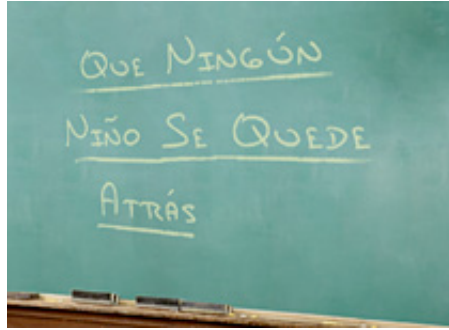


# Bridging the Language Barrier for Latino Parents

*“Our goal is to help parents feel more comfortable in a school setting, and providing information to them in their own language is a way we can do that.”*

– Melissa Torres,  
New England Equity Assistance Center



Along the Blackstone River in Rhode Island sits the tiny and culturally diverse community of Central Falls, home to immigrants from Colombia, Argentina, Puerto Rico, and many other Spanish-speaking countries. In the public schools, more than 66% of the students are Latino and nearly half of the city's inhabitants speak a language other than English.

There is a strong drive in this family-oriented community to involve parents in their children's education, and a conscious effort to bridge the language barrier in order to make that possible.

Through partnerships with the Central Falls School District and community-based organizations like Progreso Latino, the Alliance's New England Equity Assistance Center (NEEAC) conducts a number of parent workshops in Spanish as part of its focus on supporting family and community involvement to improve education.

“We decided to offer workshops specifically designed for parents on how to help their kids in school, and on how to better the education of their children,” said Melissa Torres, an equity coordinator/senior specialist at the Alliance. “If we didn't have them in Spanish, the parents wouldn't come.”

The workshops, on topics ranging from parental rights under No Child Left Behind (NCLB), to bullying and teasing, to teaching science, were held at Progreso Latino and the Central Falls Registration Center in February and May. “The parents get involved in the workshops and bring that training to their homes to help their children,” said Jackie Parra, of the Central Falls School District. “Many of the parents have a lot of skills, even if they don't have the language, and opportunities like these help them find ways to use their skills and improve their lives. It benefits the whole community.”

## **Que Ningún Niño Se Quede Atrás** (No Child Left Behind)

“We saw a need in the community to inform parents about NCLB and how it impacts their lives,” said Mario Bueno, director of adult education programs at Progreso Latino. “There may be those who know their rights, but in general, the overall community is unaware of what the national standards are, and that parents actually have a say over where their child goes to school. For the

common mom and dad in the community, it is not part of the common language.”

To build an understanding of what parents should know about NCLB, Torres described ten rights parents have under the legislation, including the right to have their child learn English and other subjects at the same level as other students, the right to information on their child's performance, and the right to transfer their child to another school or request tutoring services if a school is identified as “in need of improvement” for two years.

“Parents have the right to know how their school is performing,” said Torres. “We directed them to resources where they could get that information.”

### **Incidents de abuso, de burla o de intimidación (bullying and teasing)**

“Parents have concerns about safe schools,” said Torres. “The message has to come from parents, the community, and the school that bullying is not tolerated.” At the workshop, Torres described signs of bullying to the parents, and offered strategies for responding. She told the parents that often there are culturally based ideas of what is acceptable and that different cultures have different norms.

“The workshop was very useful to the parents, especially since someone could explain bullying and teasing to them in their own language, giving them strategies about what to do,” said Makna Men, equity coordinator/senior specialist at The Education Alliance, who also attended the workshop.

“Essentially, they learned not to take the matter into their own hands, not to blame their kids, but instead to talk to someone at their school about what is happening.”

Some parents at the workshop felt that being an aggressor begins at home. Others said that American society in general is more violent than where they had come from. Some mentioned the lack of a social network—that back home, relatives, cousins, and parents were all looking out for each other's kids. Parents talked about what people in the community can do to support each other.

“I believe that it would be a good idea to have parents bring their children to this workshop to listen,” said one parent, “and to realize that their parents are interested in helping them in whatever way they can.”

### **Jugando es Ciencia (Playtime is Science™)**

“Quién hace la ciencia?” Who does science, Torres asked, as she had parents close their eyes and picture a scientist during a visualization exercise that kicks off the *Playtime is Science*™ workshops, designed to help parents understand why it is important to teach science, and how they can teach their own children about science using everyday objects at home.

“Every single group always describes a picture of a White man with wild hair who spends all his time at work,” said Torres. “It shows how strong the social message is that it's White men who do science. Parents realize after this activity that they have to counter that image.”

*Playtime is Science*<sup>™</sup> is an equity-based parent/child science program funded in part by the National Science Foundation and emphasizes hands-on activities specially designed to encourage girls and children who don't often have exposure to science activities. “English language learners will often stand back and watch,” said Torres. “With these activities, everybody has to work together as a team to perform the task.”

Parents participated in four activities: learning how to make and use a sieve, building with “wonderful junk,” making bean bags, and examining a substance called “oobleck.” Some of the parents said it was important to learn about activities they can do at home with their kids. One parent said she had never considered her role in encouraging her child to think about and like science.

“The research shows that students achieve at higher levels when parents are involved in their education,” said Torres. “For parents who have not gone through the school system in the U.S., they may not know that they are considered a partner in their child's education. This has to be made clear by schools, and one way to do that is to encourage them to participate and acknowledge that parents are their children's first teacher.”

## **In conclusion**

Presented in Spanish, the workshops were accessible to the audience in a way they wouldn't have been in English. “The material should be in the primary language of the people involved,” said Bueno. “The most important thing is that they're able to get all the information. If it's not their native language, they're going to miss out on the details. We know that the majority of students in the Central Falls community are Latino, so it made sense to offer the workshops in Spanish.”

“Our goal,” said Torres, “is to help parents feel more comfortable in a school setting, and providing information to them in their own language is a way we can do that. We're trying to help and to capitalize on the knowledge and resources they already have, and help them learn to use those resources to their best advantage.”

“All families want to be involved in their child's education,” said Parra. “Mothers who before were never involved, who dropped off their child at school and that was it, now are attending workshops like these and are more interested in education—they want to be in the classroom, they want to chaperone and help the teacher—they want to be more involved because they feel more welcome in the schools.”

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