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Latine students constitute 56% of the public school population in California. Their educational experiences, therefore, not only shape the trajectories of individual students and families but also the broader future of schooling in the state. Yet, despite their substantial demographic representation within the state, the perspectives of Latine students and their families remain underrepresented in research and policy discussions about education. Much of the scholarship and public understanding about Latine education has focused on limited forms of assessment and classification: standardized test performance, English language proficiency classifications, graduation rates, and postsecondary access. While these indicators are essential for documenting patterns of inequity, they reveal only one slice of the educational landscape. Less frequently examined are the perspectives of students and families themselves. Fundamental to understanding the necessary shifts in California's educational policy is a nuanced spotlight on how Latine families understand schooling, navigate educational institutions, and make sense of the policies that shape their opportunities. Driving this report, then, is an intentional focus on centering the voices of Latine students and families, their experiences, concerns, hopes, and desires.

Drawing on interviews with Latine parents and their children across California, this report examines how families describe their experiences with schooling across K–12 education. Participants represent diverse geographic regions, linguistic backgrounds, and schooling contexts within the state. The families in this study come from major cities in Northern and Southern California, with diverse immigration histories and statuses. They are mostly of Mexican/Chicanx descent, with some families representing the Caribbean and South America. The sample also includes families composed of adopted children, Queer parents, single parents, racially and ethnically mixed families, and intergenerational families living together, with children spanning Pre-K through high school. Parents

represent a wide range of educational backgrounds, from high school graduates to those pursuing advanced degrees. Drawing on this diversity of experience, the report highlights how families articulate educational aspirations, evaluate institutional supports and barriers, and make sense of the broader social and political environments in which schooling takes place.

The need to understand these perspectives is particularly urgent within the contemporary sociopolitical context shaping education in California and across the United States. Debates surrounding immigration policy, language education, school funding, and access to higher education continue to influence how schools serve Latine communities. These debates unfold alongside longstanding histories of racialized educational policy that have structured schooling opportunities for Mexican American and broader Latine students for more than a century. Just as importantly, these families illustrate how this contemporary context is shaped not only by existing policies but by how the climate *around* state and federal policies creates racialized climates of fear and uncertainty for Latine communities. For many families, schooling is therefore experienced not only as a site of academic learning but also as an institutional space where questions of belonging, language, and civic inclusion are negotiated.

Importantly, this report also attends to how these perspectives may vary across developmental stages and grade levels. Much of the existing scholarship on Latine student voice focuses on adolescents navigating college access and preparation. While this research has yielded important insights, it leaves comparatively less understanding of how younger students conceptualize schooling and educational opportunity. By including participants across elementary, middle, and high school levels, the present study examines how student and parent perspectives emerge, evolve, and intersect across the K–12 continuum.

The findings presented in this report therefore, contribute to a growing body of scholarship that calls for centering community voice in educational research and policy. Rather than relying solely on institutional indicators of success or failure, this approach recognizes that families' interpretations of schooling provide critical insight into how educational systems function in practice. Understanding how Latine students and parents describe their experiences can illuminate gaps between policy intentions and lived realities and identify sources of resilience, aspiration, and community knowledge that often remain invisible in conventional policy discourse.

The report proceeds in several stages. First, we review the existing scholarship on Latine education in California, focusing on the historical policy contexts, dominant outcome-based research paradigms, and emerging work on parent and student voice. This literature review highlights both the contributions of prior research and the gap in understanding the perspectives from families and students that motivate the present study. Next, we describe the research design and methodology for collecting and analyzing interview data from parents and students across the state. We then present several thematic findings emerging from participants' accounts, focusing on how families describe students' needs, educational aspirations, and the structural conditions that shape their schooling experiences. Finally, the report concludes with a set of recommendations for policymakers and educational leaders seeking to better align educational systems with the perspectives and priorities of Latine students and families.

By centering the voices of those most directly affected by educational policy, this report aims to deepen understanding of schooling in California and inform more responsive and equitable approaches to educational policy and practice.

Review of Related Literature

Latine students present a growing and increasingly dominant share of California's K-12 population. Between 1994 and 2021, the proportion of Latine students in California public schools rose from 37% to 55% of all enrolled students (Population Reference Bureau, 2022). Only Texas stands out nationally as a state where Latine students constitute a near-majority of public school enrollment, which far exceeds the national average (NCES, 2022). Within California, Latine students are not evenly distributed, nearly three in four live in the state's ten largest counties with dense concentrations in Los Angeles County, the Central Valley, and communities along the U.S.-Mexico border (Cuellar Mejia, & Johnson, 2026). In terms of national origin, the majority of California's Latine population traces its heritage to Mexico, though the state is also home to some of the largest Salvadoran and Guatemalan communities in the U.S. Yet despite this demographic centrality, much of the scholarship on Latine education has focused on academic outcomes—achievement gaps, college eligibility, and language reclassification—rather than on how Latine students and families interpret, experience, and respond to educational systems and policy. Reviewing historical and contemporary research about Latine

education in California, we explore the racialized policy contexts that structure schooling as well as the dominant outcome-based paradigms in research on Latine student success. Further, by focusing on broader scholarship related to parent and student voice in education, we build from a persistent and notable gap related to education and education policy. Namely, there remains a dearth of research that examines how Latine families and students themselves make sense of education policy and schooling experiences, particularly across developmental stages.

Historical Foundations: Racialized Schooling, Legal Barriers, and Community Resistance

Any examination of Latine educational experiences must begin by acknowledging what the term both captures and erases. “Latine,” like its predecessors “Hispanic,” “Latin@” and “Latinx” is a pan-ethnic umbrella term that encompasses individuals and cultures that span the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, Central America, South America, as well as populations whose roots are in what is now the American Southwest and predates the United States itself. In this category exists profound diversity of race and ethnicity (including Black, Afro-Latino, Indigenous, and white identities) of immigration history and legal status, of a variety of languages, of generation, and socioeconomic status. Understanding this heterogeneity is essential to any analysis of educational experience, as the structural conditions that shape the experience of a third-generation student in Los Angeles differ substantially from those of a recently arrived Guatemalan asylum seeker in the Central Valley.

