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Understanding Latino Students' Perspectives on Their High School Experiences and Post-Graduation Options

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UNDERSTANDING LATINO STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON THEIR HIGH SCHOOL EXPERIENCES AND POST-GRADUATION OPTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Projections from the U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics indicate Latinos will constitute 30% of the school-aged population in the United States by the year 2030. Enhancing the quality of education for this demographic becomes increasingly crucial. Such improvements not only benefit Latino communities but also hold significant implications for the progress and future prosperity of our nation. The focus in this study was to understand Latino students' perspectives on their high school experiences and post-graduation options, as well as to explore the influence of high school programming on their experiences. This qualitative study was conducted with 14 Latino high school students who were in their senior year within a large suburban high school district encompassing three campuses. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Following data collection, rigorous coding and refinement processes were undertaken to derive the major findings, which highlighted the importance of extracurricular activities, differences in programs, the significance of college in students' future aspirations, the pivotal role of family support, and the influence of Latino cultural backgrounds on students' comfort zones. With the findings in mind, recommendations include developing a state-level policy for districts with a large Latino student population that emphasizes the following categories: improving social-emotional support, measuring and improving student-to-staff connections, measuring and supporting students' knowledge of college-going and post-high school options, engaging families in small groups and one-to-one supports, and valuing and being inclusive of Latino culture.

PREFACE

During my undergraduate studies in psychology, I conducted a study to explore whether being extroverted correlated with doing well in school for Latino students. I returned to my high school, which had a predominantly Latino population, to conduct my study and found that being extroverted did have a positive effect on students' academics. I have always been interested in understanding how to support Latino students in achieving success. I chose this topic to contribute to the literature on the experiences of Latino students in high school and their perceived options post-high school.

Throughout this process, I learned a lot about myself as a writer. Though I have always been organized, this endeavor challenged me to manage my time effectively amidst other commitments. It also pushed me to find new ways to stay motivated with my writing, alongside my coursework. Additionally, changing school districts twice during the program added to the challenge. Through it all I discovered my resilience, often reflecting on the famous saying by renowned French writer, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry—A goal without a plan is just a wish. I had to adapt my planning strategies to achieve my goal of completing the program early.

The significance of this research extends to educators because of the growing number of Latino students and the projected increase in this demographic. Understanding the essential supports Latino students need can help educators provide enriching positive learning experiences and strong post-graduation options. Interviews with students confirmed my belief that students aspire to graduate and pursue successful careers. However, they require support to make those dreams a reality.

My research emphasized the importance of increasing student involvement in school. It also highlighted the positive impact of additional layers of support, such as positive student–

adult relationships and explicit guidance on post-graduation options and what they will require. Furthermore, my research confirmed how critical family engagement is, indicating school leaders should adopt diverse family engagement approaches beyond workshops or presentations.

I was heartened by the significant improvement in high school graduation rates, particularly among Latino students, and the notable increase in Latino college enrollment. The research focus on addressing low graduation and college enrollment rates among Latinos contributed to these positive trends. Through continued research on the obstacles Latino students face, practical and essential shifts can be presented that will improve their educational experience and post-graduation options. I am more hopeful about the future than I was when I began this research.

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I appreciate all the support my daughters gave me. Thank you for your words of encouragement when I felt discouraged. Please know that your positive affirmation notes brightened my day and helped me to persevere! Thank you for keeping me company when I was up writing for what felt like hours at a time. Grateful for your understanding when I could not go to events or when I missed out on family time to work on my dissertation. Thank you for sharing in my excitement in reaching this milestone! Thank you to the love of my life for always being my rock. Thank you for not letting me give up. Thank you for always believing in me and encouraging me! Thank you for sharing this milestone with me! Lastly, but most importantly, forever grateful to God and all He has provided me!

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my three daughters. You are the best part of me! You are what drives me to push through even when I feel I am not strong enough. I hope seeing me persevere to obtain this degree models for you the importance of grit and perseverance. I know you will all be successful in life and reach your goals. We did it, my girls!

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

"Education breeds confidence. Confidence breeds hope. Hope breeds peace." These words, by the famous Chinese philosopher Confucius, have always resonated with me. Believing in the transformative power of education, I, as a high school junior, proactively organized visits for myself and other students to nearby colleges. My determination was not only to pursue higher education but also to inspire and encourage as many of my Latino peers as possible to join me on this journey. It was disheartening to observe the high number of my Latino peers choosing to enter the workforce directly instead of pursuing higher education. Despite the culture shock I experienced upon realizing I was one of the few Latino students on campus, I chose to attend a small private liberal arts college in the Midwest primarily because it offered me the best financial aid package.

Seeing so few Latino students caused me to frequently ponder why there is not a greater exploration of higher education or trade schools among Latinos, and why school leaders do not prioritize emphasizing this path. Recognizing the interconnectedness of race, (social) class, and poverty, as highlighted by Milner (2018, p. 3), raised questions about the systemic challenges we face.

Purpose

I designed my study to explore the perceptions of Latino high school students about their high school experience as well as their post-high school options. Milner (2018) stressed that district leaders should be responsive to the realities students face outside of school and keep that in the forefront when creating policies that directly affect students. My purpose was to persuade policymakers to require school district leaders to provide the supports Latino high school

students need. I aimed to understand how the experiences of today's Latino students compare to my own experiences in high school. One of the pathways I chose to explicitly explore was going to college. With such a low percentage of Latino students actually attending college, how many of them will perceive it as a viable option? The prevailing sentiment among many of my Latino peers when I was in high school was that college was not a place for us. With a 14-percentage point increase in Latino college enrollment within the last 10 years (2013-2023), I wondered whether the sentiment of not belonging in college persists among today's Latino students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023b).

Furthermore, I designed my study to explore the factors influencing Latino students' post-high school plans, such as attending a 2-year or 4-year college. Factors that go into determining post-graduation plans may include internal motivation, family encouragement, and high school programming. Additionally, I aimed to assess the depth of their understanding regarding the implications associated with their post-high school choices.

From this research, an action plan emerged that encompasses teacher professional development and additional education for parents and students. The action plan proposed in Chapter 6 is a state policy that includes five of Patton's (2012) recommendations for generating actionable recommendations: ensuring data-based recommendations, considering optional formats, illuminating the implications of recommendations, allowing time to do a good job, and developing strategies to implement recommendations.

The good news is that the data show Latinos have made considerable academic progress since I was in high school. Specifically, in the 2000s, the Latino dropout rate was 27%, which was considerably higher than that of White students at 7%. In 2017, the Latino high school dropout rate dropped significantly to 10% (Gramlich, 2017). Although less of a drastic

difference, White students also saw an improvement from a 7% dropout rate to 5% (Gramlich, 2017).

This downward trend in high school dropout rates has continued since 2017. Reports from the National Center for Educational Statistics (2023c) indicated somewhat consistent numbers that showed a 7.8% dropout rate for Latinos. However, it is important to note a discrepancy in the dropout rates for male Latinos versus female Latinas at 9.5% versus 6%, respectively. Overall high school dropout rates, but especially those of Latinos students, seem to be moving in the right direction. The sharp decline in dropout rates is something to celebrate.

Identifying where improvements are needed in students' education has been a major area of concern among politicians. The U.S. Department of Education (2023) rolled out a new initiative called Raise the Bar, Lead the World, with a mission to support school district leaders with ensuring they are providing a high-quality public education from pre-kindergarten through high school. The belief is that it is through quality education that communities are lifted up. Furthermore, they are committed to ensuring all students are able to get an education that will allow them to succeed in school and in life in general.

In this study, I explored how Latino students perceive the benefits of high school, including different programming, college and career preparation, and relationships with staff, including counselors and teachers. The purpose was to gain insight into their experiences and choices after graduation. I chose to explore the perceptions of Latino students on their high school while they were still going through it versus asking older students to reflect back on those experiences. This insight is valuable as they live through the high school experience and make decisions about their post-high school paths.

Rationale

I conducted my study with high school seniors attending schools in Juarez High School District (a pseudonym) in Illinois. This context was ideal for this project because of its large Latino population and diverse programming. My rationale for selecting this topic was my own life experiences and a desire to contribute to improving the academic landscape for Latinos.

Latinos make up 17% of the population in the State of Illinois, making them the second-largest group following Whites (Ahn et al., 2023). Projections indicate Latinos will constitute 30% of the school-aged population in the United States by the year 2030 (Padilla et al., 2022). Not only is this important to me, but improving education for Latinos will make a significant difference for our country as Latinos continue to make up a large percentage of the U.S. population. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2023), by 2027, 70% of jobs will require education or training beyond high school. By investing in the education of Latino communities, we not only foster individual success but also contribute to the overall socioeconomic advancement and diversity of our nation.

In reflecting on my own journey as an immigrant and the challenges faced, I am motivated by the broader implications for Latinos in the education system. Statistics and insights from scholars such as Gándara (2017) further emphasize the need for a comprehensive understanding of the educational experiences of Latino students. I immigrated with my parents to the United States from Mexico when I was 5 years old. Initially, my school experience was challenging due to language and cultural barriers. Thankfully, I learned English quickly and soon thrived in school by achieving good grades. I was fortunate to have nurturing teachers who gave me additional support when I needed it. For as long as I can remember, I wanted to go to college and saw it as an investment in my future. Despite many challenges, such as financial concerns

and not having family to guide me in the process, going to college seemed to me like the right option after high school. Though attending college is not the only viable option after high school, it is important to note that "education is a strong predictor of most people's earnings and consequently their ability to acquire materials possessions, including their homes" (Milner, 2018, p. 12).

As someone who immigrated to the United States at a young age, adapting to a new education system was initially challenging. Gándara's (2017) observation captured the essence of the struggles I and many of my peers encountered. In her article, "The Potential and Promise of Latino Students," Gándara made the following statement: "Education then comes to represent failure rather than opportunity and threatens their self-worth. As a result, it can make more sense for them to reject school before it rejects them" (p. 7). I deeply connected with this statement because of my own personal experience with most of my Latino peers not wanting to continue their education. Evidently, my experience is not unique, considering the statistical reality that Latinos are underrepresented in college enrollment. In 2020, data showed 42% of White students had enrolled in college by age 24 years, whereas only 36% of Latinos had done the same (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023b). This study is important in understanding the perceptions of Latino students concerning their post-high school choices, as results could unveil the correlation between their high school experiences and subsequent options.

Juarez High School District

The district's mission is very straightforward—Every student succeeds. Within that mission are five district goals: accountability; enhanced learning opportunities for all children; ensure parents and the community are active, strategic partners in the educational process; provide safe and well-maintained schools to enhance learning; and run an efficient business

operation. The main reason I selected Juarez High School District is the large Latino population and diverse programming options. Latino students make up 90.9% of the student body, or approximately 7,282 students. Four percent of students are White and 3% are Black. Asian, American Indian, and students who identify as two or more races each make up less than 1% of the student population (Citation withheld to maintain confidentiality, 2022).

Within Juarez High School District, there are three campuses: East, West, and a Freshman Center. The focus of my exploration was on the four programs offered at West and East Juarez High School: Enlace (Spanish word for link), Knowledge Empowers Youth (KEY), career and technical education program (CTE), and the general program. These program names and all other names in this study are pseudonyms. Enlace and KEY are both part of the Tier 2 and Tier 3 intervention within the multi-tiered system of supports (MtSS). The MtSS has three tiers that make up the framework, and data are used to ensure students receive support for their academic achievement as well as their social, emotional, and behavioral needs (American Institutes for Research, n.d.). Tier 1 supports are given to all students and are often referred to as the core. Tier 2 is small group support for academic interventions and targeted behavioral and mental health. Tier 3 is the most intensive level of support and mainly for students who require individualized and intensive interventions. Enlace and KEY both support students in Tier 2 and 3. In the following paragraphs, I highlight the main features and components of the four programs explored in this study: Enlace, KEY, CTE, and the general education program.

Enlace

Juarez High School District has a graduation rate of 78.6%, which is below the state average of 87.6%. Enlace and KEY are intervention programs run by staff from the Regional Office of Education (ROE). Enlace has a limited number of seats for students in need of Tier 3

support. Most students only stay in the program for 1 or 2 years, though students can stay in Enlace all 4 years if they want. On average, up to 540 students participate in this program annually (Citation withheld to maintain confidentiality, 2024).

Each student is assigned a mentor. Students check in with their mentors once a day and receive academic and social-emotional support. Another benefit Enlace students receive is being able to attend summer school for free.

Enlace has a family-centered approach. Mentors provide support to families as well by connecting them to school and community resources. Mentors can also serve as parent advocates if the family requests they accompany them for school meetings. Support includes referrals to community agencies, workshops, and guidance on navigating the education system. Mentors also facilitate workshops and provide one-on-one help to families on how to support their child's academics and aim to increase their engagement in school.

KEY

The second program, Knowledge Empowers Youth (KEY), is also an MtSS support. KEY supports about 50 Juarez High School District students. KEY is housed at the local community college, Juarez Community College's campus. Juarez College has about 3,850 undergraduate students, of which 1,016 are full-time and 2,834 are part-time students (Citation withheld to maintain confidentiality, 2024).

KEY accelerates credit recovery in a hybrid setting for seniors who are either in danger of not graduating on time due to low credits or have already dropped out but want to come back and finish. Students must be under 22 years of age and agree to the attendance requirement of 80%. However, KEY's approach is to meet students where they are, so if a student cannot meet the 80% attendance requirement, KEY counselors will work with the student to develop an

attendance plan. Unlike the traditional school day, KEY is a half-day program and students have the option of coming for the morning or afternoon session. The time is self-directed and self-paced. Students work on completing modules consisting of readings and quizzes to demonstrate mastery, which serves to replace credits they lost. In addition, students can continue to work on the modules remotely for the rest of the day. This flexibility allows students to have a job that requires hours that conflict with the traditional school day. Another layer of flexibility KEY provides is allowing students to attend night school for a reduced price.

KEY also offers students individualized support from KEY counselors on goal setting. This includes goal setting on how to complete all of the necessary credits as well as help with planning for the future. An invaluable support is KEY counselors walking each student through the process of applying to college and connecting them with staff from Juarez College. Many students end up registering at Juarez College upon successfully completing the KEY programming.

CTE Program

Attending a 2-year or 4-year college does not appeal to all students; some may opt to attend a certificate program or earn an associate's degree. The third program, career and technical education (CTE), gives students insights into careers that do not necessarily require college. Classes in the CTE program consist of classes in business and information technology, family and consumer sciences, and industrial technology. Within these categories, students can choose from classes like accounting, culinary arts, and carpentry, among many others. A benefit of the CTE program is it has many pathways to internships that further allow students to explore a career path post graduation and gain practical experience to help them make informed decisions about their future careers. However, even without internship options, classes in the

CTE program focus on practical application and hands-on experience, which helps prepare students for real-world scenarios in their chosen fields.

General Education Program

The final program included in this study is the general education program, encompassing students not in Enlace, KEY, or taking any CTE classes. In addition to the required classes, students in the general education program can take electives from departments other than the CTE program. Juarez High School District has a diverse offering of classes for students. Some of these classes are part of either dual credit for Juarez Community College or for other partnerships the district has with the community college. For example, it has a partnership for a certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) program that allows students to enhance their learning from the classes at the high school with additional hands-on labs on Saturdays at Juarez Community College.

Goals

My goal for this study was to understand Latino students' perspectives on their high school experience and post-high school options and have a positive impact on the quality of education they receive. This would pertain to the high school district the students came from but also on a state level by addressing the area of student need. I interviewed Latino students who participated in the four different programming described above. By investigating Latino students' perceptions of their experiences, I was able to provide a qualitative data point for leaders of the district use in determining whether they are meeting the needs of their Latino students. Specifically, I was able to uncover elements of programming that are beneficial for students that should be expanded across the district. Furthermore, the goal was for the data to guide the policy recommendation included in this study. Ultimately, I wanted to improve the

conditions of Latino students' experiences in high school to better prepare them for selecting the best post-high school option.

Definition of Terms

Community Colleges and Trade Schools

American College Testing (ACT, n.d.-a), describes trade schools as those that focus on hands-on training in specific trades, often with a higher cost compared to community colleges. The programs tend to be shorter in duration. In contrast, community colleges, similar to 4-year colleges, offer a broader array of academic programs. Though both community colleges and trade schools offer certificates and diplomas, community colleges stand out by offering various degrees, including associate degrees. The distinction arises from their provision of general education courses alongside technical courses and training.

There is a big overlap in the programs offered at community colleges and trade schools, such as IT technician, plumber, welder, carpenter, HVAC technician, and automotive technician, to name a few. Some community colleges offer introductory classes into some fields like cosmetology that are only offered in full programs at specialized beauty schools or trade schools. Other fields are not offered at all at community colleges, like professional truck driving, as this would only be offered at commercial truck driving schools.

COVID-19 Pandemic and Quarantine

Coronavirus-19 is a disease caused by a virus named SARS-CoV-2, often referred to as COVID-19 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024). It was very contagious and spread quickly, and over one million people have died from COVID-19 in the United States. COVID-19 most often causes respiratory symptoms that can feel much like a cold, the flu, or

pneumonia. The majority of the world implemented some type of mandated quarantine or stay-at-home order to maximize COVID-19 containment.

Four-Year Colleges and Universities

American College Testing (ACT, n.d.-a) describes 4-year colleges and universities as institutions that offer a broader range of academic offerings than a trade school. Students can earn a bachelor's degree at the undergraduate level that is typically completed in 4 years. These institutions provide a well-rounded education because they combine general education courses with major-specific coursework. There are several differences between colleges and universities. A college is often smaller in size and therefore has fewer program offerings. College professors are often focused on teaching and undergraduate education. Research activities may be limited compared to universities. University professors, on the other hand, are typically engaged in both teaching and research and often have graduate students helping teach their courses. For the purposes of this research, I primarily use the word college.

