

# VOICES FROM THE FIELD:

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES  
FOR IMMIGRANT PARENT-FOCUSED  
PROGRAMMING





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Any errors or oversights in the findings or recommendations presented here are the responsibility of the author alone.

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## VOICES FROM THE FIELD:

### CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMMIGRANT PARENT-FOCUSED PROGRAMMING

#### SUMMARY

The purpose of this research project was to build a knowledge base of existing parent programs and assess how well they serve immigrant and refugee families. Thirty-seven interviews with program staff in early education, K-12, and adult education were conducted to gather qualitative information about family and parent programming in immigrant-rich communities.

Challenges and barriers identified included:

- **Transportation and child care** - Transportation and child care have been cited in pre-pandemic surveys as top barriers for parent engagement programs. Since the onset of COVID-19, virtual programming has increased accessibility but child care remained a top challenge to parent participation.
- **Culturally and linguistically appropriate services** - Effectively communicating with immigrant parents often requires investment of time, money, and personnel to provide appropriate and accessible services that can adequately meet needs.
- **Relationship of trust** - A common problem between institutions and families is lack of trust often caused by lack of communication. Trust-building between families and schools was cited as a primary objective of parent-focused programming.
- **Digital divide** - Access to technology was a barrier at all system levels, from early education to K-12 and adult education. Families encounter problems connecting to Wi-Fi, obtaining and maintaining devices, and using new tools and apps. Programs that serve young children also do not have sufficient funding to provide families with technology.
- **Funding and policy barriers** - Funding for parent-focused programming is usually tied into other funding streams, which can lead to adult education and English instruction being overlooked and underfunded.

From our conversations, we learned about best practices and actions to address many of these barriers. We then drew on this information to make a number of targeted recommendations. The identified best practices include:

- **Providing culturally and linguistically appropriate services** - Bilingual and bicultural specialists who are well versed in education and educational systems are in the best position to provide information to immigrant parents. Curriculums that incorporate family home culture are most likely to be received well.
- **Coordination with community based organizations** - Programs that work alongside community-based organizations (CBOs) and already serve immigrant populations are well positioned to learn about the community's needs and provide resources.



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- **Tailored and varied forms of communication and outreach** - Programs can try different engagement formats that may work for their school or community. Teacher home visits are an example of a model that may work to build stronger communication between schools and families.
- **Bridging the digital divide** -The digital divide will remain an important issue to address even when in-person programming resumes. Systems can ensure more equitable access to technology support by providing different avenues to receive support.
- **Logistical assistance** - Engagement programs can draw in more participants when they include topics in their curriculum that are helpful and relevant to immigrant families, like immigration information, health resources, and financial literacy.
- **Intentional integration pathways** -Programming for parents can be designed to help immigrant families better integrate into schools and communities by offering services that combine their curriculum into more traditional programs like English as a second language (ESOL) courses.

In light of the complex challenges and innovative approaches to family engagement, we recommend:

- Addressing the traditional barriers of transportation, child care, and access to technology by supporting campaigns and legislation that are using equity-focused solutions to better fund and restructure current systems
- Encouraging collaborations between ESOL providers and cities and municipalities
- Supporting broader language access efforts



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## INTRODUCTION

More than a quarter of Massachusetts parents with children ages 10 or younger – nearly 481,000 mothers and fathers – are immigrants.<sup>1</sup> Though children of immigrants in the Commonwealth have high levels of income mobility<sup>2</sup> with many success stories, immigrant families still face many barriers, including poverty, low levels of parental education and or limited English proficiency.

Immigrant parents with children ages 10 and under are up to five times less likely than native-born parents to have a high school diploma or equivalent. About a third of immigrant parents are low-income, defined as annual income below 200% of the federal poverty threshold, and 40% of immigrant parents with children ages 10 and under are limited English proficient (LEP).<sup>3</sup> Immigrant parents of young children are twice as likely as native-born parents to lack access to the internet. All these factors affect parents' ability to integrate into U.S. society, and can also affect their children's academic success.

The barriers faced by immigrant parents have been particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, as families have struggled to maintain access to state-sponsored early childhood programs, K-12 schools, community-based organizations and various social services. As remote learning requirements have forced parents to provide supplemental instruction and monitoring for online learning, parents who are limited-English proficient (LEP) have lower levels of education or digital literacy, have faced disproportionate challenges.