Latine educational experiences in California are also shaped by longstanding patterns of racialized exclusion. From the late nineteenth century forward, Mexican-origin students were segregated, under-resourced, and positioned as linguistically and culturally deficient within public schooling systems. Legal challenges such as *Alvarez v. Lemon Grove School District* (1931) and *Mendez v. Westminster* (1947) demonstrate that Latine communities were not passive subjects of discrimination but active agents contesting segregation well before *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954).¹

¹ The legal strategy underlying these early desegregation cases reveals the complex racialization of Latine students in California. In *Mendez v. Westminster*, attorneys argued that Mexican Americans should be classified as white and therefore entitled to attend white schools, deliberately avoiding direct challenges to the “separate but equal” doctrine. This strategic use of whiteness to achieve desegregation highlights how racial categories have been contested and mobilized in education

This history of structural inequality is foundational to contemporary scholarship. Gándara (1995, 2018) documents how educational policy repeatedly constrains opportunities for Mexican American and broader Latine students through inadequate funding, inequitable access to advanced coursework, and unstable bilingual education policy. Valenzuela’s (1999) concept of “subtractive schooling” further illuminates how schools often devalue students’ linguistic and cultural resources, producing disengagement not as individual failure but as institutional practice. She reminds us that educational meaning-making is relational and contextual. Students’ disengagement is not merely attitudinal but rooted in institutional signals about whose knowledge counts. Thus, understanding Latine education requires attending not only to access and outcomes but also to how students and families experience and interpret policy, and how institutions intentionally and unintentionally shape these experiences through exclusion and under-resourcing. Similarly, Cammarota (2004) and Cammarota and Fine (2008) demonstrate how youth participatory research and critical civic engagement expose structural injustices embedded in schooling, highlighting the analytic power of youth perspectives.

The increase in immigrants created a public backlash, where the 1990s marked a resurgence of exclusionary policy in California, including Proposition 187 (restricting public services for undocumented immigrants), Proposition 209 (ending affirmative action in public institutions), and Proposition 227 (restricting bilingual education). Although Proposition 58 (2016) later restored support for multilingual education, these policy oscillations reflect what Gándara (2018) characterizes as cyclical instability in educational access for Latine communities. Demographic trends not only affect public discourse but also policy in more restrictive ways. Historical and contemporary policy contexts thus structure how Latine families encounter schooling—not simply as neutral institutions but as sites shaped by immigration politics, racialization, and language ideology. This historical grounding underscores the importance of examining how Latine families and students interpret schooling within these racialized policy environments.

law. Despite these legal victories and subsequent desegregation mandates, California schools remain highly segregated by race, ethnicity, and language today.

Deficit-Oriented Paradigms of Latine Student Success

A substantial body of research documents disparities in achievement, graduation, and postsecondary attainment. Reports such as *The State of Higher Education for Latinx in California* (Campaign for College Opportunity, 2018) and *Excelencia in Education* (2024) track gaps in college eligibility, enrollment, and completion. Victorino et al. (2025) document how Latine undergraduates at a Hispanic-Serving Institution navigated pandemic-related economic and digital inequities. Browne et al. (2024) demonstrate how near-poverty status shapes Latinx students' educational expectations.

This scholarship is indispensable for documenting structural inequity. Gándara and Mordechay (2017) similarly detail persistent opportunity gaps in California, particularly for English learners². Yet this research often relies on institutional metrics—test scores, enrollment rates, degree attainment—leaving less space for students' and families' interpretive frameworks. The focus on these metrics also obscures the root causes of opportunity gaps, leading to a narrative that predominantly blames individual students or their families rather than the institutions that are supposed to serve them.

Language policy research offers a revealing example. Williams (2025) critiques California's limited investment in dual-language immersion (DLI) programs, despite strong public demand. Williams et al. (2025) report that nearly 70% of Latine families surveyed would choose bilingual education if available, directly challenging English-only narratives that informed earlier policy decisions. These findings shift beyond historic pushes toward English assimilation for Latine learners.

Yet even in this emerging scholarship on family preferences, perspectives are often aggregated into survey data. We know that families want bilingual education. Latine families' advocacy for bilingual education represents a form of educational resistance rooted in asset-based thinking. By demanding programs that honor and develop their children's home languages, families reject the premise that Spanish is a problem to be solved and instead position bilingualism as cultural wealth. This shift from deficit to asset thinking reclaims agency over their children's linguistic identities and educational futures, asserting that maintaining Spanish while acquiring English strengthens rather than hinders academic achievement and socioeconomic mobility. However, we know far less about how parents and

² 81% of English Learners in California are Spanish speakers. California Department of Education, <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/ad/cefelfacts.asp>

students interpret language policy debates, school-level implementation, or the relationship between bilingualism, identity, and belonging in daily school life.

Parent Voice

A growing body of research challenges deficit-based constructions of Latine family engagement. The privileging of school-defined, Eurocentric forms of participation over Latinx family school values often creates a cultural mismatch that mislabels involved, supportive Latinx parents as "disengaged." While schools typically define parent involvement as visible, school-based actions (e.g., volunteering in classrooms, attending PTA meetings), many Latinx families prioritize home-based support, including teaching mutual respect, providing moral guidance, and emphasizing family obligations (Palacios & Paulick, 2024) Hernandez and Daoud (2025) argue that prevailing models of parent involvement mischaracterize Latinx families, particularly those of English Learners, by privileging school-defined forms of participation. Their work calls for asset-based frameworks that recognize cultural and linguistic capital.

Robillard et al. (2023) provide qualitative evidence of Latine parental agency during the COVID-19 school shutdowns in California. Parents assumed roles as instructors, technology navigators, and emotional supports while confronting digital inequities, economic strain, and linguistic barriers. Rather than being disengaged, families were deeply involved in sustaining children's learning in ways often unrecognized by institutional frameworks.

Garcia Isaza et al. (2025) further distinguish between structural parental practices (resource management, scheduling) and relational practices (emotional support, communication). Their findings underscore that Latino immigrant families cultivate youth engagement even amid systemic barriers, challenging narratives that position families as obstacles rather than partners. This research aligns with Cammarota & Fine's (2008) call to center marginalized communities' voices in educational research, not as anecdotal supplements but as analytic lenses. Yet even within family engagement scholarship, much attention remains focused on parental strategies rather than on how families interpret policy landscapes or how parent and student perspectives intersect, align, or diverge.

Student Voice

Youth-centered scholarship provides a partial corrective. Cammarota and Fine’s (2008) work on youth participatory action research demonstrates that when students critically examine schooling structures, they generate powerful analyses of inequality. Similarly, Garcia et al. (2019) illustrate how youth civic writing surfaces critiques of education policy, immigration, and access. However, much student voice research centers on adolescents, particularly high school students navigating college access. College aspiration studies dominate Latine education research, reinforcing a teleological narrative in which schooling is evaluated primarily by postsecondary outcomes.