Hispanic and Latino

The term Latino was officially adopted by the United States in 1997 to complement the English word Hispanic. Latino includes people who come from Latin America or descend from people from Latin America, or where the spoken language is Spanish (Fernandez-Morera, 2010). "Hispanic" can be controversial because of its tie to Spain. Hispanic includes people living in the United States who are Spanish speakers, belong to a household where Spanish is spoken, are somehow of Spanish heritage, or who self-identify with Spanish ancestry or descent.

Spanglish

Speaking Spanish with numerous borrowings from English or any combinations of Spanish and English (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Research Questions

I developed two research questions to frame my study. The primary research question was: What are Latino students' perspectives of their high school experiences and their post-graduation options? The secondary research question was: What are the factors that play a role in their plans post-high school? The qualitative data I collected enabled me to answer both of my research questions.

Conclusion

Juarez High School District has a mission statement to ensure all students' success both in and out of high school. This is a commendable mission statement and one that district leaders try to bring to life. The focus in this study was to continue to improve the high school experience and ultimately improve students' quality of life by increasing the options they see as viable after high school. The purpose was to gain insight into their experiences and choices after graduation while they were still navigating both. Senior year is when most students are having to decide which pathway they will take or be stuck with minimal options. "While the related challenges are often overemphasized, the tremendous assets these young people bring with them are often overlooked" (Gándara, 2012, p. 4). It is important and very personal to me that we do not forget how important Latino students are and how valuable they are to the success of this country. In the next chapter, I present the results of the literature review that informed my research questions.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Several factors affect the academic trajectories of Latino students. In this chapter, I discuss trends in research carried out with Latino high school students focusing on the role of family experiences in shaping their perspectives. This chapter is divided into five sections: (a) the role of family, (b) culture and identity, (c) Latino students' sense of connection in high school, (d) high school support programs for Latino students, and (e) implications of post-high school paths.

The Role of Family

Castellanos and Gloria (2007) discussed the psychosocial cultural framework, which interweaves core Latino values, family, community, and friendliness into strengths-based practices that are essential for Latino students, such as mentorship, cultural congruity, and professional development. Castellanos and Gloria proposed practices they believed would lead to stronger educational experiences for Latino students and increased retention and graduation rates. When examining the factors contributing to student success, it becomes evident how important it is for schools to have a strong partnership with families, as parents play a vital role in a student's life. Castellanos and Gloria provided an example of creating family-oriented summer and bridge programs, illustrating that organizing more family-inclusive events throughout the academic year can provide Latino students with a stronger sense of community.

Another crucial area in which family should be involved to better support their child(ren) is the topic of college-going. Kiyama (2011) explored the role of families in developing a college-going culture in Mexican American family homes. She used a qualitative multiple case study approach and collected semi-structured pre- and post-program interviews in a metropolitan

area with a 36% Latino population. The program was a partnership between a university and an elementary school district with 87% Latino students. Participants included parents/guardians, children, and siblings. Kiyama's findings included family funds of knowledge, specifically as they pertain to educational practices and access to educational resources: (a) daily educational practices within the household, (b) extended family and social networks, and (c) preexisting family college knowledge. These findings illustrate the rich educational values that are already present in Latino families yet are often untapped by educators. Furthermore, families in this study reported having no funds of knowledge as it pertained to college-going; however, their daily educational practices proved otherwise. It is essential to recognize that families possess valuable knowledge about education. By acknowledging this, leaders of outreach programs can better leverage and expand upon this existing knowledge base. Moreover, tapping into the wealth of knowledge within families can help foster a deeper understanding of the college application process, empowering Mexican American students and enhancing their comprehension of the factors that shape their educational experiences.

According to Kiyama (2011), families play a crucial role in nurturing a culture that values higher education, underlining the importance of collaboration between families and educational institutions in the academic journey. For example, Kiyama highlighted the significance of parents modeling college behavior to their teenage children, such as a mother attending classes at a community college and engaging in joint study sessions. Additionally, Kiyama shed light on the barriers some Latinos face in pursing higher education and focused on the importance of leveraging the collective knowledge of college-going to assist families in navigating the educational system effectively.

Expanding on the theme of family support, Bueno et al. (2022) explored the experiences of 27 Pell-eligible students in their last year at a community college. Conducted for the project entitled, “Bridging Faculty and Student Cultures: Culturally Responsive Support for STEM Students Transferring Between Two and Four Year Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI),” the researchers used a phenomenological methodology and focus groups with semi-structured open-ended questions. Bueno et al.’s findings indicated there was a significant impact of socio-emotional and instrumental support from family members on the motivation of college student participants in STEM. The support encompassed verbal encouragement, expressions of pride, and empathetic communication, parents demonstrating sincere concern for the students’ college needs and experiences.

Instrumental family support is reflected in actions such as ensuring students have regular meals, coordinating plans with their academic schedule, and attending to their overall well-being. Bueno et al.’s (2022) research further emphasized the indispensable role of families in supporting students’ academic well-being through socio-emotional means. For example, students felt more secure when their families explicitly stated they would always be there for them. Bueno et al. advocated for formalizing family involvement in students’ college trajectories.

Carey (2016) advocated for a more precise socioenvironmental intervention in college counseling to be able to support families and parents’ consideration of higher education. Through semi-structured interviews, observational data, and document analysis, Carey investigated how 11th-grade Black and Latino boys’ college ambitions were shaped by their school’s college-going culture, racial stereotyping, and their family’s economic marginalization. Furthermore, Carey categorized their perceived and actual challenges as either internal or external factors. He found the students were shaped by the college-going culture of their high school. Overall,

internal dilemmas fell within two related themes: their perceived academic under preparation, which was mainly related to difficulty focusing on academic tasks; and their unease about feeling socially equipped to make friends in college. Furthermore, students were affected by how they felt their teachers viewed them and were highly aware of some discrimination and stereotyping practices (Carey, 2016). The external factor students expressed most with regard to being able to attend college was that of anticipating college costs and the accompanying difficulties these costs posed for their families.

Culture and Identity

Having explored the pivotal role of families, I now shift the focus to another integral dimension of Latino students' academic experiences—culture and identity. Bernal et al. (1991) described how social identity theory framework can help understand how group membership influences behavior and relations with members of one's own and other groups. Bernal et al. asserted there are three basic assumptions within this theory: (a) we categorize our social world units comprised of similar groups and units comprised of dissimilar groups, (b) we strive for a positive self-concept, which is derived, in part, from our membership in the ingroup, and (c) the positive or negative valence of our self-concept partly depends on how we evaluate the ingroup relative to outgroups (p. 144). For instance, according to Bernal et al., Latino students may exhibit more positive interactions and be more open and trusting with ethnic peers than with White peers. These distinct behaviors may result from the amount of shared knowledge between individuals or from the relative preference for the ingroup over the outgroup (Bernal et al., 1991, p. 145).

Social identity theory is complex but on its simplest level, it helps illustrate how important social identities are and the way they may affect behaviors. Bernal et al. (1991, p. 147)

asserted school leaders can be better informed of minority youth's adaptation to the classroom environment by identifying the prevailing social identities of students, including the expectations and behaviors and the compatibility with environmental demands. This is especially important for schools that have multiple ethnic groups. Professional development may be needed to help teachers and administrators understand their students, especially if they are not of the same social identity group as the students.

Similar to Bernal et al.'s (1991) study, Fergus (2004) explored social identity, group membership, and the role the Latino culture has on identity and how it influences behavior. Fergus (2004) conducted 26 interviews of Mexican and Puerto Rican high school students over the course of a year who were recruited from a youth center. He sought to understand how they

> 1) defined their own ethnic identity; 2) perceived others defined them racially and ethnically; 3) assessed the opportunities available for the social group with which they identified and that of those with whom they were identified; and 4) how their academic orientation is related (or not) to the internal and external construction of their ethnic identity and perceptions of opportunity. (p. 13)

Fergus found the Latino cultural identity held significance for the students, as they consistently expressed pride in their ethnicity, frequently opting to use ethnic terms when questioned about their identity. Though all of them identified with ethnic terms, the variations in their choices offered valuable insights into the importance of cultural and ethnic identity for Latino students. Additionally, a subgroup of Latino students embraced a hyphenated identification, like Mexican-American or Latino-American, signifying a dual connection to both their ethnic heritage and American identity. Others identified more with their ancestral or national roots, using terms like "Mexican" or "Chicano" to emphasize their cultural heritage and historical ties. Last, another

group of Latino students focused on cultural identification, emphasizing shared cultural practices and values associated with their ethnic background in general. According to Fergus, students expressed wanting to disprove the stereotypes that existed about Latinos. Furthermore, they wanted to demonstrate that Latinos can be academically successful.

Some students in the Fergus (2004) study shared the feeling that the school environment could be limiting opportunities and purposefully mistreating individuals like them based on skin color and ethnic affiliation. These experiences significantly affect students. It is important for school district leaders to acknowledge actions of discrimination when they occur and provide students a place to have a voice when they feel they are being discriminated against.

In light of the challenges some students face in school environments, as observed in the Fergus (2004) study, it becomes essential to explore factors contributing to academic success among students. For instance, Garrett et al. (2010) conducted interviews with three working-class Puerto Rican male urban high school students who demonstrated high academic achievement in an attempt to understand the factors influencing their success. Students in Garrett et al.'s research attributed much of their success to home and community-related factors. Specifically, they found the following success factors: (a) the acquisition of social capital through religiosity and participation in school and community-based extracurricular activities, (b) having a strong Puerto Rican identity, (c) the influence of the students' mothers/sisters on their academic achievement, and (d) the potential for caring and sincere teachers and other school staff to influence high academic achievement (Garrett et al., 2010). These findings underscore the untapped potential within large comprehensive urban high schools, revealing a need to leverage the unique funds of knowledge students bring from their homes and communities. Garrett et al.'s research provided additional evidence for the central role of

mothers and sisters. Students recounted how their mothers played a dual role in their education, either by directly aiding them with homework or by actively seeking out resources to support their learning. Additionally, students highlighted the supportive role of their mothers and sisters, who often served as mentors during times of personal crisis or when they needed guidance. They attributed their high academic achievement to this support, considering it a source of motivation and encouragement (Garrett et al., 2010).

Garrett et al.'s (2010) findings resonate with the principles of social identity theory, as discussed by Bernal et al. (1991), highlighting the significance of a strong cultural identity in influencing academic achievement among Puerto Rican high school students. In their in-depth study, Garrett et al. (2010) not only identified a correlation between a strong cultural identity and academic success, they also delved into the specific elements contributing to this phenomenon. They found a sense of pride in one's Puerto Rican heritage was a shared trait among all participants in their study.

Moreover, the research by Garrett et al. (2010) emphasized the need for proactive measures in educational institutions. They recommended school leadership and teachers go beyond the acknowledgment of cultural identity to foster a supportive environment that actively promotes and celebrates students' ethnic identities, suggesting such efforts could significantly enhance academic achievement and overall well-being among students, as highlighted in the context of Puerto Rican students.

Building on the importance of ethnic identities, Quintana et al. (2010) explored the experiences of 24 Mexican American high school students, particularly their psychological dimensions of ethnicity. Conducted through semi-structured interviews, the study captured the nuanced perspectives of students from a single high school in the U.S. Southwest, with a

demographic of 41% Latino, 39% White, and 18% Black. The findings represented six major categories: (a) ethnic identity, ethnic self-pride, and identification with being the target of discrimination, stigmatization, and otherness; (b) socialization, implicit learning of culture and explicit family teaching of culture; (c) interethnic support and challenge, social connections, acceptance, validation, individual empowerment; (d) interethnic relations and attitudes, direct/vicarious exposure to racism/conflict; (e) ethnic transcendence, assimilating or emphasis on individuality, in group pressure to conform; and (f) ethnic differences and similarities, differences in cultural characteristics, differences in privilege, opportunities, and choices. This study's first and second findings supported the findings of Garrett et al. (2010) and Bernal et al. (1991). These studies highlighted the significance of ethnic pride and the awareness of racism and othering, particularly among non-White individuals. The third finding regarding interethnic support aligns with the research of Bernal et al. (1991) and Fergus (2004), who similarly emphasized the significance of establishing connections within one's social group and finding support within that group. Furthermore, fostering such interethnic support often leads to more positive relationships with peers from similar ethnic backgrounds. Understanding the experiences of Latino students underscores the importance of cultivating these connections for a sense of belonging and support.

Comprehending how students define their identity and establish connections across various categories is crucial for educators, policymakers, and researchers. Sirin et al. (2004) investigated the awareness of racial and ethnic consciousness among minority urban high school students. Data were collected before implementing an intervention program at an urban high school via focus groups, questionnaires, goal maps, and a group identity collage of students'

future aspirations and influences with 18 high school students in ninth and 10th grade. Similar to all the studies in this section, all participants expressed pride in their ethnic group.

Sirin et al. (2004) found students expressed being aware that some people automatically identified their ethnic group with stereotypical representations, such as individuals from housing projects, thugs, and drug dealers. Furthermore, driven by pride, participants aimed to represent their ethnic group positively. Most participants could vividly imagine the career they aspired to pursue after college graduation. However, there was variability in the participants' awareness of the process necessary to achieve each step of their plan in addition to time orientation. Another theme that emerged was that students frequently emphasized the concept of self-reliance. Approximately two-thirds of the participants highlighted the significance of maintaining self-control in their thoughts, actions, and physical well-being as a pathway to success.

Latino Students' Sense of Connection in High School

A study by Goodenow and Grady (1993) included 301 African American, White/Anglo, and Hispanic students in two urban junior high schools. School belonging was found to be significantly associated with several motivation-related measures, including expectancy of success, valuing schoolwork, general school motivation, and self-reported effort. An interesting finding was that sense of belonging was more significant for Latino students as compared to the Black and White students in terms of the correlation between sense of belonging and academic achievement (Goodenow & Grady, 1993). This finding further shows how essential it is for students to feel a sense of belonging in school.

The importance of fostering a sense of belonging in students is evident in various studies. Goodenow and Grady (1993) discovered school belonging significantly correlated with motivation-related measures, with a particularly noteworthy impact on Latino students' academic

achievement. Building on this idea, Villarreal's (2017) research highlighted disparities in extracurricular activity participation, with Hispanic students being less likely to engage in sports-related activities. Recognizing the significance of extracurricular involvement, Garrett et al. (2010) emphasized its role in generating social capital benefits for students. Therefore, actively participating in extracurricular activities emerges as a meaningful pathway to cultivate a sense of community and belonging among students.

Spencer and Wilson (2023) conducted 12 semi-structured interviews with Latino college graduates in West Tennessee and artifact analysis to investigate the impact of college experiences and cultural factors on Latino persistence. The findings underscore the significance of on-campus and off-campus influences in guiding students toward graduation. Another notable theme highlighted the connection between activities outside the classroom and student college persistence. Therefore, Spencer and Wilson emphasized the need for diverse student programming to increase student participation. Recognizing the significance of such inclusive initiatives, schools can become hubs of cultural exchange, fostering unity and understanding among students. They found Latino student persistence was attributed to acquiring support from family, cultural knowledge, and students' perceptions of their teachers and the student–teacher relationship, particularly on a 2-year degree-granting college campus. Specifically, Spencer and Wilson found students' negative experiences resulted from teachers who were degrading, judgmental, or distant.

Garrett et al. (2010) reiterated the importance of positive teacher–student relationships. They expressed that students value teachers who are caring and hold students to high academic expectations; whereas positive relationships with teachers contribute significantly to students' well-being, negative experiences can have detrimental effects on their academic and emotional

growth. Bernal et al. (1991) warned that these negative student–teacher interactions can go as far as leading minority students to reject the cultural values and academic demands of their schools, which can ultimately end in academic failure.

Furthermore, Bernal et al. (1991) stated challenges can arise if there is a cultural mismatch between students and the school environment. This mismatch can result in micro-level sociological variables, including disparities between home and school environments, leading to potential underachievement. For example, conflict can occur as a result of differences between minority and Anglo cultures in the areas of nonverbal and verbal communication, cognitive styles, cultural values, and behaviors. This can especially be the case when staff does not reflect the school's make-up, as is the case in so many districts. To address these potential challenges, Garrett et al. (2010) strongly advocated for school district leaders to train teachers to be culturally sensitive, with high expectations for all students regardless of their racial/ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. Furthermore, it is imperative that school leaders foster an environment in which students can develop a positive self-concept and not feel the majority group is devaluing their group; a potential consequence is students developing low self-esteem (Bernal et al., 1991, p. 147).

Building on the imperative for cultural sensitivity in educational settings, Martinez and Deil-Amen (2015) studied the college choice process and transition experiences of 131 Latino university students and examined the impact of high school norms on their persistence at a 4-year university. Data were collected through three data sources: reflective essays regarding the college choice process, first-round interviews regarding the college choice process, and second-round interviews reflecting on the college choice process and transition into college during the first year of college. The findings revealed the students, influenced by their high school

socioeconomic status and curriculum placement, experienced varying exposure to either a college-for-all or gatekeeping ideology. Generally, those exposed to college-for-all messages felt deceived about their readiness, whereas those exposed to gatekeeping felt inadequate and doubted their ability to persist through first-year challenges.

The potential positive effects on students' academics highlight the vital need, emphasized by Martinez and Deil-Amen (2015), for educators who can harness the strengths inherent in these students and embrace their cultural practices. In addition to extracurricular involvement, healthy relationships with teachers are another crucial factor in ensuring students feel connected to their school. Healthy relationships with teachers are another entry point to ensuring students have a connection to the school. Martinez and Deil-Amen's findings included the importance of the quality of teacher interactions and the tone of those relationships. Notably, students referenced and drew on those positive student–teacher interactions when needing to reassess their self-confidence and cope with academic challenges.

