported their school was testing a plan to change the time of parent meetings from evening to morning. However, like other participants, they reported challenges related to the format of the meetings: "The agenda-driven format preferred by our president is off-putting to our families, whereas the "open-forum" becomes unwieldy. We need to strike a better balance." (School ID 2002, State not identified)

### ***Event Planning by Parents***

One notable point from the findings was that Latino parents and Non-Latino parents had a similar mean value of participation rate in event planning (Latino parents: 26%, Non-Latino parents: 28%). However, Latino parents were more likely to participate in activities related to their culture and Catholic identity. Eight principals also reported that Latino parents took a lead in event planning in collaboration with school staff. One principal mentioned, “The Ambassador Mothers Program has been hugely successful. It is overseen by our Latino Outreach Coordinator.”

They contribute their gifts and talents in so many ways to our various activities throughout the year. They lead our Día de los Muertos celebration, creating the altar, volunteering that day to help with Pan de Muerto, etc. Last year we had a Día de los Muertos celebration typical of Mexico, celebrating children. It was the idea of the Latino moms, they organized it and it was fantastic. It turned out to be a fun festival celebrating our children. (School ID 1001, California)

These results may seem contradictory to the answers from the three principals saying that Latino parents feel uncomfortable to plan a parent-teacher meeting. However, when the nature of the event is related to Latino cultural experiences and the target of the events is Latino family, Latino parents are more likely to lead organizing meetings. The principal of School ID 1003 said,

We have an Ambassador Mothers group of Hispanic mothers who create and execute events that build sociocultural competence and help recruit other Hispanic families. The Ambassador Mothers (overseen by our Latino Outreach Coordinator) have helped build sociocultural competence through school-wide and classroom events. (School ID 1003, Washington)

### ***Volunteering***

The principals valued Latino parents’ active engagement, which is contradicted by Lopez’s study (2001), which focuses on the lack of Latino parents’ participation in schooling. In our findings, one principal stated “Latino parents are very involved by the nature of our school, our location, the demand for Spanish-English dual language education in the area.” The principals further reported that they encourage Latino families to volunteer in school events (Mean = 4.8, SD = 0.4) and to volunteer with the community (Mean = 3.9, SD = 1.0) on the scale from 1 (Never) to 5 (Always). Given that the means of encouragement of volunteering for school events is higher than the one for the community, we can conclude that overall, Latino families are more likely to start their volunteering at the school, and then enlarge their volunteering to the community. Principals also perceived that Latino families want to build community in the school given the high mean value of 4.1 (SD = 0.7).

### **Conclusion**

Latino parental engagement in the Catholic bilingual school is an important factor to flourish students’ learning as well as to revive a declining enrollment in the Catholic school

community. The schools' institutionalized efforts play a critical role in fostering Latino parental engagement (Marasco, 2016; Scanlan & Zehrbach, 2010). Within this study, a nationwide network of Catholic bilingual schools was demonstrated to provide an array of support aimed at facilitating school enrollment of the Latino population and engaging the Latino population in diverse school activities. Our goal in this study was to ask how family, school, and church contribute to understandings of why school-based family engagement is a crucial practice within the Latino population. We found that various approaches of the Catholic bilingual schools were aligned with what Latino families were looking for from schools, and some of the approaches actively facilitated Latino parents' active engagement and empowerment in the schools. We analyzed the specific successful approaches that Catholic bilingual schools implemented in the timeline. At the school enrollment stage, the schools were able to successfully increase enrollment of Latino families through their strong commitment to forming a religious connection with this community. The various language supports, including bilingual recruitment material and bilingual staffing, also worked, as shown in previous studies (Crea et al., 2015; Fraga, 2016; Ospino & Weitzel-O'Neill, 2016). Moreover, Latino parents' take on the recruitment activities also contributes to an increase in school enrollment. Once Latinos started enrolling in the schools, the schools spurred to engage them in various school activities by providing a wide range of services as if they are a one-stop-shop. Through the schools' support, Latino families were able to actively participate in a parent-teacher organization, school event-planning, and volunteering for the school.

Across these findings, we observed that Catholic bilingual schools encouraged Latino parents to engage in school activities and take a leadership role. Thus, Latino families contributed to the school community in many ways. These findings are notable as they contradict much of the literature focusing on what Latino families lack instead of what they can contribute to school (Lopez, 2001). Unlike the long-held belief that Latino parents are reluctant to participate in school activities or take a passive role at school, this study sheds light on the active roles of Latino parents evidenced by principals' narratives. These findings evoke in-depth discussions about how Latino families were able to participate in school activities particularly in Catholic bilingual schools and why. The schools' visions and practical strategies that they identified as successful would be valuable resources to other schools that strive to facilitate Latino family engagement.

The reiterative theory of action that the Catholic bilingual schools implemented and identified as successful in this study stem from perceiving Latino parents' cultural, and linguistic experiences as funds of knowledge. For example, the schools had specific considerations for Latino families' cultural and spiritual experiences. They employed bilingual staff members and Latino outreach coordinators to bring in Latino families (Ospino & Weitzel-O'Neill, 2016). Latino parents organized a club for recruitment and planned various school events based on their cultural and social capital. These findings go beyond the evidence provided in previous research that TWI programs can

increase Latino populations' access to Catholic schools (Fraga, 2016). Not only access, but also active participation was consistently observed in the findings (Lowenhaupt, 2014). Notably, Latino parents showed interest and strength in organizing activities relevant to their Catholic identity and culture in nature. These findings suggest that schools need to view parents' religious, cultural, and linguistic experiences as funds of knowledge and provide opportunities for parents to take initiatives based on their assets.

Within our study, the close relationship of family, school, and church exerted a positive influence in Latino family engagement. For example, the schools recruited the Latino population in connection with the church, and the parents expected their children to grow in faith through school activities. The role of Catholic churches and charities seems more crucial in the current political rhetoric against Latino populations. The schools reported that proactive support from the diocese in many ways was helpful to provide adequate services to Latino populations who feel "scared and unsure" in this era. Thus, the goal of facilitating Latino family engagement will involve seeking continuous collaboration of family, church, and school. Latino parent engagement in the Catholic bilingual school will invigorate school communities by being aligned with the core of Catholic values on equity and community engagement (Ospino & Weitzel-O'Neill, 2016).

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