Less is known about how younger Latine students conceptualize schooling, belonging, and policy environments. How do elementary and middle school students understand language programs, tracking, or disciplinary practices? How do their perspectives intersect with family narratives about opportunity, safety, or mobility? These developmental dimensions remain underexplored.

Student voice, as represented in contemporary educational research, emphasizes the importance of lived experience as a foundation for educational meaning-making. However, systematic research on how Latine students in California articulate these meanings—particularly outside of crisis moments or civic projects—remains limited.

Across historical, outcome-based, and voice-centered scholarship, a clear tension emerges. We possess extensive documentation of inequity, rich theoretical frameworks explaining racialized schooling, and growing evidence of parental engagement. Yet we lack sustained inquiry into how Latine families and students themselves interpret education policy and schooling experiences in contemporary California. This gap is particularly significant in a state where Latine students constitute the majority. California’s debates over bilingual education, immigrant inclusion, and access to higher education are not abstract policy questions; they are lived realities that shape family decision-making, student identity development, and educational belonging. Gándara (2015) argues that policy instability disproportionately affects communities with limited political power. Understanding how families perceive and respond to such instability is therefore central to educational equity. A family perspective-centered approach attends to both parent and student voices—not merely as preference data but as interpretive accounts of schooling’s meaning, fairness, and possibility. It also recognizes that family and student perspectives may align, diverge, or evolve across developmental stages. This

review, therefore, highlights the need for research that examines how Latine families and students in California understand education policy, interpret schooling structures, and articulate aspirations beyond narrow college-access frameworks. Centering these perspectives is not ancillary to equity research; it is foundational to understanding how policy is experienced, enacted, and contested in everyday school life.

Methods

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to examine Latine student and parent perspectives on schooling across California. Qualitative interviewing was selected as the primary method in order to foreground participants' voices and to capture detailed accounts of how students and parents understand schooling, opportunity, and belonging within contemporary educational contexts.

Interviews were conducted with Latine parents and their children currently enrolled in K–12 schools across California. Though the protocol employed for parents and their children asked similar questions of both parties, these interviews were conducted sequentially, rather than simultaneously, to allow child and parent sustained space to share their perspectives.

Participants

Participants included Latine parents and their children representing multiple grade levels across the K–12 spectrum and residing in different regions of California. Families were recruited through a snowball sampling method, relying on existing contacts with parents at school sites the research team had worked with through prior activities. We deliberately took this approach as familiarity played a key factor in parents deciding whether participation was safe in the present context of anti-Latine activities within the state and country at the time of our data collection; this theme is reflected in the findings that follow.

Demographic information about participants—including student grade levels, family linguistic background, and geographic location—was collected during the interview process. To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms are used for all individuals as well as for schools and districts referenced in this report. **Table 1** provides an overview of participant characteristics.

Parent Name	Student Name	Student Grade	Ethnic Background	1st Gen / 2 nd Gen
Rosario			Mexican	1st
	Vanessa	3rd	Mexican	2nd
	Leslie	4th	Mexican	2nd
	Alonso	7th	Mexican	2nd
Rafaela			Mexican	1st
	Edgar	Kindergarten	Mexican	2nd
Elena			Mexican	1st
	Alejandro	7th	Mexican	2nd
	Brian	7th	Mexican	2nd
	Beatriz	11th	Mexican	2nd
Agustina			Mexican	1st
	Mario	6th	Mexican	2nd
Barbara			Mexican	1st
	Mateo	9th	Mexican	2nd
	Luis	6th	Mexican	2nd
	Alexa	2nd	Mexican	2nd
Angel			Mexican	3rd
	Bayron	6th	Mexican & Trinidadian	4th
Esteban			Ecuadorian	1st
	Daniel	PK	Ecuadorian & White	2nd
Juan		Parent	Guatemalan & Filipino	2nd
Flor		Parent	Dominican	1st

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Given contemporary concerns among parents about traveling to interview locations or participating in in-person data collection due to ongoing disruptions by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), all interviews were conducted via Zoom. Interviews typically lasted approximately one hour and were conducted separately with parents and students to allow participants to speak freely about their experiences. Interview protocols included questions related to participants' educational experiences, perceptions of school support and resources, language and learning environments, educational aspirations, and broader interpretations of schooling.

Interviews were conducted in both English and Spanish, depending on participant preference. Offering this option helped build rapport with participants. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and subsequently transcribed for analysis. Spanish-language interviews were transcribed and, where necessary for analysis and reporting, translated into English by members of the research team. Rapport was maintained throughout the interviews through affirmation of participant experiences. Throughout the interviews, team members would ask clarifying questions to ensure the intent and meaning of participants' statements were properly captured. Likewise, throughout the interview process, care was taken to ensure that participants could describe their experiences in their own terms. Open-ended prompts encouraged participants to elaborate on their perspectives on schooling, family educational priorities, and the broader social and policy contexts that shape their educational experiences.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed an inductive qualitative approach to identify recurring themes across participant interviews. After transcription, interview data were reviewed by members of the research team and organized for analysis. We coded our data using Google Sheets to cross-reference comments across all research members. The full research team engaged in iterative readings of transcripts to identify emergent patterns in participants' descriptions of schooling experiences, educational priorities, and perceived challenges and supports.

Initial coding categories were developed inductively from the data rather than imposed a priori. Through collaborative discussion and comparison of transcripts, these codes were refined into broader thematic categories that represent recurring issues raised by participants. This deliberate, grounded theory approach allowed us to work toward a clearer understanding of the key needs, desires, and experiences of the families in this study.

Importantly, we recognize that the limited sample size for this report is not representative of a singular Latine experience in the state, nor is it a generalizable sample in terms of demographic representation. Instead, this report deliberately offers substantive voices from within the broad array of Latine communities in the state, centering individual perspectives that represent the diversity of Latinidad. These findings that follow highlight recurring patterns in how the Latine parents and students in this study describe their educational experiences, needs, and aspirations within California's contemporary schooling landscape.

Emergent Themes

This study examined the educational experiences and aspirations of Latine families and students across California, centering their voices as the primary source of knowledge about what schools should look and feel like. Findings are organized across three levels of educational life: the broader structural forces that shape how schools operate and who can access them; the school as an institution with its own organizational culture and physical environment; and the classroom as the most immediate site of daily learning. Cutting across all levels are three major themes: the current sociopolitical climate, the rich diversity within Latinidad, and language. These cannot be focused within any single level and instead shape how families and students experience every dimension of schooling.