High School Support Programs for Latino Students

It is essential to examine the support systems in place within the high school setting as the interpersonal dynamics within high schools are so important. Though Latinos' academic performance has shown noteworthy advancements, including reduced dropout rates and a rise in college enrollment figures, there remains a need for further efforts to enhance their high school experience and preparation. Gándara et al. (1998) explored three programs in California that were designed to increase the college-going rates among Latino students. The authors reported evaluation results for each program and made policy recommendations based on their findings. The three programs included in the study were ALAS, AVID, and Puente. ALAS, which stands for Achievement for Latinos through Academic Success, focuses on Latino middle school

students to prevent behaviors that lead to dropping out of high school and operates independently on the same campus where students attend classes. Within this setting, student participants benefit from a designated counselor/advocate who collaborates with students, families, and school staff to ensure the well-being of each student. Milner (2018) emphasized the crucial role of counseling services in supporting students who are facing challenges both within and beyond the school environment.

Gándara et al. (1998) described ALAS as having a focus on the most at-risk Latino students with the lowest motivation, poorest academic skills, and the greatest need for teacher supervision. ALAS emphasizes that this high-risk group does not represent a minority of Latino students, but rather makes up 30% to 40% of the Latino student population. ALAS incorporates psycho-social interventions as much as academic and cultural interventions. ALAS stresses the importance of psycho-social interventions to address the disruptive behaviors displayed by Latino students, including a lack of productivity, truancy, and verbal abuse, to name a few. ALAS also addresses the risk factors in the settings in which students live. Gándara et al. found ALAS had considerably favorable results due to the program's comprehensive approach to intervention, which focused simultaneously on the youth, family, school, and community. Specifically, short-term outcomes indicated 97% of the participants were still enrolled compared to the comparison group, which had only retained 82% of students. The intermediate term outcomes looked at students in high school, 1 year after receiving the intervention, and showed 86% were still enrolled compared to 69% of the comparison group.

The second program Gándara et al. (1998) selected was AVID, which targets high school freshmen with the goal of improving retention and achieving favorable results by senior year. The focus is to untrack students and afford students who are academically underperforming the

opportunity to join college preparatory classes. This is done with AVID social scaffolds, institutional supports, and academically-oriented peers for these students to achieve academic success. For students who stayed in the program all 4 years, a little less than half matriculated to college.

A common element shared by both ALAS and AVID is the intentional use of scaffolds and additional support provided to students. Both programs, in addition to the third program, Puente, Spanish for bridge, have five common critical components:

- Building social capital, developing social problem solving and coping skills
- Providing specific support for high expectations scaffolding
- Raising aspirations; instilling vision of possible future
- Closely monitoring student progress
- Providing strong adult-student bonds

All three programs incorporate frequent instructive feedback regarding how to be successful students, emphasizing the importance of persistence and focus. These explicit supports have proven to be crucial for academic success among Latino students, as highlighted by Castellanos and Gloria (2007). This recognition shifts the narrative away from blaming the students and prompts a reflective approach, urging leaders of educational institutions to assess and improve their practice.

Building on the theme of supportive environments, Garza (2009) sought to understand the perceptions of teacher behaviors that convey care among 49 Latino and White high school students in a large suburban high school in Central Texas. The data collection involved interviews, observations, and questionnaires. By exploring commonalties and distinctions between the two ethnic groups, Garza offered valuable insights. The findings revealed five major

themes related to how students perceived teachers as caring: (a) teachers provided scaffolds while teaching, (b) teachers had a kind disposition through actions, (c) teachers were available for students, (d) teachers showed a personal interest in students' well-being both inside and outside the classroom, and (e) teachers offered effective academic support. In classrooms where teachers exhibited these types of caring behaviors, students reported a more positive and connected experience.

Emphasizing the importance of cultivating a welcoming school environment, Garza (2009) advocated for teachers and staff to extend their support beyond academics, creating an atmosphere akin to an extended family. This approach, which is particularly beneficial for Latino students, contributes to a conducive environment for both academic and personal growth. Garza (p. 311) stated Latino students appreciated teachers' readiness to provide instructional assistance, but more importantly, students felt more connected to teachers when they believed the teachers was genuinely interested in their success. Acknowledging the distinct perspectives of students, Garza highlighted the potential for using culturally responsive caring to foster positive experiences for all students. Students perceived teachers as caring when they demonstrated flexibility in deadlines, showcasing a commitment to understanding individual student needs and fostering a supportive academic environment (Garza, 2009). Despite potential hesitations from some staff regarding flexibility, Garza advocated for recognizing the reality that some high school students require multiple opportunities to achieve success.

In line with the significance of academic support, the Puente Project asserts that the majority of Latino students, like all students, are capable of mastering a college preparatory high school curriculum and attending college if equipped with the necessary information and provided access to a high-quality preparatory curriculum (Gándara et al., 1998, p. 27). Furthermore,

Garrett et al. (2010) recommended a comprehensive approach that includes mentoring, college preparation materials, advice, and career training to instill a scholarly identity and provide the necessary social capital for academic endeavors. It is crucial to recognize that dismissing student perspectives may inadvertently manifest in inadequate actions and dispositions displayed by teachers on a daily basis (Garza, 2009, p. 298).

Implications of Post-High School Paths

Having discussed the support structures within high schools, I now look at the implications of post-high school paths. Robles (2009) explored the education–earnings–wealth relationship by constructing estimates of social gains and losses based on work–life earnings profiles for Latino workers. The research demonstrated investing in Latino students' higher education yields social benefits, leading to an augmentation of public revenues and contributing significantly to national prosperity. Robles noted the social and economic benefits for students if they receive either a certificate of some kind, a diploma, or a degree after completing high school. Although the numbers would more than likely be higher in today's account, the figures Robles cited are significant. Robles cited the premium for Latinos with a high school diploma over those with no high school diploma to be an additional $300,000 over their work–life horizon. However, the biggest educational payoff was a college degree compared with those with no high school diploma, with a premium of more than $1 million over the work–life horizon (Robles, 2009). Furthermore, Robles noted these benefits extend past the actual student, as families and society as a whole also benefit from the student earning a certificate, diploma, or degree. Robles advocated that the work of successful small feeder programs be replicated to promote outcomes on a larger scale while also holding local, state, and federal public sector leaders and decision makers accountable to ensure changes are made.

Sirin et al. (2004) found that, overall, students' educational aspirations are shaped by an awareness of the limitations of only holding a high school diploma. Perhaps this is a major reason why Sirin et al. found that most students who see themselves as college-bound also aspire to advance their education and attain a professional degree. Among individuals aged 25 to 34 years who were employed full time throughout the year, a discernible correlation emerged between higher levels of educational attainment and increased median earnings. This trend persisted consistently across each year from 2010 to 2021. To illustrate, in 2021, individuals holding a master's degree or higher reported a median income of $74,600, showcasing a notable 21% increase compared to those with a bachelor's degree ($61,600). Furthermore, in the same year, individuals with a bachelor's degree experienced median earnings that were 55% higher than those who had completed only high school, as they had an average $39,700 annual income (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023a).

As noted earlier in this section, Latino college enrollment has significantly improved from a 22% college-going rate in 2000 to a 36% rate in 2018 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023b). Some politicians credit this improvement in an updated and tougher economy to policies instituted under the Bush and Obama Administrations. Other politicians credit the improvement to the fact that Latinos make up a larger portion of the student population, which has focused the attention of educators who previously may have neglected their needs (McConnell, 2014). Regardless of the reason why, it is important to continue the positive momentum with improving the Latino educational landscape and improving their post-graduation options.

College

In the year 2021, data showed 42% of White students enrolled in college compared to only 36% of Latinos. The percentage enrolling in a post baccalaureate program was even more discrepant with 60% of the students being White and 13% being Latino (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023b). These numbers indicate a need to focus on making college an option for Latino students. An unsupportive high school setting complicates the desire to pursue higher education or certificate programs post-graduation. Martinez and Deil-Amen (2015) discussed the role of high schools in influencing the post-graduation paths of Latino students, emphasizing the need for comprehensive support structures. Sirin et al. (2004) observed that students with a well-structured future plan encompassing both short- and long-term goals exhibited a clear intention to attend college. This planning and consideration of the necessary processes indicated a positive correlation with explicit plans for higher education. Though planning can take many forms, explicit goal setting could be beneficial to implement for Latino students (Sirin et al., 2004).

A welcoming environment that fosters support significantly increases the likelihood of continued educational pursuits. Sapp et al. (2015) highlighted the positive impact of community-based organizations in supporting Latinas' college aspirations. These organizations provided access to influential institutional agents, organized college tours, facilitated overnight stays in residence halls, and offered valuable information for informed decision making. Administrators who are aiming to provide college opportunities for Latino students must understand their educational and personal histories within different environments. By adopting a holistic, culturally rich, and family-inclusive model, administrators and educators can better serve Latino students in their transition from high school to postsecondary education (Sapp et al., 2015).

Recognizing the external encouragement from family and friends, as noted by Spencer and Wilson (2023), further reinforces the significance of a supportive network for academic success.

Murphy and Murphy (2018) highlighted the importance of leaders of postsecondary education institutions recognizing the unique influences on Latino student success. They emphasized the need to prioritize hiring Latino faculty to create a more inclusive and supportive educational atmosphere. Though progress has been made in different components of Latinos' education, such as lower dropout rates, there are still various areas in need of improvement.

Unfortunately, the stark reality remains that only 19% of Latinos successfully complete a bachelor's degree, a significant difference compared to 58% of Asians, 40% of Whites, and 26% of African Americans (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). One contributing factor to this is that Latinos attend 2-year schools at a significantly higher rate of 50%, compared to only 30% of Whites and 36% of African Americans (Krogstad, 2016). This is significant because the likelihood of their transferring to a 4-year institution is much lower than that of students from other racial/ethnic groups. Navigating college and transfer policies is challenging, and this challenge is amplified for first-generation students who lack familial guidance.

Trade School

Consideration for trade school as an alternative pathway for students should also be acknowledged within the broader discussion of postsecondary education. Trade schools offer valuable vocational training and opportunities for those with specific career goals outside of traditional college pathways. This has become a strong viable option for students who have limited financial resources. This holistic approach recognizes there are diverse educational trajectories and supports students in making informed decisions for their future. A shortage of tradespeople has created an incentive to provide financial opportunities to increase the number of

students going into trade careers. An example of these incentives is Michigan's governor proposing a $100 million plan to prepare youth for high-paying, in-demand technology jobs (Gross & Marcus, 2018).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored the following: (a) the role of family, (b) culture and identity, (c) Latino students' sense of connection in high school, (d) high school support programs for Latino students, and (e) implications of post-high school paths. Culture and identity significantly shape Latino students' education. Therefore, recognizing their diverse backgrounds, tapping into family support, and fostering a sense of belonging are crucial. Successful high school support programs, like ALAS and AVID, emphasize social capital and caring environments.

Post-high school paths affect social gains, making investing in Latino students' education vital. Supportive high school settings, goal setting, and community-based organizations enhance educational pursuits. A collective commitment to inclusivity is essential for empowering Latino students in their academic and post-high school journeys.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

Research Design Overview

I used a phenomenological research design to conduct my qualitative study. Lester (1999) described phenomenological research as a way to focus on personal perspectives, which allows for a deeper understanding and provides a way to explain phenomena through individuals' lived experiences. The phenomenological approach was well-suited for this project's goal, which was to gain an in-depth understanding of Latino high school students' perspectives on their high school experiences, cultural identities, families, college/career knowledge, and aspirations for life after high school.

Lester (1999) stated phenomenological research can be "used as the basis for practical theory . . . to inform, support or challenge policy and action" (p. 1), which aligned with the ultimate objective of this study. I used interviews to gain an understanding of the personal perspectives of Latino high school students. The two research questions that guided this study were: What are Latino students' perspectives of their post-graduation options? What are the factors that play a role in their plans post-high school?

Context

As outlined in Chapter 1, Juarez High School District predominantly serves a predominantly Latino student population and provides various programs across its East and West campuses. This diversity in programming, coupled with the unique life journey of each student, contributes to the need for a nuanced exploration of their experiences within a specific educational context. It is important to note that two of the programs are intervention programs that are integral components of the MtSS framework discussed in Chapter 1. For a more detailed

overview of district programs, refer to Chapter 1. Table 1 provides a review of the programs in which the study participants were actively engaged.

Table 1

Review of Programs From East and West Campuses

Program	Brief description	Staff responsible for the program	Location of program
Enlace	Support for attendance, behavior, or grades	Regional Education Office staff	East & West campuses
KEY	Half-day hybrid credit recovery acceleration & mentorship	Regional Education Office staff	Juarez Community College
CTE	Career and technical education courses	Juarez High School staff	East & West campuses
General	Students who did not participate in Enlace, KEY, or CTE	Juarez High School staff	East & West campuses

During the study, I was employed by the elementary school district that serves as a feeder for the high school district, and I collaborated with the Bilingual Director of Juarez High School District. We met several times a year to look at the test scores of the eighth graders who would be attending Juarez High School District. This engagement provided me with valuable insight into the student demographics and educational programs. I gained access to the district as my research site by initiating discussions with the district superintendent. I then followed the district's protocol to gain permission to conduct research, which was aligned with the National Louis University (NLU) Institutional Research Board's (IRB) requirements.

Participants

I used purposeful sampling in the recruitment of students to participate in this study. This method, advocated by Patton (1990), is instrumental in identifying information-rich cases that

are appropriate for an in-depth interview setting. I recruited students to participate in this research through collaboration with the college and career counselor, Enlace counselor, and the KEY coordinator in which I engaged in discussions about the criteria I had for including students. I tasked them with recruiting students who met the following specific criteria: senior-year enrollment, Latino heritage, a diverse program representation (i.e., Enlace, KEY, CTE, and general program), and a predisposition for outgoing and comfortable participation in hour-long interviews. The counselors facilitated this process by leveraging their knowledge of students' ages and daily interactions with them. They selected 25 students to participate, and after discussing the list with me, they facilitated the process of obtaining consent and, when necessary, assent. As an incentive, I included a raffle of four $20 gift cards with details provided in the consent and assent forms.

Both the college and career counselor and the KEY coordinator facilitated the process of giving the students assent and consent forms. Minors who were under 18 years of age were asked to have their parents sign the consent form and return it to the college and career counselor or the KEY coordinator. In addition, I asked students to provide their assent by signing the assent forms as well. Students age 18 years and older were allowed to complete their own consent forms.

I ultimately selected students based on the availability of both their schedules and my own. I interviewed 15 students; however, one recording failed, so I only included 14 students in the data analysis portion of the study. Three of the participants were male and 11 were female. Six participants were from the West campus and eight were from the East campus. Table 2 provides a list of the 14 participants using their pseudonyms, respective gender, campus, and program.

Table 2

List of Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Campus	Program
Brian	Male	West	CTE
Esmeralda	Female	West	General
James	Male	West	KEY
Juana	Female	West	General
Monica	Female	West	Enlace
Vicky	Female	West	Enlace
Blanca	Female	East	KEY
Jose	Male	East	KEY
Talia	Female	East	General
Sofia	Female	East	General
Caro	Female	East	General
Vero	Female	East	Enlace
Julia	Female	East	CTE
Noemi	Female	East	CTE

Data Gathering Techniques

I conducted one 60-minute interview with each of the 15 participants on one of the Juarez High School District campuses in a location that was quiet and private in the Fall of 2022. The interviews were structured according to the six categories from the student interview guide (see Appendix A). The six categories in the guide were as follows: life outside of school, life in school, cultural identity, family, college/trade school/career knowledge, and their futures. I incorporated active interviewing techniques as described by Holstein and Gubrium (1995), which allowed students to elaborate and provide narratives in their responses through my active

engagement asking students to elaborate on their answers. To create the conditions to promote this type of interaction and facilitate open and honest interaction, I created a comfortable context to promote a natural and conversational context for the interview. I did this by having the KEY coordinator and college and career counselor provide the students a copy of the questions in advance. I also put students at ease when I initially met with them by engaging with them in casual conversation. I tended to incorporate humor, like sharing how I got lost the first day I went to their campus, to establish rapport.

I used a web-based recording and transcription platform called Rev to facilitate the process for all of the interviews. I selected to pay for a membership to Rev instead of using the free version. I recorded all of the interviews directly through the Rev phone application, which then automatically saved the audio files. Because the audio files were automatically saved on the Rev platform, it also streamlined the process when I uploaded the recordings to have them transcribed on the Rev platform. In addition to storing the audio files, Rev stored the files with the transcripts. Below are details of the data analysis and ethical considerations of the data collection and interviews.

Data Analysis Techniques

Saldaña (2021) highlighted that many qualitative researchers find themselves overwhelmed when confronted with the multitude of coding methods available. This feeling of being overwhelmed was something I personally experienced as well. To deal with this feeling, I divided the data analysis into four stages: data refinement, summarizing, line-by-line coding, and creating categories.

Data Refinement

Before commencing the data analysis, it was crucial to ensure the accuracy of the transcripts and the protection of participant identities. The interviews were quite extensive, each spanning approximately an hour and resulting in lengthy transcripts often exceeding 20 pages for subsequent analysis. After completing all the interviews, the initial phase of analysis involved a thorough review and refinement of the transcripts. This process had several goals, the first of which was to rectify inaccuracies, such as when the transcript initially recorded “chicken” instead of “chiquito,” which is a Spanish word meaning little one. Corrections were made to accurately reflect the spoken word as chiquito. In addition, the transcripts had instances where the lines were listed under the wrong person. It may have said the person being interviewed said “I think so,” when it was really me, the researcher, who had said that. I corrected all of these errors. Following the correction of these issues, I created pseudonyms for each of the interviewed students to safeguard their identities.

The clean-up was time-consuming but it also allowed me to do some pre-coding. Saldaña (2021) recommended the use of some pre-coding, which in my study consisted of circling, highlighting, bolding, and underlying things that struck me as code-worthy. During that process, I also created memos to capture responses that jumped out to me, as suggested by Saldaña, whose process entailed using memos while coding to document thoughts and initial analyses.