This study examines the scope and availability of programs for parents and families, based on interviews with providers in immigrant-rich communities. We interviewed stakeholders from different systems that interface with parents: the early education system, the K-12 school system, adult education providers, and community-based organizations (CBOs). The latter included immigrant-serving organizations and culture-specific organizations, as well as social service and health care providers that serve children and families. Throughout the interviews, we also identified successful programs and best practices in supporting immigrant parents and their children.

By building a knowledge base and network of existing programs, approaches, advocates and providers serving these families in Massachusetts, we aim to better support efforts to establish, promote and advance state and local policies that ensure equitable and effective support for immigrant families, including the development and expansion of programs tailored to the needs of immigrant parents.

### **An overview of programs for families and parents in Massachusetts**

#### **Early education system:**

As of 2017, the Department of Early Education and Care supported around 54,000 children from low-income families in attending an early education and care program.<sup>4</sup> Such programs include preschool expansion programs, Head Start, Coordinated Family and Community Engagement (CFCE) programs, and the Parent-Child + program.

Every town or city in Massachusetts has a CFCE program, though some municipalities pool together in regional partnerships. CFCEs can be run by a CBO or a school district. The programming is locally focused, and uses existing resources and structures to provide meaningful supports for child development and school readiness while fostering parent-to-parent interaction and community building.





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CFCE program directors interviewed characterized their cities as “resource-rich,” but they acknowledged that helping families access these resources was a top challenge. CFCE directors try to use a standardized family engagement framework tool to connect parents with resources in the community. In one community, they run play groups at culture-specific community based organizations. In this particular instance, the activities are not adapted to reflect the participants’ culture, but it was suggested that this could be a setting where it might be easy to tailor the activities and to offer an integration-focused curriculum.

The Parent-Child+ home-visiting program is also funded through early education and care grants and run by school districts or community-based organizations. This program supports school readiness, early learning and parenting skills through intensive home visits focused on educational play. CFCEs in general, and CFCEs with Parent-Child+ programs in particular, aim to identify and engage families whose children are not receiving formal early education, specifically “hard-to reach” families, including immigrant families.

In addition to providing books, toys and learning materials, a Parent-Child+ coordinator can connect parents to services in the community that match their cultural and language needs. While the gold standard for the program is to recruit home visiting staff who can serve parents in their native language, this may not always be possible, especially when multiple low-incidence languages are spoken in the area. However, parents often build trusting relationships with home visiting staff, so they feel comfortable practicing their English with them, and they also receive accessible materials to help them build both their own literacy and their children’s skills. One of the most requested referrals for Parent-Child+ clients in Worcester is to English classes for adults.

### Programs within K-12 systems, adult education and CBOs

School districts use a variety of funding sources to implement parent engagement programs and can choose the models that best suit their population. Schools may try different models from year to year or may work with the school administration to formulate a new engagement plan. While engagement models are not chosen to specifically cater to immigrant parents, districts with large immigrant populations, including all those we interviewed, try to consider the needs of diverse families, including immigrants.

Popular programs or models include parent cafés (offered as weekly virtual drop-ins during the COVID era) and student success workshops. There are also extended programs, such as the Parent Institute for Quality Education (PIQE), a nine-week workshop developed in California to strengthen family-school collaborations and empower parents to support their children’s success. Some districts have adapted the PIQE and renamed it, such as the Family Institute for Student Success in Brockton. In Springfield, the district runs its parent engagement program in conjunction with CBOs with expertise in particular areas it wants to explore. For example, it partners with a local refugee resettlement agency to provide trainings for the refugee population. Parents can also request topics for workshops that they would like to see.

The adult education system includes programs funded through the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) as well as programs funded by other sources (private funders, town and city municipal budgets). Classes may take place at adult learning centers (these are often connected to a school district), CBOs or faith-based institutions. Libraries may also offer English classes, ranging from informal drop-ins, to one-on-one tutoring, to classes. The largest barrier to accessing adult education is waitlists. While many programs were able to successfully shift to online programming during the pandemic, some sites chose to stop offering English classes due to funding.



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The most well-known specialized English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) programs are those that prepare students for jobs or job training programs in specific industries by teaching relevant vocabulary. ESOL programs that specifically engage parents are not widespread, and standard programs often do not record whether a student is a parent or caregiver.