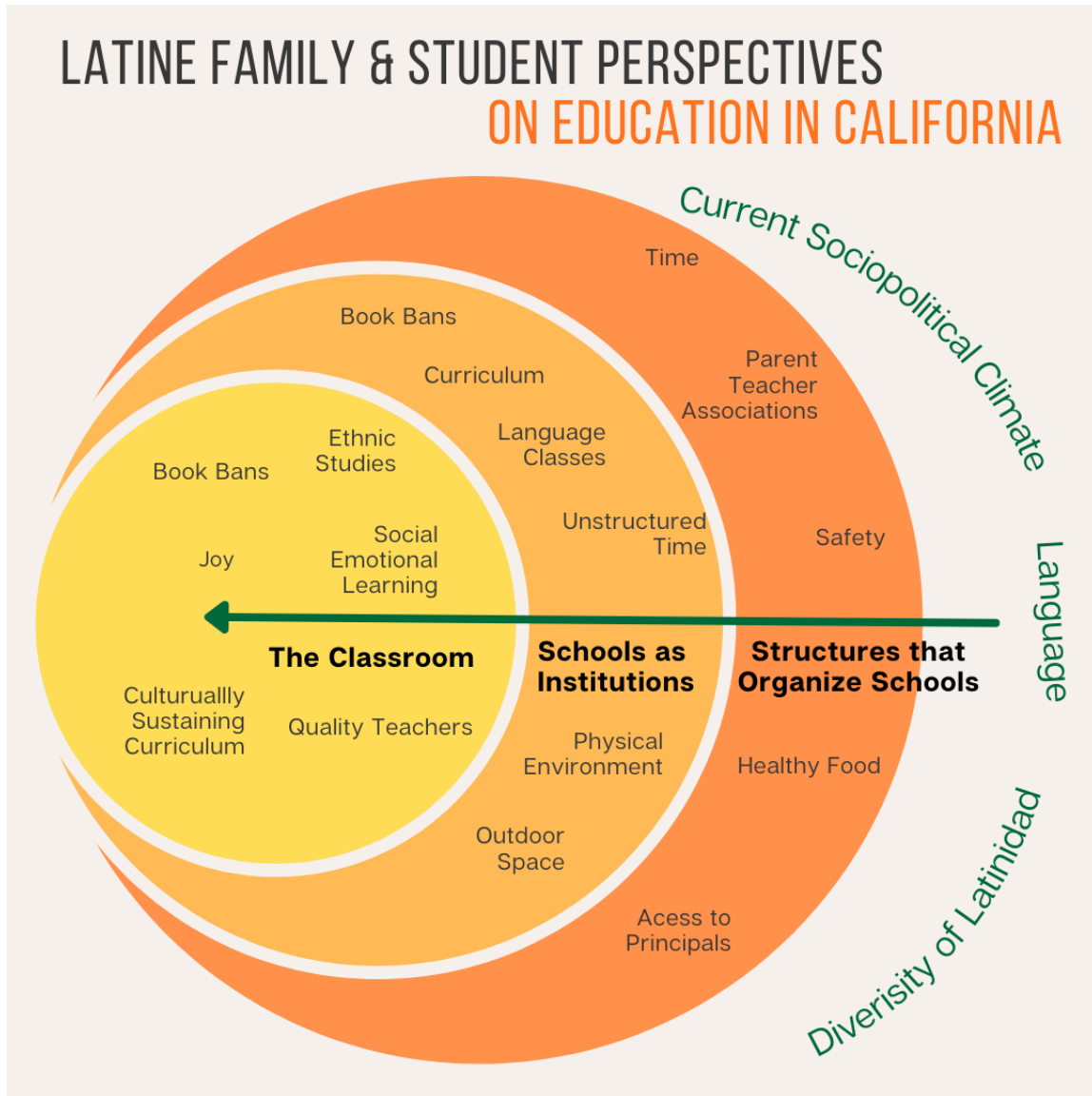


Figure 1.

Cross-Cutting Themes

Current Sociopolitical Climate. For many Latine families in this study, the most fundamental question about school was not about curriculum or instruction; it was whether school was safe. The current sociopolitical climate, marked by intensified immigration enforcement and anti-immigrant rhetoric, has created a pervasive fear that cuts across immigration status, age, and geography. Participants, situated in varied urban and suburban school districts across California, both experienced and expressed similar fears. Children described anxiety about being stopped, targeted, or losing a

parent without warning. Parents described monitoring their communities for ICE activity, calculating the distance between themselves and their children, and suppressing their own fear so as not to frighten the very children they were trying to protect. For these families, school is not a neutral institution. It is a place they must weigh the risk of entering. This pervasive fear surfaced frequently in interviews with children as a barrier to their sense of safety. Mateo, Beatriz, and Alonso, all US citizens who attend different schools across California, expressed their worries.

Mateo, a high schooler in a more suburban district in Northern California, shared, “I’m just scared that an ICE agent will see me as a Latino or Hispanic, right? And pull me over, maybe. I mean, I’m not driving, right, but I’m on my bike. Then you can be stopped. ...I see like, the Trump hats on people sometimes, and I get a little worried. Yeah, the MAGA hats. And it kind of worries me. I’m a little scared that someone’s gonna... Like, shoot me.”

Beatriz, a high school student in an urban district in Southern California, added that her teachers were talking about the raids in class as a moment to reflect on history. “Everything that’s going on with, like, the ICE raid and all this stuff. We’ve actually, like, in history class, we’ve taken, like, a day to really, like, talk about it, and ... my teacher explained, like, what was going on, and about, like, how stuff like this has... like, just how... history is repeating itself... How this has already happened before, and just kind of starting over again.”

Parents described weighing the risk of attending school events against the possibility of exposing themselves to danger. For undocumented and mixed-status families in particular, the school door is not simply open; it’s a threshold that carries real stakes upon entering. Parents also shared fears for their children in the event that ICE might show up, including the reasons they chose to transfer their child to a different school, despite the school’s detailed protocol on teacher actions and school administration ensuring that ICE would not be allowed on the school campus. Even when parents were extremely pleased with their child’s safe classroom environment, thoughtful teachers, and welcoming school culture, the thought of not being able to get to their child’s school on time in case of an emergency was enough to finalize their decision to switch schools.

Rafaela, whose child is in kindergarten shared, “Another thing that got me, really scared, too, is because where I’m at, there was a lot of ICE raids in the summertime, and then one of my friends, who’s also a mom, her school was impacted... they [ICE] were around her school, so she went...they

gave her the okay to pick up her child, or to make sure he was safe. And I thought, oh my gosh, I can't leave class and then drive 25 minutes to make sure my kid's okay. ”

She went further to explain more about the effects that these ICE raids were having on her well-being, including the ways she had to hide what she was feeling to not worry her child.