Summarizing

Once I had all of the transcripts finalized, the first thing I did after pre-coding was to create a table to generate a summary overview of the responses to capture some of the main topics of the interviews. These topics included the participants’ interests, jobs, role models, relationships with the programs in which they participated, motivations to do well, identities,

perspectives on college/trade school, and definitions of success. Next, I created a table to write summaries describing each participant as far as school site and program and a quick summary of their answers. Saldaña (2021) suggested educational researchers should capture their thoughts and document them. I wrote down some notes to capture responses that jumped out to me.

Line-by-Line Coding

I selected a single transcript for experimentation with different coding formats. Initially, I employed in vivo coding to meticulously engage in line-by-line coding of each transcript. I used inductive coding by being open minded and creating codes based on the data, rather than using previously developed codes as I did the coding.

To gain valuable insights and feedback on my process, I met with my dissertation chair to discuss my work with this particular transcript. During this period, I also experimented with various tools, including Google Docs and Sheets. Within Google Docs, I explored different methods, such as line numbering and side annotations, to structure my coding. The original table I created with precoding was not conducive for identifying themes and subthemes effectively.

Creating Categories

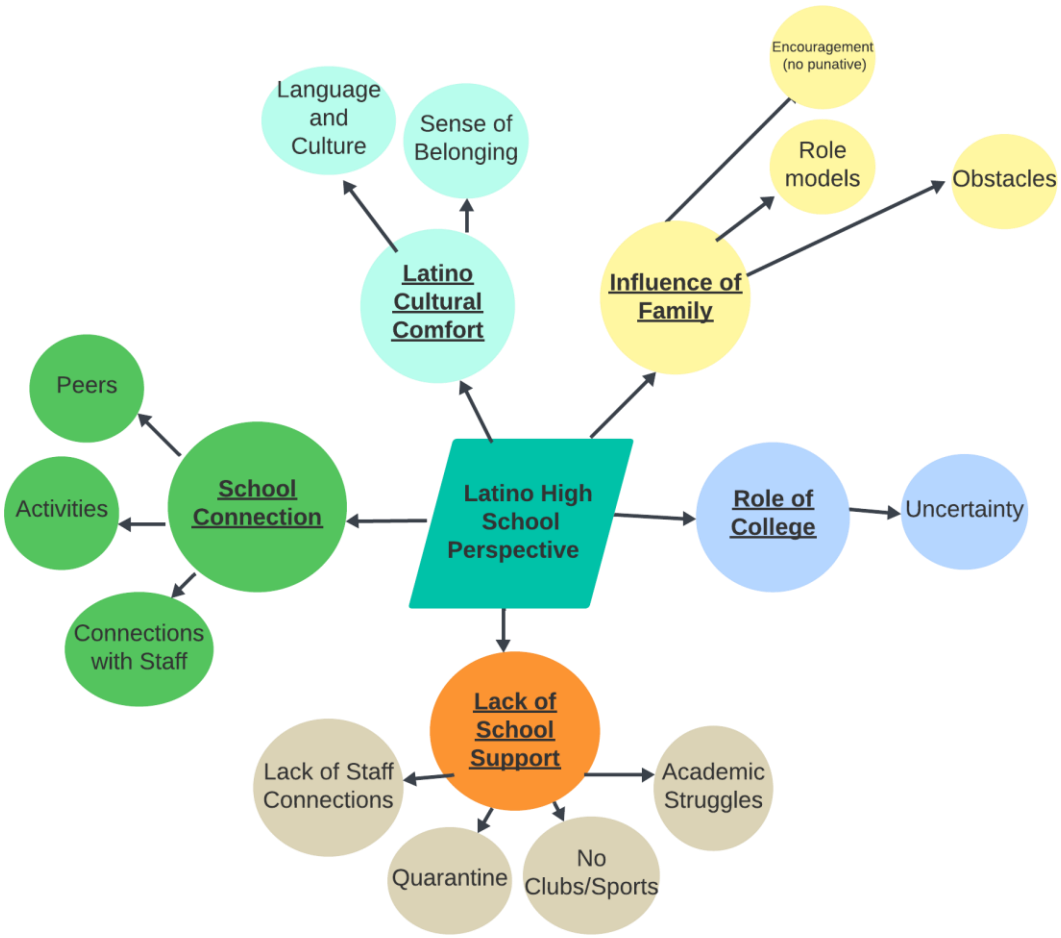
In the next phase of data analysis, I transitioned to a more visually informative chart that outlined each of the six main areas in the student interview guide and separated them into four columns: (a) participant name, (b) code I created, (c) rich quotes from the student, and (d) notes. I coded the first three categories, generating over 50 unique codes in the process. These codes became a valuable resource for analyzing the remaining transcripts.

I continued line-by-line analysis for the rest of the transcripts, which involved associating the codes I had created with the distinct categories from the interview guide (see Appendix A). Subsequently, I organized these codes based on their conceptual similarities and determined their

frequency to gauge the strength of the findings. This allowed me to compare the emerging themes across the study participants effectively. The final step involved synthesizing all the gathered information. To accomplish this, I used sticky notes to identify and visualize the key findings and their relationships. Subsequently, I transferred this organized information to a digital platform using Lucid Chart and created a comprehensive concept map that encapsulates all the major findings, which can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Concept Map



Through the process of data analysis, the following findings were identified: extracurricular activities and quarantine, program differences, the role of college in students' futures, the crucial

influence of family on students, and Latino cultural comfort zones. The findings are discussed in Chapter 4.

Ethical Considerations

As an integral step in the research process at NLU, I diligently secured IRB approval to initiate and conduct the study. In strict adherence to the approved protocols, I held comprehensive discussions with the participants outlining the details of the study, including potential risks and benefits associated with their participation. Participants were thoughtfully provided with the study questions in advance and informed regarding the data collection methods. Emphasizing the voluntariness of their involvement, participants were assured they had the right to refrain from answering any questions that made them uncomfortable.

To ensure utmost confidentiality, participants were informed that their identities would be safeguarded throughout the study. Pseudonyms were thoughtfully assigned and used exclusively to refer to each participant, and any other potentially identifying information, such as school names and program titles, was meticulously anonymized. Furthermore, to secure the collected data, all result files were stored in a password-protected folder on my personal computer. The audio files, integral to the study, were stored on the Rev platform, which is fortified by an additional layer of security through password protection to ensure access is restricted. These rigorous measures were implemented to uphold the ethical standards and integrity of the research process, prioritizing participant confidentiality and data security.

Limitations

I conducted my research exclusively within one high school district that has three campuses. Because this was a phenomenological study, which avoids generalizations, it was appropriate to have a relatively small sample size, 14 students out of the 7,874 students who

make up the district (Finlay, 2009). Though the results cannot be generalized, the phenomenological approach facilitates the ability to really focus on the specifics of how the participants perceive a situation; in the case of this study, the focus was on their high school experience and their post-graduation options (Lester, 1999). Uncovering trends among the 14 students was immensely helpful to provide students with the appropriate support.

In conclusion, the careful design and execution of data gathering techniques, ethical considerations, and data analysis methods paved the way for a robust exploration of Latino students' perspectives on their high school experiences and post-high school options. These efforts were critical to generating meaningful insights that can contribute to the understanding of the subject matter.

CHAPTER FOUR

Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore Latino students' perspectives on their high school experience as well as their post-graduation options using Patton's (2012) systematic approach. Specifically, I focused on his first two steps, analysis and interpretation, to make sense of the findings of this evaluation. In this chapter, I discuss the results from the student interviews about their life in and out of school, their ethnic and linguistic identity, family life, and their knowledge about post-high school options. The initial section of the chapter delves into the main finding, aligning with Patton's suggestion to include a thorough description, analysis, and organization of raw data. This method allows for the identification of trends, ultimately aiding primary users in comprehending the insights derived from the data. The findings of this study were the following: quarantine-related challenges, program differences, the role of college in students' futures, the crucial influence of family on students, and Latino cultural comfort zones. In the second half of the chapter, I discuss the relevance of the findings, drawing connections to relevant existing literature and to the research questions.

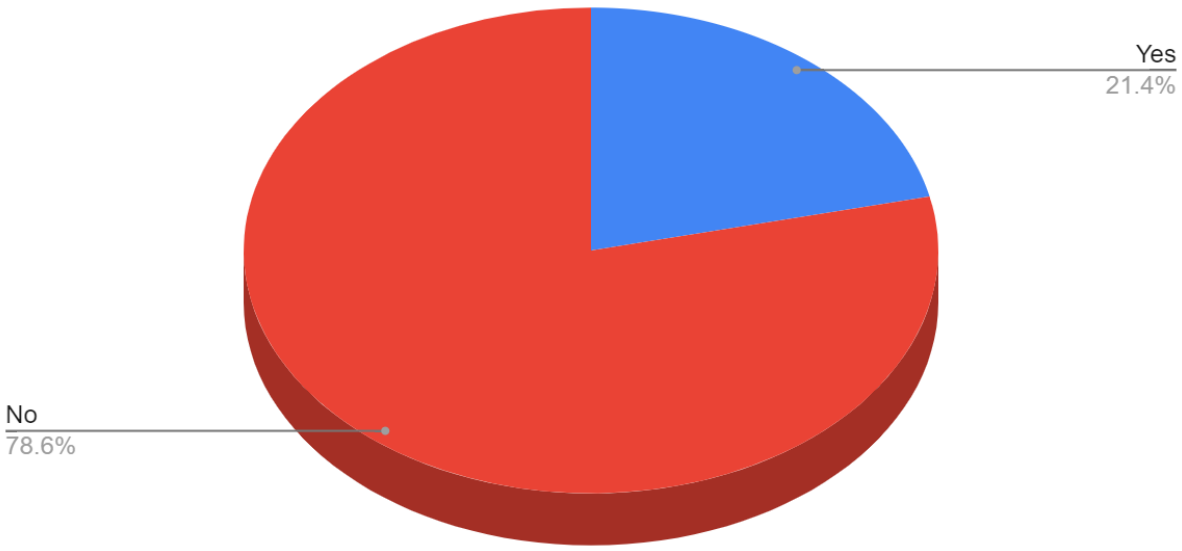
Finding 1: Extracurricular Activities and Quarantine

This discovery provided insight into one aspect of the research question: understanding students' perceptions of their high school experiences. Though academics are one of the main components of high school, extracurricular activities are also important to students' development and preparation for post-high school. Only three of the 14 students were involved in extracurricular activities. Monica and Vero were involved in band and flag football, respectively. The third student involved in extracurriculars was Blanca, who had participated in dance her

freshman and sophomore year. Figure 2 illustrates the students' responses, emphasizing a significant contrast in participation rates.

Figure 2

Count of Students Involved in Sports, Activities, or Clubs



Note. $N = 14$.

Five students indicated the quarantine changed the trajectory of the sports and clubs they would have joined. Brian explained, "Quarantine kind of messed that up for me. I used to play basketball [and after] the quarantine hit, I kind of just fell off." He did not feel the same motivation to join; instead, he just played basketball for fun but acknowledged the experience was not the same as if he had been part of the school basketball team. In his interview, he also expressed feeling like he did not fit in at Juarez High School. Caro was another example of a student whose school involvement was adversely affected by the quarantine. She said, "I was in cross country freshman year, but then the whole COVID thing, I didn't go through with it." Even

though Caro could have joined cross country or any other sport after the quarantine, she felt like something had shifted and chose to stay inactive from sports and clubs for the rest of her high school career.

Yet another example of plans changing after the quarantine was lifted was Juana, who said, “Freshman year I had made the rugby team, but it was the same day that they closed everything down, March 13th, 2020.” It was impressive that after 3 years she remembered the exact date the quarantine was put in place with accuracy. This could be an indicator of how profound this experience was for her.

School districts had never experienced a quarantine of this magnitude and leaders were ill-equipped to deal with the shift from in-person school to an online platform. Specifically, the lack of hands-on activities during the quarantine made the online platform increasingly difficult for eight students. James spoke to this challenge, which he felt caused him to fail multiple classes and jeopardize his graduation. James asserted, “What also put me [in the KEY program] was quarantine. I kind of messed up my schedule and didn’t have the motivation to do it.” Prior to the quarantine, James had looked forward to taking a mechanics class. However, the online platform prevented the hands-on components he had been excited about. He noted, “If the quarantine never happened, I would have been assembling an engine and stuff like that. It would’ve been cool, but it didn’t happen.” James’s response is an example of the impact the quarantine had on his high school education. Furthermore, it affected his perspective on post-graduation options. He felt that because he had been unable to explore the hands-on features of the mechanics classes in his junior year, he would now have to determine whether he liked mechanics enough to pay for classes at the community college.

The quarantine affected the students considerably. Vicky, one of the eight students who mentioned the quarantine, described it as just an overall challenge for her. She looked down and lowered her voice when she conveyed, “High school was difficult; we stopped coming for a year and then we came back again. It was difficult, at least for me.” Fortunately, Vicky was an active participant in Enlace and benefited from the guidance of program counselors who offered extra support, as she was able to successfully navigate academic challenges and graduate on schedule.

Unfortunately, the challenges persisted for the eight students even after schools reopened for in-person classes after the quarantine was lifted. For example, Esmeralda shared that prior to the quarantine she had struggled with depression and the quarantine made it harder. She described the challenge with returning to school: “The shift back to high school was so hard for me. I did not like it and I was depressed. It was just very different. I felt like I was starting kindergarten.” With the support of her family, Esmeralda was able to push through and maintain good grades without additional support from the school.

However, not all students were as fortunate as Esmeralda. Blanca, for example, was referred to the KEY program because of her failing grades. She attributed her excessive absences to the aftermath of the quarantine:

> When I did go back, it didn’t feel the same. Nothing was the same. I don’t feel like it was the same way as before where you would just talk to everyone in the halls. I felt very “desanimada” [without motivation] like to go and it just wasn’t the same thing.

It was not until Blanca worked with the KEY counselors that she gained the clarity, confidence, and motivation to move forward with her aspirations post-high school.

Finding 2: Program Differences

This finding revealed a divergence in results across various programs in terms of students' connection to school. This discrepancy prominently manifested in the influence of staff relationships and the effective instruction in goal setting they received, emphasizing a robust correlation to post-high school aspirations. This section is divided into three subfindings: differences in connections with counselors, differences in connections with teachers, and focus on the future in KEY and Enlace.

Subfinding 1: Differences in Connections With Counselors

It is crucial to highlight the distinct organizational structures within each program, particularly in terms of counselor involvement. Enlace students benefit from collaboration with both program counselors and school counselors. In contrast, KEY program participants exclusively engage with KEY counselors. The structure for Enlace and KEY counselors is set up so the counselors have frequent communication with students. Meanwhile, students enrolled in the CTE and general program do not have dedicated program counselors and thus rely solely on the support of school counselors. The school counselors mainly meet with students for scheduling purposes, though students have the ability to text the counselors if they need support.

Enlace and KEY. All six students who participated in Enlace and KEY conveyed profoundly positive and transformative experiences with the program counselors. James, in reflecting on his time in the KEY program, expressed, "I did not know what I wanted to do in high school, but I've come a long way in here." He looked happy as he made this comment and shared his intention of enrolling in Juarez Community College after graduation.

Students in the Enlace program consistently described the Enlace counselors as supportive. For example, Vicky conveyed, "Ms. Gonzalez [a pseudonym] showed me how to

manage my emotions and learn that it's okay to be emotional and how to deal with them in a healthy way." The emotional support Vicky received from Ms. Gonzalez, particularly in navigating her emotions, illustrates the support Enlace students receive that goes beyond the academic domain. Having gained confidence in being able to self-regulate will be beneficial for Vicky to reach her post-high school plans. Monica shared a similar sentiment about the Enlace counselors: "They became a big support system for a lot of people. It took a long time to get here, but I think they definitely helped me a lot emotionally and mentally." Monica's emphasis on the support she received for her mental health was evident, and it positively affected her academic performance. Monica felt mentally stronger and more confident to take on the new challenge of attending college after graduating high school.

Vero shared positive comments about the Enlace counselors such as the fact that Enlace counselors were focused on students' futures and helping them move forward in life. This was a stark contrast to the negative interactions she had with school counselors. Vero complained, "They [school counselors] just want you to pay $180 for a class. They don't sit down with you unless you tell them. They either give you attitude or they just won't care." Furthermore, she said she would not seek out help from the school counselors and relied on the Enlace counselors instead. The support of the Enlace counselors was instrumental in steering her through the steps needed to access college. The significance of the Enlace program and the transformative impact of its counselors on students are vividly demonstrated through the positive interactions outlined in this section.

Monica had positive and negative experiences with the two school counselors. She expressed:

> When I got switched, that's when I realized what people were talking about, that sometimes [school counselors] are kind of unavailable or make you feel like they have too many students to talk to. So, you're kind of just trapped. Or you might want to reach out for help with college and FAFSA, things like that you're supposed to have somebody guiding you. We have a few counselors that think, I'm there whenever you need me, I'm available, I'm going to guide you. And then there's some that are hesitant to help or they let you figure it out. Sometimes they don't give people a safe space to come. But I think if someone's not looking for you, maybe you won't go for the opportunity. Some people just need somebody to say, "Hey, are you keeping up with this?"

Monica's final statement emphasized that students who do not actively seek out their counselors might miss valuable opportunities. This comment underscores the importance of having proactive structures for school counselors, like the Enlace and KEY programs, to improve students' high school experience. Their system is designed for frequent contact with the counselors to provide students with the support they need. School counselors operate under a system where students are expected to take the initiative in seeking help. However, this poses a challenge because students may not be aware of the comprehensive support services available. Monica emphasized that this limited awareness often led to missed opportunities.

CTE. Not only did Enlace counselors have a positive connection with the students on the caseload, they also positively influenced students who were not in the program. For example, when asked about his relationship with his school counselor, Brian, a participant of the CTE program, articulated, "If I have a problem, I'll go to my counselor, but if I need somewhere to vent, I'm going to go to Ms. Gonzalez [a pseudonym]. She is the only person that I trust."