## Spotlight on five immigrant-rich cities

### Worcester:

- Second-largest school district in Massachusetts, after Boston
- 21% of the population is foreign-born
- 59% of public school students have a first language that is not English
- Stakeholders interviewed: K-12 parent engagement program, English learner support at district, early childhood home visiting program, early childhood play group, library programs, parent engagement coordinators and CBOs

### Springfield:

- 10% of the population is foreign-born
- 30% of public school students have a first language that is not English
- Stakeholders interviewed: home visiting program, family strengthening program, K-12 parent engagement program, library program, pilot two-generation/workforce program.

### Everett:

- 41% of the population is foreign-born
- 66% of public school students have a first language that is not English
- Stakeholders interviewed: family-centered health program

### Brockton:

- 30% of the population is foreign-born
- 45% of students have a first language that is not English
- Stakeholders interviewed: early childhood playgroup, K-12 family engagement program

### Lawrence:

- 40% of the population is foreign-born
- 70% of students have a first language that is not English
- Stakeholders interviewed: early childhood home visiting program, family support services program, early childhood playgroup, community college programs, K-12 family engagement program, CBOs

Data sources: Foreign-born population is from the U.S. Census Bureau, 2015–2019 estimates by city: <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/massachusetts>. School demographics are from the Mass. Department of Elementary and Secondary Education school and district profiles (2020–2021 school year): <https://profiles.doe.mass.edu>.



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## Insights from stakeholders

We reached out to more than 80 service providers and policy experts to speak about their programs and perceived barriers to immigrant parent engagement, and were able to conduct in-depth interviews with 37 participants. Some provided feedback at a statewide or systemwide level, while others worked in areas with large immigrant populations, providing a variety of program types. Specifically, we focused on the Worcester, Springfield, Everett, Brockton and Lawrence areas.

We spoke with program staff and administrators to learn about their offerings and their methods of outreach and engagement. Though some of the interviewees were themselves immigrant parents, the conversations with them still focused on their role as program and service providers, rather than on their experiences as parents.

## PARENT NEEDS AND BARRIERS TO ENGAGEMENT

Interviews identified a wide range of challenges in meeting the needs of immigrant parents, reflecting the unique needs of each community and of each program. However, some common themes emerged, including a host of issues that have long been present but were exacerbated by COVID-19.

### Transportation and child care

Transportation and child care have been cited in previous surveys as top barriers for parent engagement programs and adult education classes.<sup>5</sup> A survey conducted by the Massachusetts Partnership for Infants and Toddlers in early 2020 showed that lack of transportation was a leading cause of low enrollment in early childhood programs for low-income families, regardless of immigration status.

The need for transportation and child care also came up in our interviews, although providers noted that those were barriers prior to COVID-19. They reported that launching virtual programming as a response to the public health crisis has reduced or eliminated concerns around transportation. As a result, a number of programs said they intended to continue virtual programming even when in-person services resume.

### Culturally and linguistically appropriate services

Family engagement work is key for helping parents and caregivers navigate the K-12 system. When school districts invest in family engagement programming and staff, they are usually successful in reaching and communicating to parent populations that were previously unengaged. But translation and interpretation are crucial to effectively engage immigrant parents, and schools rarely have a robust, in-house team. Districts often work with local CBOs for language assistance.

Most parents are unaware of language access obligations under federal law<sup>6</sup> that require all recipients of federal funding – including public schools – to provide translation and interpretation for parent-teacher conferences, notices, schoolwide meetings and many other interactions. While some districts have staff devoted to interpretation and translation, it is common for bilingual teaching staff to have to fill that gap, which can be strenuous. This may lead to a pattern of staff only providing interpretation and translation services when it is absolutely necessary.





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Despite the importance of providing culturally appropriate services, cultural values are often not explored and are therefore not reflected in services. **As one program director who came to the U.S. as an immigrant shared, “we’re not going to give up who we are and we’re hanging on to [both cultures], right as we’re learning something new.”** She mentioned that she would be turned off by a program in which she could not express herself in her native language. Programs may not always successfully explain why parent engagement is important to student success, and immigrant parents may feel vulnerable or fear that their limited English skills will negatively affect their children’s academic outcomes.