“I think, yeah, the ICE raids, and the terrorizing of our communities, and how it's getting worse and escalating to more violence. I feel it does impact my child because he... he witnesses how I get. Especially, like, this week, my community got... impacted again. I think that impacts him because... and maybe that's why he's been anxious, too, and not wanting to go [to school].” These accounts reveal that immigration enforcement does not stay outside the schoolhouse door: it enters with every child who has learned to scan a crowd for a MAGA hat, every parent who has mapped the minutes between their workplace and their child's classroom, every family quietly calculating what it would mean if today were “the day.” The emotional labor of managing this fear, for parents, and increasingly for children themselves, is a largely invisible tax on learning that schools are only beginning to reckon with.

The Diversity of Latinidad. An affirming finding across all levels of this study that aligns with the literature is that “Latine” is not a monolith and that schools, in their practices, curricula, and assumptions, often treat it as one. Participants from across California pushed back against a Latine identity that is implicitly Mexican-centric, particularly in a state where immigration from Central America, South America, and the Caribbean has reshaped the demographics of many school communities.

Families from Guatemala, Ecuador, and the Dominican Republic described experiences of being subsumed under a homogenized Latine identity that did not account for their particular histories, cultures, or languages. When asked what he wishes California schools should do differently, Juan responded with, “The biggest one for me is kind of understanding the differences between the Latino populations that we do have here, so we're not just painting everybody in one big stroke. Like I said before, like, I'm Guatemalan, so going to school in the Bay Area, we're in a state, in a region that used to be Mexico. So there is a lot of Mexican-Americans, but for me, I never saw myself included in the whole big Latino umbrella, because it tends to be just Mexicans, or we talk about Mexican stuff. Now there is more celebrations like in [Bay Area city] there is a whole like, Central American parade for Independence Week, so that's great. So there is little things I do see moving, and I see new immigrants

from Venezuela and Colombia, and there should be ways where we can celebrate their history and stories too.”

Juan interrogated how *Latinidad*, though necessary for uniting communities around shared experiences, also carries the risk of erasure, particularly for Indigenous people from Latin America. "How are we going to use the word 'Raza,'" he asked, "when, especially with Indigenous people, that word is kind of exclusive of Indigenous people? In the sense that it kind of historicizes them, leaving them in the past and not the present." For Juan, being Guatemalan offered a different framework entirely, one organized not around race but around place and community of origin. "Over there, they don't tell you, like, oh, what race you are. It's like, what pueblo are you from?"

This distinction carries real consequences inside California schools. When Indigenous Guatemalan students are categorized as *Latine*, their particular histories, cultures, and languages are subsumed into a pan-ethnic label that was not built with them in mind. Juan noted that many Guatemalans do not speak Spanish at all, their home languages are Mam, or other Mayan languages, meaning that even the bilingual and Spanish-language supports schools offer as gestures toward inclusion can leave these students unreached. The category meant to welcome them becomes another wall.

Mixed families, including adoptive families, and ethnically mixed families described their children navigating educational spaces that had no category for their uniqueness or complexity. Angel, the adoptive parent of Bayron, also struggled with how *Latinidad* erases his unique family makeup. In his interview, Bayron proudly said he was Mexican and Trinidadian representative of his dads' cultures. However, Angel noted that his child's affluent school district misses the mark in how they teach about race and ethnicity in their approach to monthly celebrations. "This is really a presentation of a limited depiction of race, ethnicity, right? Like to to an audience that is, say, [school district] I think, is a very sheltered experience, and so they're not doing any sort of service to these, these sorts of, you know, communities, especially like, say, like, my family. We have a child who came to us through adoption, right? And so, like these complications about...the deterministic like it comes with your blood. Kind of harkens back to like this, this concept of race as embedded through biology, or, you know, DNA, right?" The category of "*Latine*" itself was experienced in Angel's family as a flattening via "box-checking" rather than a genuine embrace of diversity.

Social class surfaced as another dimension of Latine diversity that schools frequently flatten. Rather than accounting for the full range of economic and educational backgrounds present within Latine communities, schools often default to assumptions of poverty or limited parental education, assumptions that can misdirect resources and quietly communicate who a family is presumed to be.

Angel's experience illustrates this plainly. He discovered that his son had been automatically enrolled in a program for first-generation college students, despite the fact that Angel himself is pursuing a doctoral degree. "How did you get selected for that," he asked his son, "when one of your parents is getting a PhD?" For Angel, the misplacement was not simply an error, it was a signal that the school had made sweeping assumptions about his family without ever asking. He reflected that what concerned him most was how such structures, however well-intentioned, shape his son's understanding of himself and his place in the world. The "frictionless path" laid out before certain students, one paved with assumptions about who needs what, can itself become something worth questioning. Angel's primary goal for his son's education, he said, is precisely that capacity: "to notice structures, ask questions, and think critically about the paths placed before him," rather than simply walking through them unexamined.

Language. Language runs through every level of this study, as a barrier to access, as a site of cultural identity, as an educational resource, and a source of ongoing inequity. Families described the need for people to reach out with more of an understanding of family needs as well as robust, high-quality translation at every point of contact with schools: enrollment, parent-teacher conferences, disciplinary proceedings, and school governance meetings. The absence of reliable translation was experienced as exclusion. Beyond translation, Rafaela shared, "Some parents don't speak English, like, my mom, she doesn't speak English, so she had a hard time when she would go. So, I think I ended up being the translator all the time. So maybe, like, having translators or people... I don't know if... not case managers, but, like, somebody in charge to reach out, reach out to families and understand. I think sometimes the teachers end up doing all that emotional and social labor, that that's why they burn out."

Moreover, bilingual and dual immersion education emerged as a deeply held priority. Families described wanting their children to maintain and develop their Spanish alongside English. Language was not seen as remediation or a transition strategy but as a full bilingual or multilingual education that

honored all languages equally. Though not overtly, many parents named that the lack of programs in Spanish pushed toward English only instructions that came with a grief about language loss. English Language Development (ELD) programs were a source of both hope and frustration. While families valued dedicated support for students still acquiring English, many described ELD tracks as insufficient or isolating from grade-level content that limited their academic mobility.

Perhaps the most striking finding within this theme was the experience of students whose home language is not English or Spanish, specifically for indigenous Guatemalan students whose primary language is Mam or another Maya language. These students experience a triple displacement: excluded from English-dominant instruction, often unable to access Spanish-language support, and be invisible within a Latine category that equates this group to Spanish. For these families, the question of language in school is not simply about bilingualism but the deeper questions about who schools are built for and how far the commitment to linguistic inclusion actually extends.