Brian's status as a transfer student at West Juarez High School meant he initially had few connections with staff. Having that connection to Ms. Gonzalez made him feel supported.

The other two CTE participants, Noemi and Julia, conveyed positive relationships with the school counselors. Noemi described both of the counselors she had as nice and she described their relationship as "pretty good." The third CTE participant, Julia, had very positive things to say about both of the school counselors she had. She expressed:

> I think that they help you a lot. This year I bugged her a lot since I had to submit my application toward college. She helped me a lot because I was stressing out a bunch. They're very sweet. If you need help and you're mentally not okay and you need to calm down and just sit down, they're always there and I like that.

The support Julia described was both academic and emotional, both of which she needed. Julia's proactive choice to approach the counselor for support stands out. Nonetheless, it is essential to recognize that not every student will adopt a similar approach, and some may opt to navigate challenges independently.

General Program. Juana exemplified a tendency among students to refrain from seeking assistance from their school counselor, choosing instead to navigate challenges independently. She emerged as the most vocal student expressing discontent with her overall school experience, including her lack of connection with any of the staff members. This was further articulated when asked if she had a role model in school, to which she disclosed, "I don't really think I have anyone. I never really look to anyone for guidance. I just sort of figured it out."

Esmeralda also expressed her preference for handling things independently. She stated, "I don't really go to them [school counselors]. I kind of like to do things on my own." As the youngest sibling, Esmeralda received guidance from her older siblings, which supplemented the

support typically offered by the school counselor. Similarly, Talia, a general education program participant, recounted minimal engagements with her school counselor. Having recently experienced a change in counselors, she reflected, “I spoke with my [new] counselor only once, and she made an effort to discuss my post-high school plans.”

Contrary to other general education students, Caro described a markedly different relationship with her newly-assigned school counselor. A notable distinction was that Caro frequently sought out the counselor for assistance. Caro described:

> We are pretty close. I got changed just this year to a new counselor, but I had to rebuild the bond, but overall, it’s been pretty good. [Counselors] have been really helpful. They gave me advice and added from their experiences.

As a result of her proactive engagement with her counselors, Caro discovered various opportunities, such as participating in the CNA program. This experience ignited her passion for nursing, motivating her to pursue a career in the field after high school.

Subfinding 2: Differences in Connections With Teachers

Among the 14 students, eight conveyed positive connections with at least a few teachers. Table 3 shows the breakdown by program of students expressing a positive relationship with teachers; all three of the Enlace students, two of the three CTE students, two of the four general program students, and none of the KEY students.

Table 3

Students With Positive Teacher Connections

Program	Percent of students with positive teacher connections	Number of students with positive teacher connections
Enlace	100%	3 of 3
General	80%	4 of 5
CTE	67%	2 of 3
KEY	0%	0 of 3

Enlace. The Enlace students conveyed having positive relationships with some of the teachers. They expressed appreciation for the support they received, whether it be academic or emotional support. For example, Vicky found emotional support from an English teacher. She conveyed:

> I was struggling a lot with home issues freshman year. Anytime anything would happen or I would be upset with something that was going on at home, I would openly tell him what was going on. He would give me advice on how to handle things. Or sometimes tell me [my struggles] don't define the way that I am.

In addition, Vicky described how some teachers were flexible and empathetic to students' situations and would give deadline extensions if students shared with them challenges with juggling work and school. Conversely, Vicky also encountered teachers who were not empathetic to students' needs. She shared, "Although they know you're working, they don't really take it into account or they think that it does affect school." It is noteworthy that half of the students interviewed were working in addition to going to school.

General Program. Esmeralda, a student in the general program, had many positive things to say about teachers. She commented, "I feel like you can talk to them about your

personal problems, and they'll be super understanding." She added that every English teacher she ever had was always very understanding and she was able to open up to them and seek help with extensions when needed.

Sofia's experiences with teachers varied, encompassing both positive and negative interactions. One instance of a negative interaction involved her counselor's limited ability to assist when she missed a test deadline. Despite efforts, the counselor could not secure permission for a makeup test, opting instead for Sofia to take an incomplete to avoid summer school. Despite this setback, Sofia still viewed other teachers positively, stating, "A lot of my teachers are really helpful and support me. If I miss an assignment or if they see that I'm off, they check up on me."

The outlier in the general program was Juana, who was strongly discontented with her high school experience. When asked how she thought the school helped prepare her she responded, "They don't teach you anything about the real stuff. They just tell you, 'When you get to college it's not going to be the same.' They say that every single year, they don't really prepare you." Juana also shared that she had no one to go to for guidance at home, which made the lack of support from counselors even more significant. Juana would have benefited from the additional support of Enlace counselors.

KEY. As noted in Table 3, none of the students in the KEY program identified having positive interactions with teachers. James openly discussed the difficulties he faced in his math courses throughout all 4 years of high school, noting he refrained from seeking assistance due to a lack of comfort with any of his teachers. He said, "I failed almost every year of math. I did night school for freshman year, first semester. I [stopped] cause it was really stressful." Furthermore, when asked what kind of relationship he had with the teachers, he responded, "I

didn't really have one with them. I was there to do work and get out. I didn't really talk to teachers." It was surprising that none of James's teachers attempted to connect with him as he struggled for years within the math department. James's experience demonstrates the strong repercussions when there is a lack of connection between teachers and students.

Similarly, Blanca disclosed she intentionally avoided certain classes to prevent potential embarrassment. She stated:

> A lot of teachers are like that [rude] because when I was in my senior year, they would call me out in front of the whole class, "Oh, you're finally here." It would be really stressful. I would even dread it because of those wanted encounters.

These negative interactions with teachers contributed to her anxiety about school. If school staff knew of her issues, she could have been given support earlier to avoid having to go to KEY. That being said, having KEY in the school district is immensely beneficial, especially for students who did well for most of their time in high school but struggled junior year.

Subfinding 3: Individualized Support Enlace and KEY

The KEY program provided students one more opportunity to graduate instead of getting a General Education Development (GED) diploma. As mentioned in earlier chapters, KEY's main purpose is to help students with accelerated credit recovery in a self-paced setting. KEY counselors meet one-on-one with students and they develop goals together for credit completion so the students can graduate. They also support students in exploring post-high school options like attending Juarez Community College.

Although the students did not know the KEY counselors for a long time, it was apparent there was trust built between them. Blanca described one of her one-on-one meetings with the KEY counselor in her interview:

> Last week we talked about my goals. It was very motivating. He's like "When do you want to be done?" And I told him, hopefully within a month, and he [asked] "What do you want to do after?" [He] made me realize that I really did want to come back to school. I think a big thing was for me [was] he reminded me, we're not your enemy, we don't want to see you fail. We want to see you succeed.

The daily interaction and focus on planning for the future may also strengthen the trust that exists between the students and the KEY counselors. All of the KEY participants shared they felt comfortable asking the counselors questions.

KEY participants had transformative changes while in the program. They all went into the program skeptical about being able to finish and unsure of what they could do after high school. With the additional support from counselors, they focused on getting their credits completed so they could move on to the next chapter in their lives. All three of the KEY participants spoke with excitement about going on to Juarez Community College. They all said they knew the KEY counselors would support them in their transition. This was a huge shift from when they first started the program. For example, Jose enthusiastically praised the program, stating, "It's helping me succeed, giving me more options in life." He, like Blanca and James, saw continuing his education as a way to have more options in life. Blanca shared one way KEY changed her, stating, "I would've never had this motivation a year ago. I feel like now I'm just holding myself accountable. I don't want to make excuses for the past 2 years." Holding herself accountable referred to creating goals and laying out steps to meet them like her KEY counselor taught her.

Students in Enlace were required to have daily check-ins with counselors. Integrated into the regular school day, the Enlace program facilitated one-on-one sessions that took place during

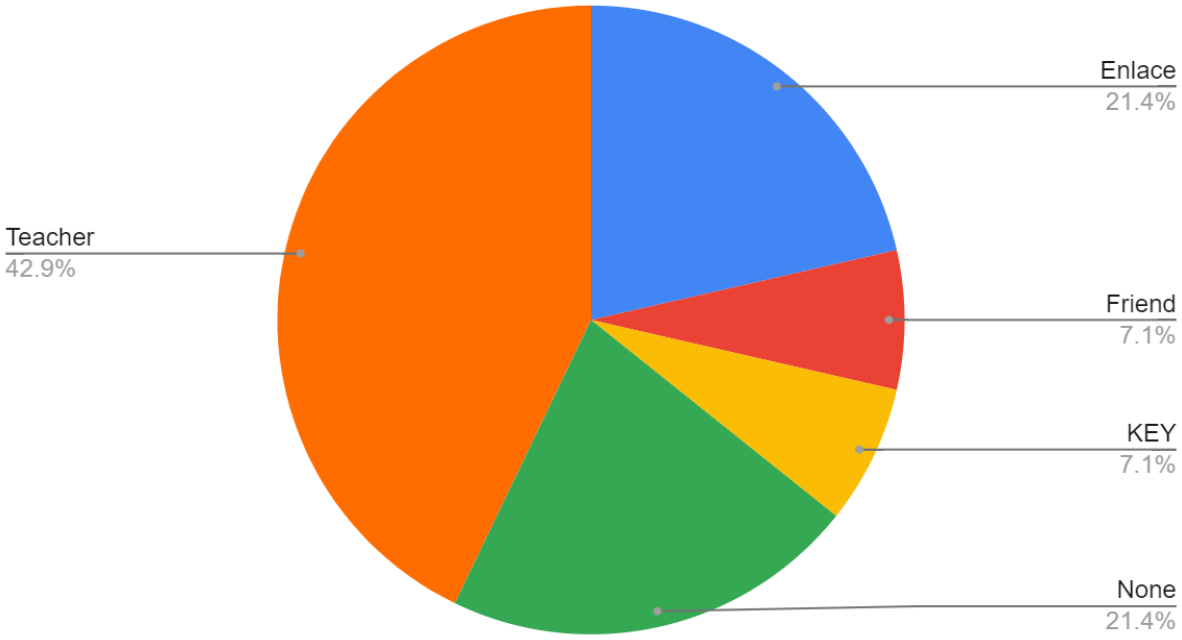
lunch or study hall periods. Daily engagement allowed Enlace counselors to build a stronger rapport with students and offer wrap-around services such as social-emotional support. The wrap-around services could include a combination of educational, medical, social, and psychological services tailored to the individual's specific circumstances. Vero spoke effusively about the individualized support she received:

> My experience with the Enlace counselors was really nice because they want to know where you're at. They want to know what's going on and after they know what's the problem, they will try pulling you forward. Keeping you focused on school, helping you graduate.

The Enlace counselors held significant importance to students, as evident in the fact that Enlace counselors were the second most commonly identified as students' role models. Figure 3 shows 42.9% of the students interviewed identified either teachers in general or specific teachers as role models. The support the Enlace counselors provided complemented the encouragement parents provided for the students. However, both the Enlace and KEY counselors were able to provide more specific guidance on navigating the education landscape.

Figure 3

Count of Role Models Identified by Students



Note. $N = 14$.

Finding 3: The Role of College in Students' Futures

This finding is divided into two subfindings: seeing college as a possibility and uncertainty about college.

Subfinding 1: Seeing College as a Possibility

All of the students, with the exception of Esmeralda, shared the belief that anyone could attend college if they wanted to. This answers part of the research question: What are students' perspectives of their high school experiences and post-graduation options. Esmeralda was an outlier not just because her response was different but also because she drew from her brothers' negative experiences. Esmeralda responded:

> I don't think so because I think you have to be motivated. If there's nothing to motivate you, you're going to drop out. I don't think it's for everybody. I think there are some

> people that would prefer just going straight to work than going to study to become something. And also, with financial burdens, I think people can't really afford it sometimes, so it's harder for them.

Therefore, Esmeralda's response was not surprising as all four of her brothers had dropped out of college.

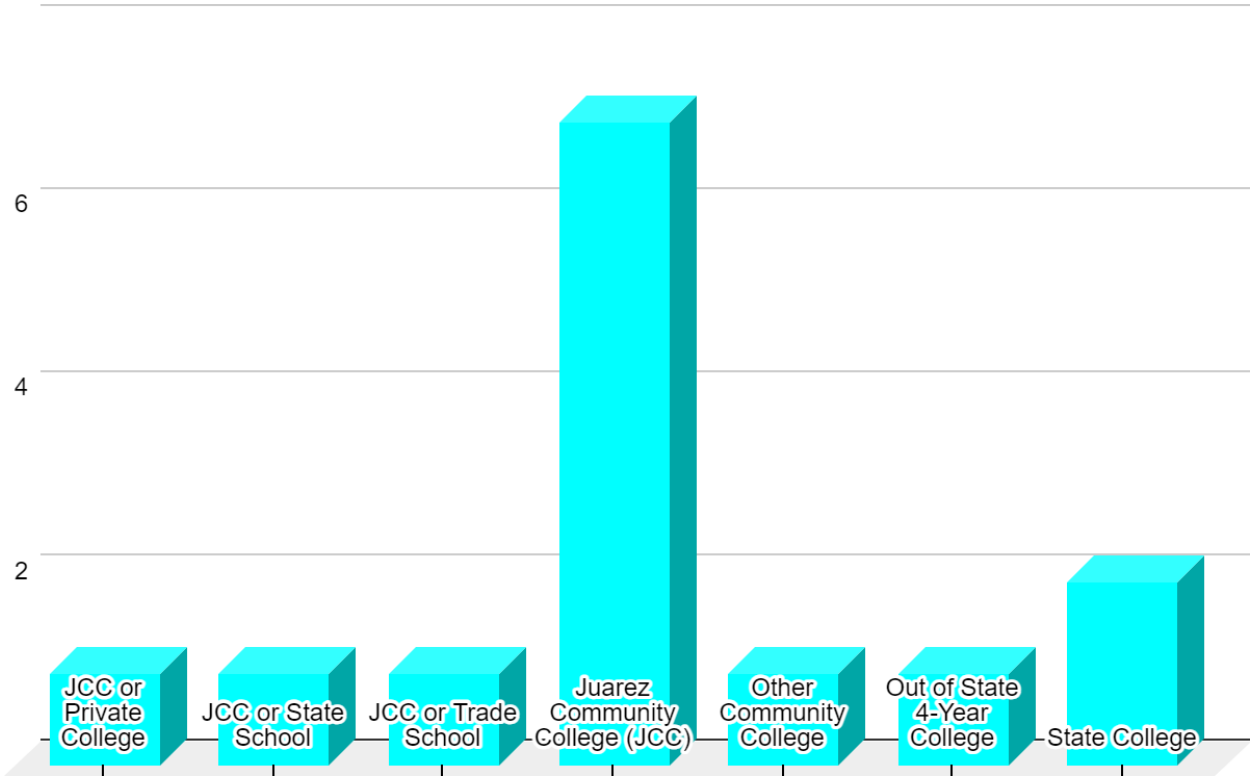
The rest of the students had a much more positive outlook on the question, "Can anyone go to college?" Jose, who had struggled in high school, remarked, "If I could believe I could go to college, anyone can go to college." Jose's quote shows the direct effect of the KEY programming. The program had a direct effect on his choices post-high school.

Addressing the research question regarding students' post-high school perspectives, all 14 interviewed students expressed a desire to attend college. Additionally, they aspired to pursue careers that offered financial stability. As of the fall of their senior year, only two of the 14 had received college admissions. This raises concerns about the likelihood of the remaining students achieving their goal of attending college. Unfortunately, Juarez High School District does not track college applications or acceptances, making it challenging to assess the success rates of college enrollment.

Delving into students' viewpoints on life after high school unveiled a prevailing ambition—attending Juarez Community College. Figure 4 illustrates the distribution of students' school preferences. Notably, seven students intended to enroll at Juarez Community College and three were weighing options between Juarez Community College and alternatives (private college, state school, or trade school). Two students aspired to attend a state college, one aimed for admission to a state college nearby, and the last student was seriously contemplating enrollment at a community college other than Juarez.

Figure 4

Post-Graduation Plans



Note. $N = 14$.

Interestingly, none of the students intended to pursue a career that was already established within their families. While examining how students perceived their post-high school opportunities, a commonality emerged—all 14 students had a defined idea of the job or career path they were keen on. Only one student expressed possibly going to a trade school to get his commercial driver's license; however, he was also debating going to Juarez College for a welding certificate. The remaining students expressed aspirations that involved attending either a 4-year or 2-year college. Although some of the programs the students identified would be offered at a trade school, such as mechanics, all of the students expressed wanting to go to a community college. Figure 5 has the full list of careers the students identified as well as the type of education

they will need for that career, which answers more specifically the question of what are the students' post-high school options.