## Building relationships of trust

The primary objective of parent-focused programming offered by schools is to build more trust and empower parents to better communicate with teachers and staff on behalf of their children. Many interviewees who work in the K-12 space said there is a very obvious lack of trust between schools and immigrant families. **One family engagement coordinator was quick to note that just because staff can speak the language of families, that does not mean they have their trust. Trust must be cultivated with consistent and responsive communication methods that deliver on the promises that they make to families.** COVID-19 exacerbated mistrust, especially as schools struggled in delivery of both regular classes and extracurricular offerings and were forced to try new methods to reach parents. However, when different communication avenues were employed, some stakeholders were able to reach “harder to reach” parent/caregiver populations (see COVID-19 section).

Immigrant parents are likely to struggle to understand the out-of-classroom services that schools are able to provide and are not as empowered to speak up when they might encounter problems. There might also be confusion around expectations of how an early education program or school addresses problems with services provided to a child both in and out of the classroom. Parents might view it as a “school” problem and feel intimidated bringing it to the attention of administrators. Early education systems and K-12 systems are not inherently set up to facilitate communication with parents. Improving this will require time and effort on the part of staff and administration.

## The digital divide

The digital divide that exists in our communities and the way it affects immigrant households was a recurring theme. The most apparent issue is access to both hardware (Chromebooks, tablets, etc.) and reliable internet connections and Wi-Fi hotspots. Families with multiple children enrolled in virtual learning struggle with having sufficiently strong internet connections to accommodate multiple streaming platforms for extended periods of time.

Tools used in classrooms may not be suitably adapted or matched to the apps, tools and services that immigrant families use to communicate. Providers understood that it would be useful to have curricula that can teach and adapt content to text messages, WhatsApp and other apps that are routinely used by the populations they work with.

Traditionally, digital literacy courses have been taught in computer labs with desktop computers, even though these are not the types of technologies people have in their homes. Rather, it is more likely that families have access to smartphones, tablets or Chromebooks. Stakeholders described past efforts to recruit parents for digital literacy courses. Before COVID, two programs mentioned that despite efforts to advertise a digital literacy class by hanging flyers, distributing brochures and placing ads in newspapers,



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it had very low enrollment. They thought that perhaps the recruitment material was not relaying enough of a value to participants, but one provider still reported being “shocked” that more participants were not interested in the course.

Early education stakeholders noted that access to technology is a newer terrain for them, and while K-12 schools are able to provide devices such as Chromebooks to their families, this is not something that early education programs always have funding to do. Troubleshooting technology issues can be costly and time-consuming and can lead to disagreements over how to responsibly administer and address problems.

Schools were often able to help with technology issues by providing tech support sessions, but for programs serving younger children, there were fewer supports in place. When asked about places outside of schools that might be able to offer tech support, libraries and local Boys & Girls Clubs were suggested as places where some services were offered. Stakeholders reported it was more likely in early education programs for parents to use smartphones, which are often too small or limited in capacity for good virtual engagement. Families were more likely to have access to loaned devices if they had an older child in school.

Family access to technology in certain regions differs between immigrant parents of children ages 0–4 and those with children ages 5–12. For example, in the Springfield statistical city town and area, 22% of immigrant parent households with children ages 0–4 lacked access to a computer and 19% had no internet access. This was significantly lower than immigrant parent households of children 5–10, where 16% had access to a computer and 9% had access to the internet.<sup>7</sup>

Technology also exacerbates the pervasive issues caused by language barriers and lack of language access but it can sometimes offer solutions as well. One program with bilingual staff was able to take advantage of simultaneous interpretation capabilities available through Zoom. Lastly, families often faced compounded barriers, as access to working digital tools meant that Chromebooks needed to be brought in to be serviced or repaired, which in turn led to transportation difficulties.

## Funding and other policy barriers

Our conversations unveiled a number of frustrations with policies and guidance set by state actors that mandate one-size-fits-all approaches to parent engagement at the district level and are not inclusive of immigrant parents beyond English-learner students. For example, English Parent Advisory Councils (ELPACs) – groups of parents at each school that are set up to provide guidance on English language learning decisions at the district level – leave out immigrant parents of non-English learner students and only seem to engage the parents who are most likely to already be active. This excludes those who do not know how to engage with key contacts at the school. Funding at the K-12 level is targeted to after-school support or other enrichment activities focused mainly on students. **Grants also may be time-limited and only be active for 1–3 years, making even successful programs hard to sustain. As one program expressed, “we don’t need to build more programs, we need to build deeper with what we already have.”**

In the context of ESOL and adult basic education programs, waitlists continue to be the largest problem identified, as demand is much higher than what programs can accommodate. Programs are often designed for intermediate-level speakers but in reality serve those who have a beginner level of English. Of the programs we spoke with, only one had a true beginner-level course. Furthermore, almost all programs serve those with an ability to read and write in their native language, leaving a gap in services for those needing not only English instruction but also literacy instruction.