Level One: Structures that Shape School Experiences

Theme 1: Access to School

Healthy Food. Access also surfaces in more everyday, but no less significant ways. Families raised concerns about the quality of school food, describing meals that were unfamiliar or nutritionally inadequate. Additionally, both parents and children talked about the constraints of the school day and the lack of time students had to eat their meals. Elena shared, “I would say, more of, lunch, like, their, what they're eating, or what they're offering? I mean... Segun que it's healthier, but it's really not healthy. And, I guess a little bit more time for them to eat. That I would say, because I do hear the kids telling they don't get enough time to eat.”

Rafaela also shared, “I know when I was growing up, it was pretty bad. Why? Because our bodies are very sacred, and our children are being fed those foods, and... I think it has to do a lot with their developmental things, like if... I know I probably had a lot of sugar and a lot of things when I was growing up in [Urban School in Southern California]. I love those coffee cakes, but I know they were full of sugar... Yeah, so definitely, like, more food, because even when we think about, like, our cultural identity, like, our food is so important, like... And does our food reflect our... who we are, like, what we eat, traditionally, and... So maybe that, starting with that, the food.”

For students who rely on school meals, as a primary food source, this is not just a minor inconvenience, it affects concentration, dignity, and a student's basic sense of being cared for.

Time: Breaks, Recess & Lunch. Furthermore, students across age groups emphasized the importance of having time to socialize, play, and decompress. Many describe schools that felt relentlessly academically-driven, leaving little room for peer connection and joy that make school feel livable and joyous. This was particularly a concern after children experience long periods of classes and having to sit down in uncomfortable furniture. Families echoed this, noting that children who never have room to be children also struggle to learn. Alejandro, a middle school student, expressed, “Probably having more time at lunch and nutrition. Because we barely had, like, only 15 minutes of nutrition, and... 40? 45. 45 for lunch... just hang out with our friends. Then go on the field and just play and get... Our energy out before we go back to class.

Similarly, Beatriz, a high school student said, “I would definitely have to say probably more... like a break time. We don't actually have a break. And I would probably say, like, a longer lunch time as well, because sometimes sitting in a classroom for so long, and then only having, like, 35 minutes of lunch. It's like, it's something that's, like, it doesn't give me that full break. And then also, sometimes, like, the lunch line can be so long, where it takes me almost 15 minutes to get lunch, and then it gives me, like, only 15 minutes to eat, and not really, like, be able to enjoy my lunch.” This sentiment is also noted by Brian, a middle school student. He said, “If they would understand us more better. They would understand that us kids have a lot of energy, and they should let us have more time out on the field, so we could take out the energy.”

Safe Outdoors Space and Connection to Land. Several participants described the value of outdoor time, gardens and farm-based learning. The time and space where students could engage with the natural world and for many families, connect to agricultural and land-based traditions that carry a deep cultural meaning. Access to these spaces were uneven with students in underserved communities or in urban areas, describing no outdoor areas or limited time outside. The desire for diverse outside spaces from older students also revealed a sense of communal care that is often overlooked in K-12 spatial planning. Vanessa, an elementary school student, shared, “I don't know, because I think everyone has the exact same things in schools, but I'm thinking of, like, like, a kindergarten area, or TK? From [other school in district], I went there, and, They didn't... there was little kids, but they can't

climb on any of the big stuff. So I want them... some... some of the schools have... if they have no kindergarten areas, then they should add some... And, like, farms, because probably some schools don't have, like, farms. What I enjoy. I like to, like, explore around the farm and hang out. But sometimes it's kind of messy... Sometimes, like, at the end, we get to get, like, something to eat.”

Level Two: The School as an Institution

Theme 2: School Practices that Signal Belonging or Exclusion

Beyond policies and access, families and students describe how the physical and organizational structure of schools communicate something about whose presence is valued. These structural signals emerged repeatedly across participant interviews.

Books and Curriculum. Students and parents expressed a strong desire to see books that reflect their own cultural histories, languages and communities on school shelves. The absence of books by and Latine people, and the diverse national and indigenous communities within Latin America were experienced not as a neutral gap but active erasure. This in conjunction with national policies to ban books that center diversity highlighted a concern parents had about what their children will learn not only about themselves but other cultures and peoples. Families named this as a message that their children’s lives and histories were not worthy of literature.

Language Classes. Both parents and students called for language offerings that would reflect the linguistic reality of their communities that included Spanish, indigenous languages, and heritage language programs. Rosario carefully expressed, “There is this school that I always thought about, like, if we do go back to Southern Cali, it's an Indigenous school in LA. They teach the kids Nahua, Spanish, English, and Mandarin. Yeah, and they do a lot of, like, ancestral knowledge and drumming with the students, so I would love to find a school out here like that. And it's just... and then they teach about, like, the history of Mexico, the colonialization, and also how to be critical, so that would be nice if he could have that.” Language classes were understood not only as academic tools but as sites of cultural pride and intergenerational connection.

Institutional Power: PTA. Families also spoke to access in terms of institutional power: who gets to be in the room where decisions are made. Language barriers, meeting times that conflicted with work schedules, and a general sense that these spaces are not “for them” kept many families at the

margins of school governance. Families describe a clear desire not just to be informed about decisions but to help make them. Many Latine parents described feeling excluded from Parent-Teacher Associations (PTA) and from meaningful and direct access to their school principals, particularly around the planning of when meetings were held. Rosario further described her participation as a counter to this. She expressed, “Yes, so a big part of why I had joined the board for the PTA was because I wanted... That community to see themselves. And I think a lot of the board, were not representing them, or they felt as if they didn't have anyone representing them? So that's why I joined the board. And once I joined the board, I was able to reach out to some of that community, and that's exactly how they felt.”

Furthermore, Rosario also expressed the difficulties of becoming involved in things like PTA. She said, “I mean, as a whole, I wish that they... I think because of its location, they... assume that us parents are constantly available at their beck and call. Which I think is a little unfair. You know, we work, and sometimes it's a little overwhelming.” This exemplifies how parents who are trying their best to continue to bridge the needs of the Latine community with institutions of power continue to face many barriers during this endeavor.

Level Three: The Classroom

Theme 3: Teachers, Curriculum, and the Fight over What Gets Taught

The classroom is where policy, structure and relationships converge. Teachers were consistently described as among the most powerful forces in a student's educational experience and future trajectories. Teachers matter as much as what is taught.