Figure 5

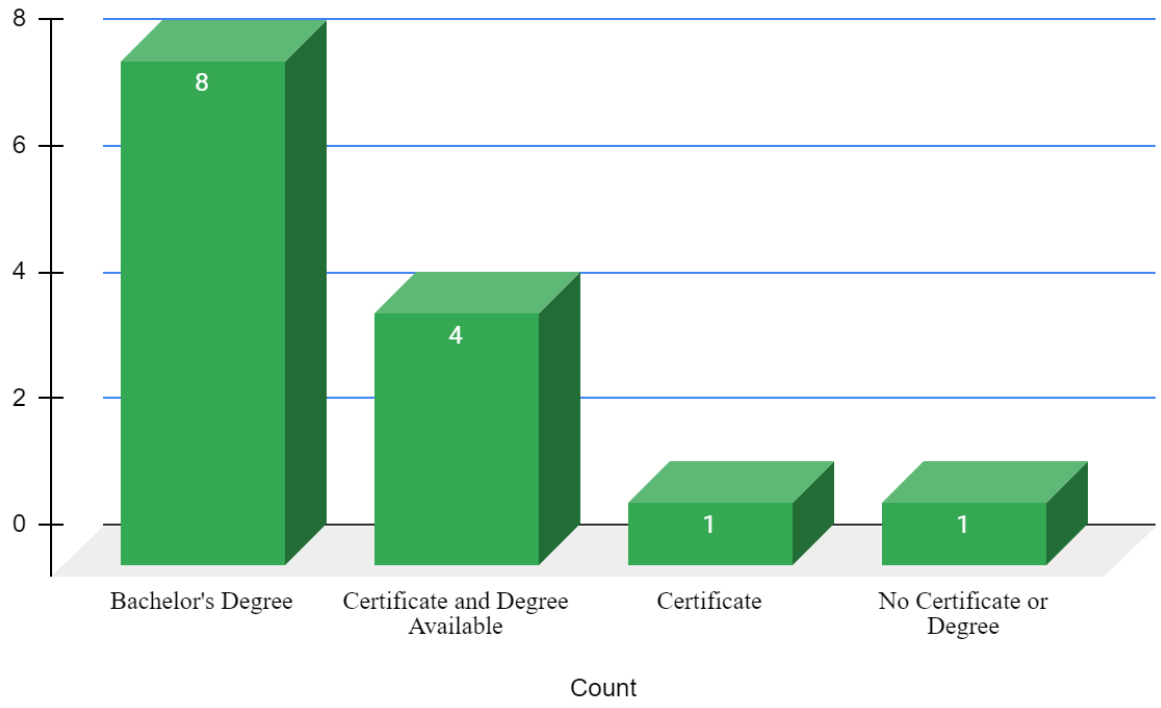
List of Careers Identified by Students

Certificate or Degree Available	Bachelor's Degree	Bachelor's Degree Plus Post Graduate Degree Required	Other
Ultrasound Technician	Accountant	Lawyer	Entrepreneur
Mechanic	Forensic Scientist	Optometrist	Commercial Truck Driver (CDL)
Nurse	Human Resources Director	Psychologist	Welding
	Teacher	Architect	

Figure 6 is a bar graph that shows the same information as Figure 5, but focuses on the count of what type of degree would be required if students pursued the career they identified. Eight of the careers identified would require a bachelor's degree, four of the careers were available at Juarez Community College for either a certificate or associate degree, one career would require a certificate, and only one career would have neither a certificate nor a degree requirement. This shows most students' post-high school aspirations were to obtain a bachelor's degree.

Figure 6

Certificate/Degree Requirement of Careers Students Selected



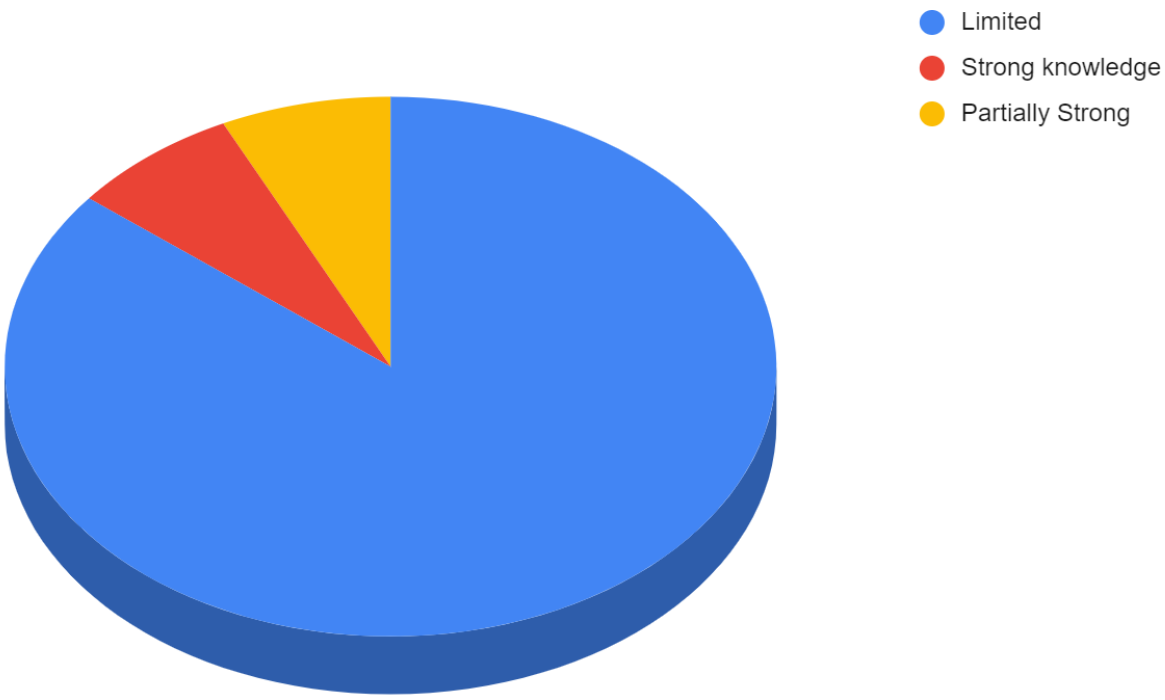
Note. *N* = 14.

Subfinding 2: Uncertainty About College

Based on what the students shared in the interview question, "What do you know about college," I categorized them into three categories as far as knowledge about the college-going experience: limited, partially strong, and strong knowledge. The outcomes offer valuable information for understanding why students hold specific perspectives on college after completing high school. Figure 7 shows the amount of knowledge about the college-going experience, which shows one student for strong knowledge, one for partially strong, and the rest of the 12 counts were limited knowledge about the college-going experience.

Figure 7

Knowledge About the College Going Experience



Note. *N* = 14.

I categorized the students as having limited college knowledge if they only had a surface-level understanding of what college would entail. Twelve of the 14 students had limited knowledge of what college entailed. Vero would be an example of this category. She understood college was about growth as a person and knew she would have fewer classes to manage at a time. She said, “College is adulthood. You’re trying to do studying and you maintain your own self. You get this life opening where it’s like you’re on your own. There’s fewer classes. [It] sounds fun.” However, she did not mention any other challenges other than financial once she got there.

Twelve of the students felt they did not have a vast understanding of what college would entail. For example, Blanca said, “Just the basic stuff. I know you apply for class. I know there’s

tuition [and], your classes can be day or night." Although her understanding was limited, Blanca, a KEY participant, was already anticipating going to the KEY counselors for help even after she enrolled at Juarez Community College.

Students may not have known a lot about college, but what they did all seem to understand was that a college certificate or degree would provide them with more opportunities in life. For example, Talia said:

> I feel like college gives me more job opportunities. Having at least a 2-year college, will help me get more jobs in the future than just having a high school diploma. So, if I go to a 4-year, that opens up way more doors than just a 2-year.

Another example of limited college knowledge was James, who was contemplating a career as a mechanic. When asked if he understood the difference between college and trade schools, he responded, "I don't really know the difference if I am being honest." Though going to Juarez Community College would be a fine option, if he was interested in being a mechanic there are trade schools that specialize in that and might be completed in less time.

I categorized Monica as having partially strong knowledge about college. She comprehended the diverse range of college sizes and recognized the potential financial commitments associated with higher education. Moreover, she acknowledged that the college experience extended beyond academics:

> I think a big thing is learning about yourself. I think you go through a lot of changes and you find out a lot about yourself. A lot of people don't have the comfort to explore that now, because I feel like everyone can be close-minded. I want to have that fresh start that college would give. I think there's going to be a lot of things that I don't do now because

> of where I am, because maybe I'm with my parents. I feel like college also gives you a lot of independence. I think that flexibility to be able to pick your schedule, I think is huge.

Esmeralda was the only one with strong knowledge of what college would entail. She understood it was not just getting to college but being able to maintain the workload as was shared in the section earlier, Seeing College as a Possibility, by her statement that not everyone could go to college. Below is an excerpt from her response on other things she knew about college:

> You get to pick [your] classes. The difference between college and trade school is trade school's very short. My brother's going to trade school right now to become a mechanic. And it's nice, only a year and a half. It's not as academic as, it's more like, what are you going to do at your job. With college, it's like if you study business, for example, you have a very wide spectrum of what you can do. I want to study psychology. I can do many things with a psychology degree.

When asked about the disadvantages of college, she said she was aware of the financial burden that students could incur and that it takes time to finish a degree:

> It takes longer for you to make more money because there's some careers where you don't need a college degree. And right off the bat, you're making a decent amount. And then when you graduate from college some people are in debt. Some people have a lot of things that they have to pay off, or they're trying to buy a house or a car. So, there's a ton of things that you're kind of late on because you were so focused on school, and you're going to have to pay off all that debt.

Esmeralda observed that her four brothers had attended school without receiving financial aid, leading her to believe that she would need to work while attending school. She said, “My parents don’t have the money to cover it all [college tuition].”

Like Esmeralda, the rest of the students also worried about the cost of attending college. For example, James said, “But one thing I really do know about college is it can mess you up debt wise.” Some of the students had already started looking at different options to see what would be the most financially beneficial. When talking about the different school options, Monica said the following: “It is a state school, which means it’ll be good for tuition because it’s not really expensive compared to most schools.” Blanca was yet another example of expressing financial aid concern. She said:

> One of the bad things about college is let’s say you go in and you have this major and then 2 years in, you’re like, wait, I don’t like any of that. And it’s not like you can use those classes for something else. You can probably use a couple, but you were working towards a goal, so now you have to start over.

Finding 4: The Crucial Influence of Family on Students

In the interviews, I asked about family because I wanted to understand what role family played in Latino students’ perspectives of their high school experience and post-high school options. This finding is divided into two subfindings: family’s influence and immigrant optimism.

Subfinding 1: Family’s Influence

Family was very important for the students. Every student mentioned that their families placed a high value on education, as demonstrated by the support and encouragement they received to excel in their academic endeavors, especially during difficult times. This support had

a direct effect on the way the students perceived their high school experience. None of the students shared experiences of facing repercussions at home for their academic struggles. Instead, parents played the role of motivators, offering words of encouragement and conveying high aspirations for their children. Blanca shared:

> My mom works two jobs so she is constantly at work. If I didn't go to school, she wasn't hard on me. She'd just be like, "echale ganas" [put effort into it], you need to go to school. But she didn't discipline me on it.

Blanca appreciated her mother's support, but it was not enough to change the outcome for Blanca, which was having to enroll in the KEY program in order to graduate.

Nine of the 14 students cited family as their biggest motivation. Jose had a huge grin on his face and beamed with pride as he told me he was very close to finishing his courses at KEY and being able to graduate. He identified his mom as his motivation for graduating. Jose grinned as he shared how his mom planned a graduation party, and they had looked into getting him a suit. Monica also credited her family as the source of her motivation; she shared, "A big motivator is my family because obviously they want me to go to school." This support aided Monica's dream of attending a 4-year college after graduating. Five of the 14 students expressed a desire to set a good example for their family.

Vicky, who would be the first in her family to attend college, was driven by a profound motivation rooted not in her present family but in the aspirations of her future family. She said,

> It's more of building something better for me than what I had growing up. I think it's my future kids that I think about a lot. I want kids and I hope to be a really good mom and be able to give them everything that they want emotionally and financially. It's not something that I had a lot growing up, so something that I really wish I [can give].

Vicky aspired to become a PreK teacher and provide the same support to her students she had received from the Enlace counselors at West Juarez High School. This is a great testament to the importance of the relationships she had with Enlace counselors.

For 12 students, family played a crucial role, with their families expressing a firm commitment to provide financial support to the best of their ability if the students chose to pursue higher education. For example, after Blanca shared with her family her desire to go to college, her mother responded, “We have a lot of time to plan and to save up, but we’re just going to have to be smart about our spending so that the next 2 years you can have full dedication to school.” Having her mother’s support made it easier for Blanca to see going to Juarez Community College as an option. Talia was another example of having parents who were willing to help pay for some of the college expenses. She said, “My mom, she’s willing to pay for my college as long as I get help from the FAFSA.” Talia was grateful for the emotional and financial support her family granted her.

Another way to see the impact of family on students was through their college-going experiences or lack thereof. Six of the 14 students had siblings or parents who went to college. However, among these six individuals, only three had family members who graduated college. James was one of these three students. Despite aspiring to pursue a different career path, James drew valuable benefits from the collective experiences of his mother and sister, both nurses, and his father, a police officer. His family’s experiences made him aware of the necessity of an education for securing a prosperous future. He said, “I am more motivated. I have to get it done to live better.” He said this in response to a question about motivation for completing the KEY program and being able to graduate. Blanca was another example of having the advantage of siblings with college experience and providing her valuable guidance. In particular, Blanca

looked up to her sister, identifying her as a role model: “She’s a very dedicated person to her job. She is a social worker; she got her master’s degree too.” Blanca respected the way her sister gave back to the community.

Among the 14 students, a significant majority, or eight students, would be pioneers in their families, becoming the first generation to attend college. Sofia was one of these eight students; she stated her motivation was to be an example for her sister. Sofia hoped seeing her attend college would be a positive motivation for her sister. Sofia shared,

> I want to make my mom proud, make my family proud. I want to be able to give my sister everything she wants in life. Be able to have her look up to me, see that I’m doing good, and make sure she does good.

Sofia aimed to become a trailblazer by setting a precedent of attending college in her family. Similarly, Caro would be the first in her family to pursue higher education, lacking the guidance and experience of family members in navigating the college experience.

Subfinding 2: Immigrant Optimism

Caro was an example of the phenomenon Gándara (2017) called “immigrant optimism.” This describes how three of the students internalized their immigrant parents’ belief that America is the land of opportunity where individuals can achieve success and prosperity and can change their social status with hard work. They exhibited extraordinary motivation as they strove to realize their goals. Caro said the following of her mom: “She motivates me to doing more because she couldn’t. She came to the United States and she basically built herself up on her own without help from anyone.” Caro appreciated the sacrifices her mother made in moving to the United States to provide her with a better life. Talia was another example of immigrant optimism. She respected the fact that her mom had not completed her education in the United

States and wanted her children to do well in school. Her mother was a big support for her when Talia was met with challenges. Talia cited her mother as her motivation:

> Most of the time it was my mom. She's always tried her part for us, our education and make it big. So, she's always motivating us to do stuff. So, she's what kept me motivated to at least graduate high school.

Talia appreciated the words of encouragement her mother offered her.

Finding 5: Latino Cultural Comfort Zones

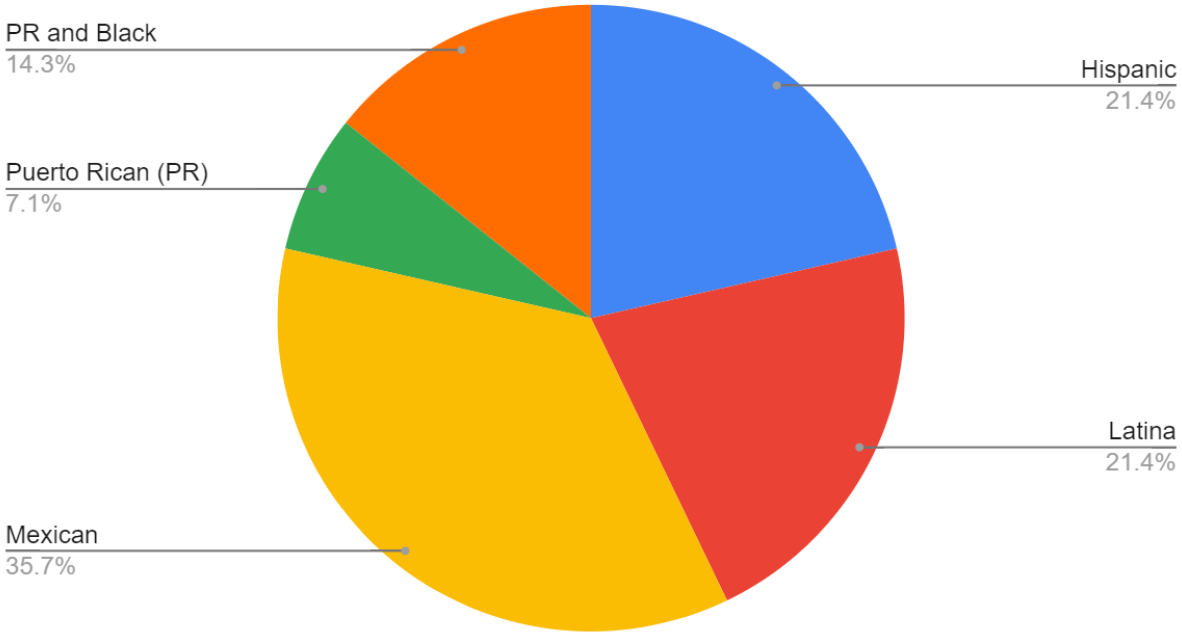
The third and fourth sections of the student interviews explored participants' ethnic and linguistic identities and family backgrounds. Five of the 14 students expressed a desire to break the negative stereotypes about Latinos. Vicky said, "It's me being proud of where I'm from, regardless of all the bad stigma around it." While embracing their cultural pride, these five students acknowledged the presence of negative stereotypes tied to being Latino. They wished to help break down these negative stereotypes and shared their aspiration to do so by pursuing professional well-paying careers. They aspired to be uplifting role models for other Latinos post-high school. They wanted those who held the negative stereotypes to see them and see that Latinos could also be part of the professional realm. The students' awareness of negative stereotypes aligns with Quintana et al.'s (2010) findings, which revealed Mexican American high school students understood the existence of negative stereotypes due to the actions of some individuals who chose to break the law. Despite not having engaged in such activities themselves, they were aware that some people would still associate them with those negative stereotypes.

A visual representation of the distribution of all the cultural identities chosen by the students is presented in Figure 8. The majority of the students identified by their Mexican

nationality. The next highest categories were students identifying as either Hispanic or Latina. Following these, two students identified as Puerto Rican and Black and one student identified as Puerto Rican.