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### Spotlight: Impact of COVID-19

Interviews were conducted from October to December 2020, amid the COVID-19 pandemic. By this point in time, most programs and adult education classes that had chosen to offer virtual options were successfully doing so, after addressing challenges in the spring and summer. Virtual offerings included playgroups, home visiting programs, ESOL and parenting classes. Instruction models for K-12 education differed by district, but most family engagement programming was offered virtually, including events, meetings, parent cafés and parent engagement training programs.

Programs in both CBOs and at the K-12 district level have had to manage meeting families' basic needs – namely food and housing – before they can provide their regular services. Examples of how programs have quickly pivoted to meet these needs include setting up a food pantry at their community organization and redirecting staff who used to work on educational or employment programs to help with unemployment applications and locating housing assistance. One school district prepared food boxes throughout the 2020 school year and devised a plan for delivery of breakfasts and lunches to every family in the district.

Many program directors and staff never imagined themselves responding to such basic needs. While they may have had some relationships with organizations that could provide direct assistance, they had to take on more of the work themselves because, having established trust relationships with families, they were the ones to whom the families turned for assistance. This was especially true when some food pantries began to ask for identification, which discouraged immigrant families from accessing food pantries and led them to seek assistance elsewhere.<sup>8</sup>

Though in general we did not receive reports that enrollment in programs such as adult education, after school tutoring, or CFCE playgroups faced major disruptions, one major school district did report a decline in enrollment for kindergarten, with both immigrant and non-immigrant families choosing not to send their children to kindergarten.

The types of referrals that programs find themselves providing have changed, with increased referrals to mental health providers and access to help for housing. One social service agency reported receiving more referrals for families with multiple children and fewer from first-time parents than in the past.

The digital divide and lack of adequate access to technology is a very telling indicator of inequity in a community but responses were mixed on whether on average immigrant families are facing greater struggles. Immigrant families are likely to be more proficient with and have greater access to smartphones and apps as compared to computers and tablets, and learning technology platforms are not as accessible or user-friendly on these platforms. Prior to the pandemic, adult education providers had not consistently included digital literacy in their curricula.

In general, the consensus across both early education and adult education programs was that there is no real substitute for human interaction, and that while they may maintain virtual platforms even in a post-COVID world for additional flexibility, they all fully plan to resume in-person offerings once it is safe to do so. Libraries in particular seemed to be strained, as the physical space was an essential part of libraries being the first stop for information for many in the immigrant community. A director of ESOL at



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a central library in an immigrant-rich community noted that newcomers regularly came to the library to obtain information and expressed concern that restricted hours are affecting those who may not know of other options.

Almost all participants identified “silver linings” to operating during COVID. The most frequently cited of these was that the pandemic has allowed programs in all systems to reach and engage more parents. This might be attributed to both positive factors, such as the convenience of Zoom/online meeting spaces, and feeling safer attending programming in-home, as well as less positive factors, such as that families are finding that they need to seek assistance more frequently if they are having trouble accessing materials or other resources. They may also have urgent basic needs and feel that the program is a trusted source of information and help.

## SUCCESSFUL MODELS AND PROMISING PRACTICES

Our conversations with participants revealed many strategies, approaches, designs, models and practices that different programs in the early education, K-12, adult education, and community services systems employed to promote engagement with parents and families. Highlighted below are approaches that were successful and innovative, grouped into themes.

### Providing culturally and linguistically appropriate services

Approaches to providing culturally and linguistically appropriate services vary between systems, settings, and the resources available to a community. Technology for interpretation and translation are “huge” – as we heard repeatedly during our interviews – and are often relied on to get information out quickly. A further step is utilizing paraprofessionals or parent liaisons who can help navigate in the language of the families and be a contact.

However, a gold standard cited by many participants was staff and educators who are bicultural and bilingual and either understand or take time to educate themselves on culture, sociopolitical history, and current conditions for immigrant families in their community. Bilingual, bicultural specialists who are versed in education and educational systems are the important conduit who can bring the experiences they have with families on the ground to decision-makers like school committees. Further, identity and culture curriculums are asset-based and help empower families by identifying strengths in their functions and practices.