Ethnic Studies. Families and students were enthusiastic about Ethnic Studies as a course and as a pedagogical framework. Students who had experienced an Ethnic Studies class described it as transformative, a class where they finally saw themselves in the curriculum and learned the history that contextualized their families' experiences and felt intellectually challenged in ways that felt relevant to their lives. Mateo, a high school student enthusiastically shared that, “There's not a lot of spaces for that, but, one that would take it was Ethnic studies. I love Ethnic studies. It's my favorite class. But, we... we spoke a lot about different ethnic groups, and when it came to Latinos, I was... I was right there. I was all the way. It's really cool.”

Similarly, Beatriz, another high school student noted that, “Reading books written by, like, Latinx, authors, like, I remember reading *The House on Mango Street*. And that was, like, that's when I was like, oh wow, like... someone who comes from the same background was, like, talking about her story, and I really liked that.”

Civic Engagement. Families described wanting Ethnic studies to start a conversation about what is happening currently and to be taught with depth and authenticity rather than meeting the requirement checkbox. Elena, a parent who attended the same schools her children are currently attending shared, “I would hopefully like to see that there's a lot... okay, I got my student involvement as far as, like, the Latino... Latino community, especially right now with the whole situation that's going on in our country. Mis hijos are scared. So, that's one thing, you know, I want to see a lot more of that. That's... I don't... I haven't seen that. As far as, like, when I was in [Urban School in Southern California], there was a lot of, you know Latino involvement. We... I was involved in, like, *Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano/a de Aztlan (MEChA)* and all that, and, you know, we would come up with our own, like, protests or rallies, right? *Y ahora nos esta bien eso*. That's one thing I can say, that I'm not seeing too much of that. So... That I would want to see. A little bit more of, like Latino students coming together. And not being scared.”

While Elena expressed gratitude for how schools celebrated certain traditions from her kid's culture, she hoped to have more ongoing conversations and learning opportunities for her children that would prepare them for the current reality while also connecting this to an ongoing history of violence. “Don't get me wrong, they celebrate, like, *Dia de los Muertos*, or, you know, *Pero*, I just feel like more of, like, for example, this situation that's going on, like, getting them more, educated in what's really going on. I mean, they're living in that era right now that... and we told them, like, look, it's happened before, you know? We were young with, like, at you guys' age, when we saw it, and... *Y ahora como que si esta pasando todo esta*. It's... we're living in uncertain times right now.”

Book Bans and Culturally Responsive Curriculum. Several participants spoke with alarm and frustration about the growing movement to remove books from classrooms and school libraries. They were clear in understanding this movement as targeting, among others, books about Latine, Black and LGBTQ+ experiences. Families described this as a direct attack on their children's right to see themselves in print. Furthermore, across interviews, students and families articulated a desire for

culturally grounded learning woven throughout the school day and year, not confined to a single month or class. They described wanting teachers who knew something about where their students came from, could connect content to community, and who would not require students to become experts on their own culture simply to be seen. Rafaela shared, “I would say, like, what about, like, Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies, or what about... You know, not erasing his community's values or his language at home. Because that's what I'm getting at here in [urban Bay Area community] did not get that. I get that both are valuable. And... and there was a lot of, like, cultural values that were present in the... in the teaching. Like, like, food, that was really nice, also collectivity, things like that, so I feel... Yeah, how do we... Because I... yeah, I know that some schools are more about, like, oh, so he's better in English proficiency, and this and that. For me, it's more of, like. That he can maintain both languages, or even if he wants to learn a third or fourth one.”

Theme 4: The Classroom as a Place of Joy and Affirmation

Participants did not only describe what was missing, they described with clarity and imagination what school could be. This theme captures the affective and relational conditions that families and students identified as essential to genuine learning.

Social Emotional Learning (SEL). Families described wanting schools that took the emotional lives of students seriously, not as a distraction from academics, but foundational to them. Students spoke about the importance of feeling known by their teachers and having adults who checked in with them, being in classrooms where it is okay to struggle. SEL was not understood as a program to be added on but as the relational foundation of a classroom. Families described also wanting their children to be taught and supported in the ways to engage others, so their children would neither be the recipient or aggressor in othering. Rafaela and Rosario, both mothers who have young boys, reflected this. Rafaela said, “What I worry is because he's a brown boy, when he... that he's not allowed to be angry, or not allowed to show emotions Because I feel that they're gonna think he's aggressive or something. And it's like, he's a human being, he can show all emotions.”

Rosario, too, noted, “I just want it to be really enjoyable for them. I don't want them to come home frustrated, or... Overwhelmed with the experience. I want them to... enjoy learning. And... And meeting new people, and... Really showing, like, kindness, not just to their peers, but to the adults that

work there. Like, I just think this is a, besides home, like, this is... Where they are learning to become adults. And... The way they behave and the way they learn at school impacts the adult that they become. And so, I just... I just hope that whatever we bring up... we teach them at home is what they're taking at school. And they utilize those tools there. To just be successful there."

Joy. Students spoke about wanting classrooms that made room for laughter, play, creativity, and connection, spaces where the culture and life they carried into school every morning was not checked at the door but woven into the fabric of the day. Families echoed this, describing the difference between schools where their children came home energized and curious, and schools where they came home depleted. The emotional temperature of a classroom, participants made clear, is not separate from its academic outcomes. It shapes them.

This theme also captures something that many education frameworks leave unnamed: the right of children, and particularly children from communities that have been historically marginalized, to experience school as a place that is genuinely for them. Affirmation here is not about praise or performance; it is about the daily, accumulated experience of having one's identity, family, and community treated as a source of strength rather than a problem to be managed.

Summary

These seven themes, organized across structural levels, paint a consistent picture: Latine families and students across California have a clear, sophisticated, and urgent vision for what their schools should be. They are naming with precision the conditions and structures in which all students learn best.

Discussion and Recommendations

The findings of this report reflect how Latine students and families across California interpret schooling within a broader historical, social, and political landscape. Consistent with prior scholarship documenting the racialized structures that shape educational opportunity for Latine communities (Gándara, 1995, 2015; Valenzuela, 1999), participants described schools not simply as academic institutions but as multidimensional settings where questions of safety, belonging, cultural identity, and civic participation are negotiated daily. The perspectives shared in this report speak across the chasm of educational policy that too often has not heard or responded to the needs of parents and students.

While substantial research documents structural inequities and policy outcomes, less attention has focused on how Latine families voice and make sense of schooling and educational policy.

Safety as the Foundation of Learning

Across many of our interviews, safety emerged as the most fundamental condition for schooling. Before discussing curriculum or instructional quality, families repeatedly returned to whether schools felt safe for their children to attend. For many Latine families, this sense of safety is shaped by the broader sociopolitical context surrounding immigration enforcement and racialized public discourse. Students described fears related to immigration raids and deportations affecting their communities, illustrating how national political debates reverberate within the daily lives of children.