Figure 8

Cultural Identity



Note. *N* = 14.

The majority of the students spoke Spanish, with only two exceptions. Of the two, one had limited proficiency in Spanish and the other did not know any Spanish. Both students who did not speak Spanish were regretful about not being able to do so. James said, “No, I wish I did. I really would love to.” Spanish was not spoken at home so he did not have an opportunity to learn it. Similarly, Brian said, “I speak Spanish a little bit, but it’s not fluent. I have cousins that speak it but I don’t.” He felt bad he had younger cousins who spoke Spanish but he could not.

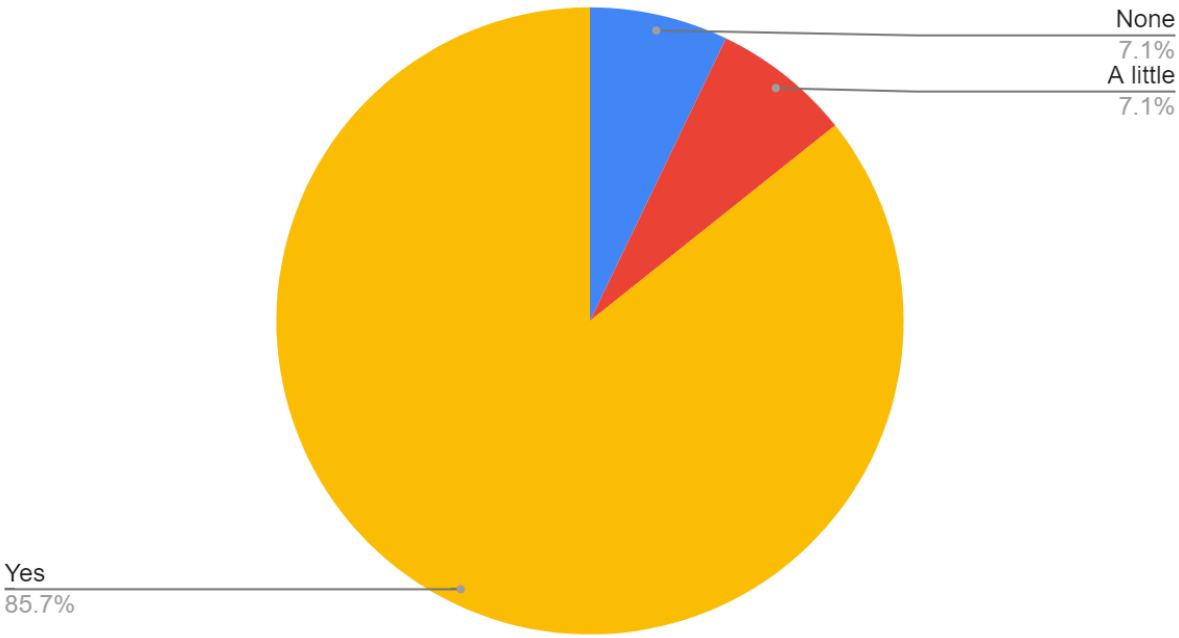
The remaining 12 students spoke Spanish at different proficiency levels. One thing that was consistent was their pride and connection in being able to do so. The insights gained aided in

providing a comprehensive response to the research question: What are Latino students' perspectives of their high school experiences and their post-graduation options? The predominantly Latino environment of their school contributed to their sense of comfort and belonging.

Although the majority could speak Spanish, most said they spoke mainly Spanglish, which is a combination of English and Spanish. For example, half the sentence will be in English and half in Spanish, or the entire sentence might be in English with just one or two Spanish words or vice versa. Sofia illustrated that she used Spanglish. She said, "Outside of that, I talk both. I alternate a lot. It's either I'll start speaking in English and then mid-sentence already talking Spanish." Figure 9 illustrates the breakdown of students' responses regarding their Spanish proficiency. The vast majority spoke Spanish at 85.7% and the remaining 14.2% were divided evenly into none and a little.

Figure 9

Spanish Spoken by Students



Note. $N = 14$.

When asked what was important about their identity, language was mentioned by nearly all of the students. The data gathered served as a valuable resource in answering the research question: What are the factors that play a role in their plans post-high school?

The Spanish language was such an important part of the students' lives that it helped understand their perspectives on their high school experience. However, they did not speak about the use of Spanish in careers or even in academics. It was seen as a way to be connected. The high school does have Spanish classes designed for heritage speakers; however, it seems none of the students were making the connection of Spanish with academics. Blanca, for example, said, "Well, one of the big ones is our language, we all speak Spanish." She felt the language tied the students together. Esmeralda had similar feelings and felt the Spanish language connected students to each other; she said, "And I feel like here, everybody can talk Spanish and they're not embarrassed and they just can talk about things more openly." The Spanish language facilitated a strong sense of cultural pride. Vicky described the comforting feeling she had being in a rich Spanish-speaking school. She shared the following:

> I think school wise, because everybody speaks Spanish. It feels nice that you can still speak the way that you would speak at home and you can still bring it here and still speak to your friends and have them know what you're talking about. Or even sometimes the teacher will speak to you in Spanish and it feels comfortable and it feels nice.

For Vicky, school offered a sense of comfort and stability that her home life did not offer.

Blanca also conveyed the connection students felt with Spanish-speaking teachers, sharing that "students favor the teachers that speak Spanish." She stated students often sought out the Spanish-speaking teachers to just hang out with them. Talia was an example of this, as

she shared she felt a stronger and almost immediate connection to Latino teachers. Furthermore, she identified her math teacher as her school role model:

> I would say my math teacher. He's also Hispanic, he's from Mexico. He tries his best to get people to understand what he's teaching and that it's okay to mess up sometimes. Just to correct your mistakes. He tries to teach you how to fix it and to not be ashamed that you did bad the first time. I look up to him.

This teacher had the language and cultural connection with students but was also able to connect with them and instill life-long ideals like it is okay to make mistakes. When asked if teachers included culture in their classes, four of the 14 students expressed that they did and the students often saw this as a positive. Talia said, "I appreciate them because they try to understand the Hispanic culture and they don't try to push it aside. They try to understand it. It's appreciated." Talia valued the way many of the teachers showed they valued the Latino culture. Esmeralda shared an example of one of her teachers connecting with students, saying, "I know my freshman year teacher kind of did that. We had this poetry unit, and we used a book from this Latino author. He came to the school and talked to us." This experience was memorable and positive for Esmeralda.

Monica also discussed how language connected her to not just to her classmates and teachers but also to her extended family. She shared the following:

> My cousins, some of them that are younger than me, they don't know [Spanish]. My grandma speaks to us in complete Spanish. So, when they couldn't speak to her, I [thought] oh my God, imagine not being able to talk to her or hold a conversation because she doesn't know English and you don't know Spanish.

Seeing others not be able to communicate with loved ones increased Monica's appreciation for speaking Spanish. Vicky also highlighted the value of speaking Spanish. She was one of many students who shared examples of using Spanish to help others outside the classroom, she expressed:

> At work it feels nice when I do have an older couple come in and they don't speak English very well or they don't speak English at all. And there's been times where I wasn't at the front and there would be somebody else that isn't bilingual and they'll call me over and be like, "Can you help?"

Monica felt proud and purposeful in being able to meet the needs of others by bridging the language barrier.

In the Findings section, I discussed the results from the student interviews. Five major findings emerged: extracurricular activities and quarantine, program differences, the role of college in students' future, crucial influence of family on students, and Latino cultural comfort zones. These findings help address the first research question related to Latino students' perspectives of their high school experience and post-high school options. They also answered the second research question exploring the role of high school programming.

Interpretation

In this section, I analyze the significance of the findings, make connections to pertinent existing literature, and showcase their alignment with the original research questions. This section is divided into the following sections: understanding the implications of extracurricular activities, significance of program differences and student perception, significance of the role of college in students' futures, significance of the role of family, and significance of Latino culture.

Understanding the Implications of Extracurricular Activities

As noted by Gándara (2017), Latinos tend to engage less in extracurricular activities, affecting their ability to establish meaningful connections with peers. Unfortunately, this trend persisted in my findings, as only three of the 14 students actively participated in sports, clubs, or activities. Among them, Monica and Vero, both intending to continue their involvement in extracurricular activities in college, successfully secured admission to a 4-year institution. Vero even earned a scholarship for her outstanding participation in flag football and girls wrestling. Notably, both Monica and Vero highlighted the indispensable role of Enlace and their extracurricular pursuits in fostering success beyond academics. A significant aspect was their groundbreaking achievement as the first in their families to embark on a college journey, with their extracurricular involvement providing valuable social capital. Of the 14 students interviewed, only one additional student, Caro, who was enrolled in the general program, had received acceptance into a 4-year college.

Monica and Vero's active participation in high school extracurriculars, coupled with their commitment to ongoing involvement in college, aligns with the insights of Spencer and Wilson (2023). These researchers emphasized the pivotal role of extracurricular activities in enhancing students' resilience in the face of college challenges. Importantly, the experiences of Monica and Vero resonate with earlier research by Garrett et al. (2010), underlining the significant social capital benefits derived from school engagement in extracurricular activities. A nuanced difference in Garrett et al.'s study is that some students were also active in community-based extracurricular activities.

The absence of participation in extracurricular activities represents a missed opportunity for students to establish meaningful connections within their school and enhance their appeal to

colleges. The far-reaching implications of engagement in activities and sports outside the classroom indicate school district leaders should explore alternative avenues to involve students. A compelling example is Caro, who, despite not formally participating in extracurriculars, found a sense of belonging and future aspirations through her active involvement in the CNA program, which included activities beyond the typical school day. This finding underscores the need for school district leaders to encourage more students to participate in extracurriculars.

Significance of Program Differences and Student Perception

The effects of school programming were notably impactful. The targeted and frequent interactions between program counselors and students proved beneficial for both Enlace and KEY participants. These programs played a pivotal role by providing students with a dedicated space to access additional support, covering aspects such as goal setting, future preparedness, emotional management, and creating a secure haven. As Gándara (2017) aptly stated, “It is axiomatic that students must feel a sense of belonging in school if they are to be truly engaged and motivated to excel. Relationships are crucial” (p. 10). The close connections built between students and Enlace and KEY counselors created an environment in which students felt at ease seeking the support they needed. Without the assistance of Enlace, these students might have faced the challenge of resolving issues independently, akin to students not in Enlace who opted not to seek guidance from school counselors. Enlace and KEY students emphasized the positive impact of the messages and support they received, citing examples such as Blanca regaining confidence and Vicky enhancing her emotional control and understanding. Therefore, it is important that school districts have proactive measures to ensure students are receiving the support they need. It is crucial that students feel comfortable seeking help and see it as a strength, not a weakness, to avoid feeling like they have to figure things out on their own.

Furthermore, it helps answer the research question regarding the factors that play a role in these students' plans post-high school. In this case, the answer would be that programming is a significant factor for students.

Positive relationships with teachers were instrumental for many students' overall high school experience. Martinez and Deil-Amen's (2015) findings included the importance of the quality of teacher interactions and tone of those relationships. Most of the students in my study shared the impact of having teachers who cared about them, found time to help, and sometimes just listened to them. Similarly, Garrett et al. (2010) found one of the three success factors students identified that influenced their high academic achievement was having caring and sincere teachers and other school staff. There is no question just how important having healthy and positive teacher–student interactions and relationships are to a student's academic success.

Interestingly, none of the KEY students stated they had positive teacher relationships. Notably, it was the only program in which this was the case. This absence of positive interactions may have contributed to the challenges these students faced academically. Spencer and Wilson (2023) found the negative experiences of students in their study resulted from teachers who were degrading, judgmental, or distant. Some of those behaviors were also present in the student interviews in my study. This manifested in teachers not being flexible with deadlines and not showing empathy when students were juggling their studies and work. One specific example was Blanca's avoidance of certain teachers due to being degraded in front of her peers for being late to class. The implications point to the significance of positive teacher relationships in students' academic experiences. Negative interactions with teachers can contribute to challenges and affect students' overall well-being and success in their studies. This is all part of understanding students' high school experiences because teachers spend so much time with students.

Significance of the Role of College in Students' Futures

Despite facing academic challenges in high school, a positive trend emerged as all students expressed a belief in the feasibility of attending college after graduation. This inclination may be attributed to the influence of high school programming that actively encouraged postsecondary education. Aligning with the findings of Sirin et al. (2004), which underscored that students' educational aspirations were shaped by an awareness of the limitations of a high school diploma, my study further validates this perspective. Many students in my research identified enhanced opportunities as a driving motivation for pursuing college. For instance, Talia articulated her belief that obtaining at least a 2-year college degree would open up more prospects compared to holding just a high school diploma. She also acknowledged that a bachelor's degree would provide even greater opportunities. These voices echo prior research (Sirin et al., 2004) that showed most students who see themselves as college-bound also aspire to advance their education and attain a professional degree. Importantly, all students in my study envisioned a future in which they secured a well-paying job.

The prevailing aspiration among the students in my study was to attend a community college, driven by the belief that it would give them more time to choose their career paths. Despite perceiving it as a lower financial risk, it is crucial to point out that research shows community college may not always be the optimal choice. Students need to be aware that attending a community college with the hope of transferring to a 4-year institution has significant implications. As highlighted by Krogstad (2016), nearly half of Latinos who attend a postsecondary institution go to 2-year colleges. It is important to note that the likelihood of their transferring to a 4-year institution is much lower than that of students from most other racial/ethnic groups.

It is noteworthy that for many Latino students, funding their education often involves sacrificing basic necessities for other family members (Gándara, 2017). Similarly, in my study, students voiced concerns about how they would pay for school, even when family members were willing to provide financial assistance. However, the knowledge that their families would support them did bring a sense of relief, reinforcing the idea that they were not alone in pursuing their postsecondary options.

By incorporating this knowledge, we are better equipped to address the research question regarding high school students' perceptions of both their high school experience as well as what options they perceive post-high school. It is notable that most students need more understanding of college. The majority of the students interviewed had a limited understanding of what college entailed; this indicates the importance of providing more explicit teaching about the role of college, what it is like, and the application process. Although the College and Career Readiness department at Juarez High School District hosted several sessions throughout the year on college topics for students and families, they were all optional. Kiyama (2011) stressed the importance of collaborating with families in the educational process, which is fundamental to their children's success. Though having the sessions available is a good effort on the part of the district, leaders need to find ways to maximize family involvement. None of the students interviewed expressed attending the optional college and career readiness sessions on attending college or about different careers. Furthermore, only a few said they went to the College and Career Readiness department in general.

Family is another way students can get insights into different careers, but none of the students in my study desired to follow in their family's professional footsteps, opting instead to be pioneers as the first in their families to pursue their chosen careers. Though this ambition is

commendable, it is essential to acknowledge the potential challenges they may encounter. For instance, James shared that his sister followed in her mother's career path and became a nurse. His mother's guidance and insights were undoubtedly valuable in guiding his sister's career path.

Among the various programs, KEY stood out for providing the most exposure to college. With classes for credit recovery located on Juarez Community College's campus, students in the KEY program had a direct link to the next step in achieving their goals. This unique arrangement allowed them to visualize college life by interacting with students who looked like them, making the prospect of attending college seem more feasible. Additionally, being on campus facilitated hands-on assistance from their KEY counselors in navigating class registrations at Juarez Community College. During the interviews, I noted the prevalence of advertisements showcasing the careers and coursework available at Juarez Community College for degree or certificate programs. The KEY program, viewed by its participants as a second chance, instilled a sense of determination not to squander the opportunity. Importantly, students felt reassured knowing they could continue seeking guidance from KEY counselors even after graduating high school, underscoring the significance of fostering healthy and positive connections between school staff and students.

Significance of the Role of Family

Nine of the 14 students recognized family as a central motivator, inspiring them to successfully complete high school and pursue higher education. Highlighting the need for a collaborative approach, Sapp et al. (2015) urged high school staff to actively partner with parents in guiding students toward college. It is essential that high school leaders and educators understand families' experiences with colleges. Latino students are often hesitant to leave the supportive community they know well, especially when faced with the reality of a college

campus where the Latino student population is considerably smaller than their accustomed surroundings.

Previous research (Garrett et al., 2010; Spencer & Wilson, 2023) showed families are among the biggest influences on where and if students attend college. This resonates with my research findings, as a significant number of students in my study were poised to become the first in their families to graduate high school and pursue higher education. Students who are the first in their families to accomplish these milestones may lack guidance at home if their parents did not complete their education or attended college outside of the United States. Expanding on the qualitative evidence introduced by Kiyama (2011), my study shares common ground, revealing that, similar to Kiyama's observations, Mexican-American families frequently express a lack of confidence in navigating the educational realm and exhibit limited familiarity with the college application process.

In my study, every student emphasized the significance of their family's commitment to education, a sentiment consistent with Bueno et al.'s (2022) research highlighting the essential role of families in supporting students' academic well-being through socio-emotional means. Similarly, the students in my study stressed the vital nature of emotional support, with parents actively contributing by providing words of encouragement and expressing pride. Engaging in conversations about academic experiences, even in cases where specific steps for improvement were not offered, highlighted the enduring impact of familial encouragement.

Significance of Latino Culture

Despite a student body that is 90.9% Latino, Juarez High School District's staff composition starkly contrasts, with only 19.3% being Latino and a predominant 76.7% being White, as highlighted in Chapter 1. This incongruity underscores the vital need, emphasized by

Gándara (2017) and Martinez and Deil-Amen (2015), for educators who can harness the strengths inherent in these students and embrace their cultural practices. Gándara (2017) suggested non-Latino teachers can contribute to students' cultural pride by celebrating students' bilingual skills and fostering pride in their linguistic abilities. It would be valuable to go beyond celebrating bilingualism and legitimize students' language practices as appropriate for learning and working inside and outside school.