For young children and families, creativity is paramount in curricula aiming to help integrate families into their local communities, especially using practices that draw from the culture of participants. In Worcester, a program draws in families with a theater program that introduces them to the community and then uses a photovoice project – a creative research method combining photography and group dialogue – to help familiarize them with services in the community.



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## Coordination with community-based organizations

Programs that want to engage immigrant parents to use their services may work in conjunction with a CBO that serves the immigrant population. These programs rely on CBOs to provide resources and services such as affordable housing and community development resources, immigration and legal services, and – since the start of the pandemic – also increasingly food and nutrition resources. Regular meetings are key to successful coordination, and almost all programs reported meeting more frequently since the onset of the pandemic. For example, while quarterly check-ins were once sufficient, it was necessary to ramp up meetings to at least once a month.

For schools with large populations of English language learning students where parents may be active with the school’s English Language Parent Advisory Council, there is an opportunity for parents to be introduced to local CBOs during meetings. CBOs can also reach parents through student extracurricular activities and might serve as a meeting place for activities like Girl Scouts. Through these activities, parents get a gentle introduction to CBOs and the services and programs they might provide.

In a district where trust was cited as a reason why parents are not likely to participate in in-school workshops, the Parent Academy was done completely in conjunction with CBOs through “courses on wheels.” The district coordinator ran workshops at the CBOs and used their interpreters to deliver workshops in a setting that was more comfortable and familiar to participants.

## Tailored and varied forms of communication and outreach

School-family home visiting is a model that can help promote stronger communication and trust between systems and families. It can be tailored and flexible. As home visiting programs have proliferated in the early education sphere, the concept has attracted interest from K-12 administrators who see it as a tool to really understand and assess needs of students and families and be able to provide targeted supports.

Home visiting helps meet families in a neutral space and begin conversations around expectations and how children and parents can work together towards success. In one district, the English learner director did not have dedicated funding for a formal home-visiting program but decided to implement a visit curriculum anyway with her students’ families. She said the program was incredibly helpful in helping direct parents to school resources, but ultimately it was not sustainable. She then reworked her home visiting curriculum into a series of parent cafés, a program that has proven sustainable even in a virtual format.

Another organization we connected with belongs to Parent Teacher Home Visiting Programs, a national network of programs that trains teachers on methods to directly engage students and their families. Initially, their model was to train teachers to conduct home visits with students and families and provide parents with resources on student success and work while having parents identify their own goals and plans. However, this led to inequitable outcomes, as some teachers were able to conduct more home visits than others, and the costs were significant.

The program revised its model by instead training teachers to assess what engagement interventions could be useful for their school and community. The organization added in a small fee that schools are asked to pay. This program and its adaptations are an acknowledgement that school systems are not set up in a way that allows parents with language barriers to navigate them, and forces parents to “decode” a challenging system alone. Educators reaching out to families aim to start two-generation partnerships because they believe working with parents and students together leads to better outcomes.





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## Logistical assistance

The need to provide logistical assistance to facilitate engagement was a recurring theme, and the ways programs did so took many forms. A community college that offers tailored adult basic education or ESOL curriculums and job pathways programs reported being able to bring better services to support integration when it opens up its services across the community, instead of solely limiting programming to enrolled students. This community college runs 6–10 events each semester that are open to all in the community.

The events focus on health, financial aid, information on immigration and “Know Your Rights,” and the citizenship process. They also provide family programming, including interactive presentations on heritage and culture present in their community, such as indigenous dances from Guatemala and storytelling traditions of the Dominican Republic, or large book fairs. Information on farmer’s markets, CFCE playgroups, Family Resource Centers, domestic violence and housing assistance, and programs like Head Start is available at each event. The goal of organizing such large events is to have broad appeal and an opportunity to use that event to share resources.

## Bridging the digital divide

The best approaches to addressing the digital divide give families options on the most helpful way for them to access information. For example, one district employs a trilingual technology coach and team who can be reached via telephone, uses instructional videos in different languages sent to parents in a weekly email, creates a schedule of events with multilingual sessions for its online platform, has a point-person at a central location to facilitate in-person appointments, and provides multilingual informational sessions with the superintendent who is seen as a trusted voice in the community. The district also personally contacted every English language learner family by telephone and email to make sure they knew about these options and included referrals to social service resources in these communications, like food pantries, domestic violence prevention services and heat assistance. In another district, attendance officers were trained in technology troubleshooting so that they could ensure that check-ins with families included an understanding of their technology needs and what the school might be able to do to support families.