These experiences underscore previous work reflecting how educational policy cannot be separated from immigration politics and the broader structures of racialization that shape schooling experiences. When both parents and students fear for the safety of their families or communities, schools cannot function as insulated spaces removed from these realities. Instead, schools become sites where broader political anxieties are experienced and negotiated.

Participants' accounts also reinforce prior scholarship exploring how schools communicate powerful messages about whose lives and experiences are valued. When families feel uncertain about whether schools can protect their children or their communities, the institution itself becomes a site that instills vulnerability and uncertainty rather than support. Schools seeking to build trust with Latine communities must therefore attend not only to academic programming but also to the relational and institutional conditions that foster safety and belonging.

The Physical Conditions of Childhood: Play, Land, and Food

Participants in this study also emphasized the importance of the physical environment of schooling, including access to outdoor space, opportunities for play, and the quality of school meals. These findings highlight dimensions of schooling that are often overlooked in policy debates yet are central to students' daily experiences.

Participants described the importance of time to socialize, play, and decompress during the school day. For many students, breaks and recess were not viewed as interruptions to academic learning but as essential components of a balanced school environment. These observations resonate with broader research emphasizing the importance of holistic educational environments that support students' emotional and physical well-being alongside academic development.

In addition, several families described the significance of school gardens, farms, and outdoor learning environments. These spaces were meaningful not only as pedagogical tools but also as cultural connections. For many families, agricultural traditions and relationships to land are important aspects of cultural identity and community history. When schools provide opportunities for students to engage with the natural world, they create spaces where cultural knowledge and academic learning can intersect.

Concerns about school meals further illustrate how everyday institutional practices communicate care—or its absence—to students and families. Participants described wanting food that is both nutritious and culturally relevant. These perspectives echo a broader call within family engagement scholarship to recognize the cultural knowledge and priorities that families bring to educational spaces. Food, like language and curriculum, is not simply a logistical matter but a reflection of whose cultural practices are acknowledged within the institution.

Schools as Sites of Sociopolitical Learning

Participants in this study consistently emphasized that schools cannot be divorced from the broader sociopolitical realities shaping students' lives. Families described engaging with contemporary issues such as immigration policy debates, racial discrimination, and global conflicts within their classrooms and communities. Rather than seeking to avoid these topics, many students expressed a desire to understand them more deeply.

These accounts align with youth-centered scholarship demonstrating that young people are capable of sophisticated analyses of social and political issues when provided with supportive learning environments (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Mirra et al., 2015). Families in this study often interpreted contemporary events through historical frameworks, recognizing patterns of discrimination, exclusion, and resistance across time.

Participants also voiced strong concerns about the growing movement to remove books and restrict discussions of race, identity, and history within schools. Families interpreted these efforts not simply as curriculum debates but as attempts to limit whose stories and histories are considered legitimate forms of knowledge. Such perspectives highlight the stakes of contemporary debates over book bans and curricular control. For students whose communities have historically been marginalized in official narratives, access to diverse literature and historical perspectives is central to educational belonging. Related, many participants emphasized the importance of learning accurate and comprehensive histories that include the civilizations and cultures of Latin America, including indigenous histories such as the Mayan empire. This desire reflects a broader demand for educational systems that move beyond Eurocentric historical narratives and acknowledge the intellectual and cultural contributions of diverse communities.

Identity, Representation, and Cultural Affirmation

Closely tied to questions of history and curriculum is the issue of representation within educational materials and school structures. Students and parents consistently described the importance of encountering books, lessons, and classroom discussions that reflect their cultural identities and histories. The absence of such representation was experienced not as a neutral gap but as a form of erasure. Participants' calls for culturally responsive curriculum and inclusive literature can be understood as efforts to counteract this dynamic by affirming the knowledge and histories that students carry into the classroom.

Importantly, families also emphasized that representation must account for the diversity within Latinidad itself. Participants from different national and linguistic backgrounds described how schools often treat Latine identity as monolithic, erasing the cultural complexity of communities from across Latin America and the Caribbean. Recognizing this diversity is essential for developing educational environments that genuinely reflect the experiences of California's Latine students.

Intergenerational Knowledge and Historical Patterns

Another significant consideration emerging from the perspectives of the families participating in this study was the role of intergenerational knowledge. It consistently shaped how families interpret schooling and contemporary political events. Parents frequently described hearing their children recount experiences that echoed events from their own youth, particularly in relation to immigration enforcement, discrimination, and xenophobia.

These intergenerational conversations highlight the importance of historical literacy. When students can situate contemporary events within broader historical patterns, they gain tools for critical analysis and civic engagement. The findings from this study demonstrate how students interpret contemporary events through both personal and historical frameworks as well as the role that parents can play in this collective meaning making process.

Recommendations

Taken together, the themes shared in this report suggest several directions for educational policy and practice:

1. Strengthen policies that ensure schools are safe and trusted spaces for immigrant and mixed-status families.
2. Invest in the physical and environmental conditions of schooling, including outdoor learning spaces, gardens, and culturally responsive meal programs.
3. Support inclusive and historically accurate curricula that reflect the diverse histories and civilizations of Latin America and the broader global community.
4. Protect access to diverse literature and resist efforts to remove books that reflect marginalized communities.
5. Develop culturally responsive pedagogies that recognize the diversity within Latine identities.
6. Provide professional support for educators facilitating discussions of contemporary social and global issues.

Conclusion

This study set out to better understand how Latine students and families across California interpret their educational experiences and what they believe schools should provide for young people. Their perspectives demonstrate that families possess a clear and thoughtful vision for schooling—one that centers safety, belonging, cultural affirmation, and intellectual curiosity.

We recognize that the study was limited by participant size and skewed toward a mostly female and mostly Mexican perspective, based on our sample. This work offers a crucial glimpse into the landscape of often unvoiced needs in schools while also emphasizing an urgency for future areas of research.

Consistent with the broader literature on Latine education, participants' experiences highlight the ways schooling is shaped by historical patterns of inequality and by contemporary sociopolitical conditions. At the same time, the voices of students and families reveal the possibilities for more responsive educational environments grounded in community knowledge and experience.

Listening to these perspectives is essential in a state where Latine students represent the majority of the public-school population. As this report demonstrates, students and families are not merely subjects of educational policy but active interpreters of schooling whose insights can inform more equitable and inclusive approaches to education. Centering these voices moves educational research beyond documenting disparities toward understanding how communities themselves imagine and create the conditions for meaningful learning.

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