## Intentional integration pathways: Coordination of services and resources

One model that has only been replicated on a small scale is an “ESOL for Parents” model. This curriculum was developed by English for New Bostonians, a program that funds community-based ESOL programs. It provides a base curriculum that can be adapted by the provider or instructor. Providers who have adopted a version of the curriculum include Head Start centers, culture-specific CBOs, and an ESOL program housed within a school district. The target group is immigrant parents of elementary school students – specifically kindergarten students, as this will be many parents’ first introduction to the school system. The curriculum focuses on parenting skills and knowledge including literacy activities, what to expect during school interactions, an orientation to school culture, and sometimes additional issues specific to that community. The program does not have a job training component, but if a parent requests assistance with this, referrals can be made to job coaches or employment services.

One CBO we spoke with has been intentionally seeking to incorporate more intergenerational programming into its youth and adult programs. As it already offers different youth programming, including after school tutoring, and heritage and culture lessons, it was able to capitalize on existing relationships to extend their



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programming to reach parents through family literacy programs as well as mental health circles for older adults. Youth who were already engaged with the organization were able to connect with these families and use their cultural and language skills to help them navigate some of their integration goals. Not only did this program provide an enriching experience for youth, but it helped the families feel more safe and connected to the community.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The interviews in this report illuminated some of the complex challenges faced and creative approaches employed by institutions when engaging immigrant parents, but it is important to note that we have only addressed the program side. A recommendation for a more thorough assessment of the family-focused landscape would involve soliciting input from parents through focus groups and one-on-one interviews.

From these conversations with program stakeholders, it becomes clear that approaches for engaging families must be more inclusive and responsive to the needs of all families. K-12 parent engagement staff repeatedly expressed the importance of flexibility to address local needs, but community-based organizations face similar struggles. When engagement programs for immigrant families are able to provide services independently of ESOL offerings, they have more reach and can better adapt to meet existing needs.

There are no quick fixes for the structural barriers that have prevented parents' participation for so many years, but there are ways to ease immediate challenges:

- **Transportation** was identified repeatedly as a barrier to parent engagement. Expanded virtual programming has helped make services more accessible, but programs are also eager to resume in-person programming when it is safe to do so. We support actions that would help all parents access reliable transportation. More investment in public transit is needed, especially to expand service in areas where low-income families live. We also strongly support legislation such as the Work and Family Mobility Act (HD. 448/S.D. 273)<sup>9</sup> that would eliminate eligibility restrictions to Massachusetts licenses that prevent immigrant parents from driving. This equity-driven proposal is particularly important for areas of the Commonwealth where service providers are more geographically spread out.
- The **child care** crisis is garnering more attention from policymakers, as it becomes clear that working parents have very little access to affordable, high-quality child care options. Funding should be increased for programs such as preschool expansion grants, which operate early education and child care centers in partnerships with CBOs. These programs are a great opportunity for municipalities to expand access to high-quality, accessible child care in collaboration with those who are already deeply engaged and experienced with providing services to the community. We also call for increased funding for early childhood programs that engage and serve both child and caregiver and are particularly adept at serving immigrant families. Parent-Child+'s home visits for early literacy and the CFCE grant that runs playgroups are effective approaches for creating safe and comfortable atmospheres for families to strengthen their parenting skills, learn about young child development, and connect with community services.
- **Bridging the digital divide** is an urgent priority. The MIRA Coalition is proud to support campaigns such as Latinos for Education's #TechParaTodos, an effort to close the digital divide among Latino



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families by working with companies to provide devices and with organizations to teach digital literacy.<sup>10</sup> It is important that such campaigns reach families not only of school-age children, but also those with young children ages 0–4. Programs like CFCEs and Parent-Child+ that serve families with young children would benefit from being included in such campaigns, plus additional funding so that tech devices can reach these families as well.

We expand on two recommendations below that were most commonly raised in conversations with stakeholders and where we believe that efforts for upcoming action would be most valuable.

## Language justice

A parent engagement coordinator in Brockton summed up how important language is to building trust between parents and programs by stating: **“We speak because we want to understand one another... when people meet with [others] who speak the language, it’s easier to feel connected.”** Parents are often not aware of their right to an interpreter or translated materials in school settings. Overburdened bilingual staff who are called upon to provide this assistance have to manage extra work. These factors promote an environment where miscommunication and distrust are too common.

Schools should provide explicit and clear communication about language access rights and services to immigrant parents and parents who speak a language other than English. While this may be done during registration and when a home language survey is completed, notifications should continue at regular intervals throughout the school year, and ongoing accessible messaging should provide information with helpful contacts. This recommendation can be applied beyond the K-12 system and extended to early education settings as well. Providing adequate language access is a particularly good opportunity to collaborate with a community-based organization, who can be useful in facilitating messaging and can be a good resource for language needs of populations who speak a lower-incidence language.

To avoid overburdening bilingual staff, additional compensation should be made available for administrators or other school staff who help translate materials or act as designated interpreters for families. Policies should also incentivize the use of certified interpreters and investing in staff who can be fully dedicated to language access.

State legislation to require public-facing state agencies to develop, implement and enforce language access protocols will be introduced in the 2021–2022 legislative session.

## Expanded community partnerships within ESOL programs

ESOL programs should strive to better coordinate with their cities and communities. Connecting with city departments of commerce and workforce development would allow for opportunities for student interaction and engagement and assist them in more intentionally exploring available workforce pathways. While workforce and level gains in English language are important outcomes to set for ESOL programs, participants in our interviews believed that a curriculum that could serve as an introduction to the community and local services, such as school and city transportation, would be a useful addition.

Community institutions that immigrant families already frequent or see as a local resource, such as museums and local businesses, can play an important role in ensuring that their communities are aware of ESOL classes and other parent-focused programs. CFCEs, the early education and care grant programs that run



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playgroups and child development activities for families, are also great partners for ESOL programs to work with and can use a two-generation approach to serve both young children and parents interested in ESOL or family literacy activities. Feeling welcomed in community spaces can be the key to meeting immigrant families where they are, and is a core aspect of successful engagement.

### **Future engagement with immigrant parents**

This report reflects the voices and perspectives of program staff and service providers, but in order to truly understand the needs of immigrant families, it is imperative that we speak directly with them. Such work will require outreach not only to parents who are currently accessing services, but – perhaps more importantly – to families facing barriers so great that they are not participating in available programming at all. This outreach will require further investment to obtain honest and constructive feedback that can shape advocacy and policy responses.



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## End Notes / References:

- <sup>1</sup> Data tabulated by the Migration Policy Institute based on U.S. Census Bureau data from 2014-2018 American Community Survey Data, on file with author.
- <sup>2</sup> Second-generation immigrants in Massachusetts have among the highest incomes in the country (2019). See more at [https://www.bostonindicators.org/article-pages/2019/october/immigrant\\_generational\\_differences](https://www.bostonindicators.org/article-pages/2019/october/immigrant_generational_differences) (reporting on statistics that indicate second-generation immigrants in Massachusetts have higher incomes than second-generation immigrants in other states with large immigrant communities).
- <sup>3</sup> Migration Policy Institute tabulation of U.S. Census Bureau pooled 2014-2018 American Community Survey Data.
- <sup>4</sup> Department of EEC (2018). See more at <https://www.mass.gov/doc/departament-of-early-education-and-care-2017-annual-report/download>
- <sup>5</sup> Massachusetts Partnership for Infants and Toddlers (July 2020). What do families want?: Findings from a statewide family survey and focus groups. Available here: [http://www.strategiesforchildren.org/MPIT/MPIT\\_FamilyEngagementReport.pdf](http://www.strategiesforchildren.org/MPIT/MPIT_FamilyEngagementReport.pdf)
- <sup>6</sup> Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.
- <sup>7</sup> Data tabulated by the Migration Policy Institute based on U.S. Census Bureau data from 2014-2018 American Community Survey Data, on file with author.
- <sup>8</sup> Because this issue persisted despite advocacy, the Attorney General's Office issued guidance on December 10, 2020, directing all food pantries to suspend the practice. Food pantries that distribute food through both federal and state Emergency Food Assistance Program are prohibited from asking clients for identification. See more at: <https://www.mass.gov/doc/advisory-preventing-barriers-to-access-at-food-pantries/download>
- <sup>9</sup> Full texts for these bills available at: <https://malegislature.gov/Bills/192/HD448> and <https://malegislature.gov/Bills/192/SD273>
- <sup>10</sup> To learn more about this campaign, see <https://www.latinosforeducation.org/techparatodos>.