A notable finding in my study was the significant comfort students exhibited with the Latino culture. This finding is crucial as it aligns with the perspective that "there is a dialectical connection between the individual and his or her social and cultural surroundings" (Sirin et al., 2004, p. 448), as acknowledged in the fields of education and psychology. Sirin et al. (2004) explored racial and ethnic consciousness among minority urban high school students, revealing all participants expressed pride in their ethnic/racial heritage.

In parallel, my findings resonated with theirs, as all 14 interviewed students exhibited pride in their Latino identity, especially in their ability to speak Spanish. These findings echo Garrett et al.'s (2010) study, which identified a strong cultural identity as a contributing factor to high academic achievement. Cota and Knight (1991) further suggested a causal link between parents' ethnic backgrounds and their role in teaching about Mexican culture. Specifically, their research revealed that when parents actively engage in teaching their children about Mexican culture, it can significantly influence the children's cooperative and competitive preferences. Consequently, school leaders can leverage this cultivated cultural pride and preference for cooperative groupings to enhance students' high school experiences and promote overall academic success.

Furthermore, the students in my study believed the use of Spanish contributed to fostering an inclusive and welcoming environment within the school. This sentiment aligns with the findings of previous research (Garrett et al., 2010; Sirin et al., 2004), where students expressed a heightened comfort level with peers who shared similar backgrounds and experiences. The sense of comfort extended to Latino teachers, who, like the students, spoke Spanish. Many students actively sought out these teachers.

Additionally, the participants in my study expressed a desire to distinguish themselves from negative stereotypes, echoing the findings of Sirin et al. (2004), where students also wanted to be a positive example of their ethnic group. Furthermore, the students in my study not only sought to distance themselves from these stereotypes but also expressed a proactive desire to actively dismantle negative Latino stereotypes by achieving success and assisting others in their families to attain similar success.

Conclusion

In conclusion, through qualitative analysis of 14 interviews with students in a predominantly Latino-serving high school district, I sought to uncover their perspectives on their high school experiences and post-high school options. Despite the diverse array of programs in which the students were involved, clear commonalities emerged.

The interviews yielded five key findings: extracurricular activities and quarantine, distinctions in program experiences, the importance of college in future plans, the influence of family dynamics, and the impact of Latino culture. Most of these findings resonate with the existing literature on Latino students, underscoring the noticeable advantages of participating in extracurriculars and the effective structures of the Enlace and KEY programs. These structures not only contribute to a strengthened support system but also equip students with tangible tools

for post-high school success. The relationships students build with counselors emerged as a significant factor in fostering a sense of support and aiding in their successful navigation through challenges.

The outcomes revealed a significant knowledge gap among the students, extending from the essentiality of early admissions to an awareness of challenges beyond financial considerations. Strikingly, even students who were not embarking on a first-generation college experience demonstrated a lack of in-depth understanding regarding the advantages of college and the diverse pathways open to them. This knowledge deficit appears to be a driving factor in the inclination of many students toward choosing the local community college—an option that feels familiar and less formidable as a post-high school step.

Furthermore, the high school's predominantly Latino composition played a pivotal role in fostering a sense of comfort among students who shared a cultural understanding. The use of Spanish, a prevalent language among students, served as a conduit for maintaining cultural ties. This consideration becomes particularly relevant when considering the limited availability of 4-year colleges that replicate the demographic familiarity experienced in high school.

The results highlighted the paramount importance of family in shaping students' experiences. Families emerged as the cornerstone of support, acting as steadfast cheerleaders and encouraging the students to overcome obstacles. A significant number of students expressed a strong motivation to serve as positive influences for younger family members and to bring pride to their parents. In the subsequent chapter, I go into the present circumstances of Latino students and explore avenues to enrich their educational experiences. My discussion centers on a vision for future actions, guided by the four arenas of change outlined by Wagner et al. (2006).

CHAPTER FIVE

Change Plan

Wagner et al. (2006) outlined one systematic approach with four components to bring about change in school districts. The four arenas are often referred to as the four competencies or the 4C's: context, culture, conditions, and competencies. These arenas of change are interconnected, as one cannot be changed without affecting the other three components. Competencies reflect the current state of the school district. Conditions are about exploring how well district leaders create and maintain different elements, such as district- and building-level support. Culture looks at how we characterize the school district. Last, context looks at how clearly district leaders address the core competencies students will need in life.

I used the 4C's to analyze the state of Latino students' educational experience in Juarez High School District. The chapter is divided into four sections pertaining to each of Wagner et al.'s (2006) competencies (see Appendix B). Each section consists of two parts: the "As-Is" in which I outline the current state of the competency under discussion, and the "To-Be," in which I construct a narrative related to each competency that envisions the transformative changes necessary to propel Juarez High School District toward its optimal state. The transformative changes are designed to enhance student engagement, academic achievement, and overall well-being within the district.

Context

Context, as defined by Wagner et al. (2006), is the social, historical, and economic context in which all of these efforts take place. These include the things students need to be successful as providers and learners, and the concerns of the families the district serves.

As-Is: Context

Of the 7,282 students in the district, a significant majority, 90.9%, are Latino. Within Juarez High School District, the ROE implemented two academic support initiatives: Enlace and KEY. Enlace students benefitted from the dual guidance of an Enlace counselor and a school counselor, whereas KEY students received exclusive counseling from the KEY counselor primarily related to managing work and academics. The KEY program, identified as a hybrid model due to the coursework done in person and online, specifically accommodates students who are navigating the delicate balance between employment and education.

My investigation extended to the CTE program, known for its extensive ties to trade schools and internships, particularly with esteemed union groups like the journeymen electricians. This collaboration ensures students receive valuable on-the-job training, setting a pathway for them to aspire to the coveted position of master electrician. Interestingly, feedback from the CTE students highlighted a general lack of enthusiasm for going into the fields of the classes they took (e.g., culinary arts, graphic arts, carpentry). Students pointed out that though they may have enjoyed the classes, they did not have enough interest to want to go into those respective fields. However, the experience was valuable in helping them eliminate potential career paths and in enhancing their practical skills for everyday life.

The final program included in this study was the general education program, encompassing students outside of Enlace, KEY, or CTE involvement. This group opted for core classes and electives from varied departments, revealing a diverse educational landscape. Among these options is the CNA program, in which Caro, one of the interviewees, actively participated. The CNA courses not only provide valuable skills but also exemplify the dual credit opportunities forged through the successful collaboration between the high school district

and the local community college. This collaboration is fostered, in part, by the College and Career Readiness Center, which actively collaborates with the local community college to create enriching opportunities for students.

To-Be: Context

Wagner et al. (2006) stated context is about knowing more about the worlds from which students come and those for which they must be prepared. Though the district has good support systems through Enlace and KEY, these are provided through the ROE. It would benefit all students if some of the components of the programs were to be incorporated into the other parts of the school system.

Adding support and guidance for all students such as that provided in the Enlace and Key programs would be significant, especially for those students who do not have anyone at home who can guide them in navigating school or in understanding the implications of different post-high school options. In having these supports, students would be able to get support related to their well-being as well as their academics. One specific executive function skill that Enlace and KEY are very intentional about is student goal setting. Each of the six students enrolled in Enlace and KEY highlighted the importance of breaking down their future goals into manageable steps. They found this approach brought clarity and made their goals feel attainable.

This increased support would help with executive function skills such as how to approach teachers when asking for help or requesting extensions. Developing self-advocacy skills is imperative for students' ability to navigate challenges in the college setting and in the workplace. Building these types of skills transcends beyond their high school years. The district would have a scope and sequence on these executive function skills that has alignment across the different grade levels.

To address students' desire to have more opportunities to take CTE classes, the district should expand the CTE program in a different capacity. By offering summer classes for students as young as freshman year, students can begin to think about what interests them and how that connects to potential careers after high school. District leaders should also explore hosting career themed camps for current students and eighth graders. Their participation in these camps could spark their interest in a career they may have otherwise not known much about.

Culture

Culture, as defined by Wagner et al. (2006), is the "shared values, beliefs, assumptions, expectations, and behaviors related to students and learning, teachers and teaching, instructional leadership and the quality of relationships within and beyond the school year" (p. 102). The culture of an organization is the common beliefs and shared lines of communication that genuinely shape the fabric of the organization. In simple terms, it is the action and not just the talk.

As-Is: Culture

District leaders are dedicated to embracing and celebrating the richness of Latino cultures, along with other diverse cultures. This commitment is vividly displayed across all three campuses through various means. Notably, students' artwork depicting Latino cultures adorns the campuses, complemented by murals and quotes from esteemed Latino artists. Additionally, the hallways prominently reflect a culture of college-going by having college banners and posters.

District leaders place significant emphasis on family and community engagement, a core aspect detailed on their website and that is intertwined with their commitment to intercultural values. Demonstrating a welcoming environment, major signage throughout the district is

available in both English and Spanish. Furthering their commitment to inclusivity, the Juarez High School District extends communication efforts by translating all official correspondence into students' primary home languages—English, Spanish, and Polish.

In their dedication to relevance and inclusivity, district leaders emphasize programming that resonates with the Latino culture, a sentiment echoed by many of the students interviewed. Highlighted examples include the "Día del Niño" fest (Day of the Child), a well-known Mexican tradition centered around bringing families together to celebrate children. This programming extends to feature traditional food, dance, and games, ensuring an immersive and enjoyable experience for families.

All of Juarez High School District's campuses host a program called "Coffee with the Principal," organized with the assistance of Family Liaisons. Before the quarantine, these sessions were well-attended, drawing around 30 parents each month. However, attendance decreased significantly to about five to 10 parents post-quarantine. This initiative served as a crucial avenue for fostering communication between families and the administration. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, parents could actively engage through campus tours, gaining insights into their children's daily experiences and fostering discussions about this shared journey.

To-Be: Culture

Wagner et al. (2006) referred to culture as the invisible but powerful meanings and mindsets that individuals and the collective hold throughout the system. Though district leaders actively promote and value Latino culture, there is an opportunity for enhanced integration into the curriculum. District leaders should explicitly outline culturally responsive practices within course descriptions rather than relying on individual teachers to infuse cultural responsiveness. Doing so will bring alignment across the grade levels and contents. Having culturally responsive

practices such as incorporating texts by Latino authors in English language arts classes and featuring creations by Latino artists in art classes will help build a sense of pride among Latino students as well as enrich the experience for non-Latino students or introducing a Modern Latin American history course in addition to the Latin history course. The Modern class would cover events from early 16th century to the present day. This would help to foster pride and increase students' knowledge. Additionally, it would be good to have a dedicated course exploring the historical contributions of Latinos in the United States to help support the social and emotional well-being of students by recognizing and validating their cultural identities.

Although providing a welcoming environment for families is a priority for the district, leaders can be more effective by having a target audience in mind. Lindsey et al. (2010) emphasized the importance of school district leaders understanding how the different cultural groups in their community define family and the role family plays in serving as the primary system of support for students. Instead of issuing a broad invitation, district leaders can enhance their approach by inviting parents from specific grade levels for discussions tailored to their needs. Though the district provides diverse family services, including parenting workshops and programming like Coffee with the Principal, a more impactful approach would be to engage in one-on-one meetings or small group sessions. This personalized format would create a less intimidating setting, enabling tailored discussions that directly address the specific needs of each family. Tailoring services would demonstrate an understanding of the unique circumstances and challenges faced by each family. This personalized approach can lead to increased engagement and trust between service providers and families.

Conditions

Conditions, as defined by Wagner et al. (2006), are "the external architecture surrounding student learning, the tangible arrangements of time, space, and resources" (p. 101). My research question inquiring about Latino students' perspectives on their high school experiences and their post-high school options was directly shaped by the conditions of the schools.

As-Is: Conditions

A big focus of the district is family engagement. In addition to events to promote family engagement, Juarez High School District has Family Liaison positions at each campus. The Family Liaisons work with the families by facilitating workshops on different topics addressing the community's needs. An example of a need for support is technology support. Parents have to log into the student database to check grades and attendance, which were once on paper but are now exclusively online. The Family Liaisons teach the families about technology and help them navigate the online components of the high school system.

The district, as outlined on its website, is dedicated to ensuring comprehensive readiness for all students post-high school graduation. This commitment is substantiated by the expansion of the College and Career Readiness department, now with two counselors. Additionally, a dedicated center serves as a valuable resource where students can seek assistance in matters related to colleges and internships.

The College and Career Readiness counselors organize informative workshops for families several times a year. Additionally, they initiate field trips to colleges for seniors, although this effort is still in its early stages. When discussing the challenges faced, one counselor revealed many seniors approach him in a state of panic at the end of the year, uncertain about their post-high school plans. In response, he often guides them toward the local

community college, Juarez Community College, recognizing the current limitations in resources at the high school.

District leaders have prioritized the deliberate inclusion of a diverse workforce. Although comprising a smaller percentage compared to 77% White teachers, Latino teachers make up a noteworthy 19%, the second-highest category followed by 2% Asian and 1% Black. Although 19% is much lower than White teachers, the percentage of Latino teachers at Juarez High School District is significantly higher that of the nearest high school district with a teacher demographic composition of 94% White and only 3% Latino.

Emphasizing the district's dedication to sports, its website highlights substantial financial investments in cutting-edge facilities. Currently, the district provides a diverse sports portfolio, offering nine options for both male and female students, along with four co-ed sports. Complementing this, the district actively organizes regular sports events, fostering an environment for students to showcase their talents and contributing to a dynamic sports culture within the school community. Moreover, students have the opportunity to engage in 65 different clubs, with 27% of the student population participating.

Integral to the conditions of the district are the dual language class offerings, spanning diverse subjects like biology, math, and Latino American history. Complementing this, the district broadens language education with modern language classes in French, Spanish, and Chinese. Additionally, students have the opportunity to delve into a comprehensive year-long course specifically focused on Latin American history.

To-Be: Conditions

Ortiz-Licon and Bristol (2022) pointed out that though 27% of public-school students in the United States are Latino, only 9% of teachers are Latino. This is an area of focus not just for

Juarez High School District but for the country as a whole. Furthermore, Ortiz-Licon and Bristol highlighted the need for more research on the importance of educator diversity and the impact of representation on the academic outcomes, school culture, and the opportunities afforded to Latino students. Juarez High School District is not alone in having such a lack of Latino teachers, and they are well above the national average of 9%. However, there is always room for improvement. Juarez High School District can invest in Grow Your Own Teacher programs to increase the number of Latino teachers. Grow Your Own Teacher programs are partnerships between school districts and colleges designed to recruit and prepare current employees, students, and community members to become teachers in local schools. Another component of Grow Your Own Teacher programs is working with their own students to incentivize and support them to go into teaching. Tapping students to go into teaching and come back to Juarez High School District can also strengthen the partnership with Juarez Community College. Leaders can create a program that can accelerate this for students by helping them begin to gain credit while in high school. Having these programs would foster a sense of community among participants who share common goals or interests. These programs would especially empower the current high school students to take control of their own growth and development, which will foster a sense of autonomy and self-efficacy.

In addition, district leaders would begin to track what students do after high school, whether a 4-year college, 2-year college, trade school, entrepreneurship, or entering the workforce. Tracking these numbers would allow leaders of the school district to see a breakdown of what pathways students take post-graduation. This could also be a data point when assessing their current programming.

Programming around education about trade schools would foster a sense of pride about going into a trade that would require less school but would have good pay and benefits. Therefore, it would be beneficial to increase the role of family liaisons in programming. They could partner with other departments to increase the targeted programming for families and students.

Juarez High School District has initiated investments in the College and Career Readiness department, fostering a valuable partnership with the local community college. Though this collaboration has facilitated dual credit courses, there is potential for further expansion. To maximize the impact, it is essential to enhance program visibility through improved advertising and informing parents about the benefits such as the College and Career Readiness Center to increase the programming for families on education about college and trade schools.

Although the current College and Career Readiness department is a positive start, a more impactful strategy would involve expanding services. Currently, optional workshops limit student reach; however, embedding these sessions into the school day, especially during assemblies, presents an ideal solution. Additionally, the district can amplify its collaboration with Juarez Community College by incorporating expanded presentations and joint educational programming for parents on essential topics such as the decision to attend college, financing options, and the broader benefits of higher education. The students would benefit from exposure to other colleges outside of the local community college. The College and Career Readiness department should make it a goal to make sure each student visits a variety of colleges and trade schools. They could visit a public college, private college, and a small and large campus. Additionally, they should build a network of Latino alumni who have gone on to colleges or trade schools. These alumni could come back and present to the students.

Last, though the district has 27% student participation in extracurricular activities, leaders should be intentional to improve this percentage. Gándara (2017) highlighted that Latinos tend to engage less in extracurricular activities. This has many negative effects, such as less meaningful connections to peers. This could, in turn, affect Latino students' sense of connection to the school in general. The 12 students who were not participating cited work schedule conflicts, no clubs of interest, not knowing how to join, and a lack of transportation among some of the reasons. Once district leaders know what is hindering participation, they can be intentional about addressing those issues.

Competencies

Competencies, as defined by Wagner et al. (2006), are "the repertoire of skills and knowledge that influences student learning. Competencies are most effectively built when professional development is focused, job-embedded, continuous, constructed, and collaborative" (p. 99). In a school setting, there is always professional development offered. How the professional development works varies from district to district. Sometimes the professional development is tied to districts' strategic plans, and other times it is in response to what is going and what the needs are.

As-Is: Competencies

The first Wednesday of every month at Juarez High School District is a half day so teachers can participate in professional development. Some of these days are driven by building principals and some are led by the district office. Despite the valuable learning opportunities, it is important to recognize that, with 76% of the staff being White, there is currently a need for more extensive culturally responsive teaching training.

The district goes beyond standard professional development by offering on-the-job opportunities that extend beyond the typical Wednesday half days. Institute days, bringing the entire district together, provide collaborative spaces for shared learning. Additionally, the district has committed to enhancing teaching practices by appointing four instructional coaches per campus, with a specific focus on providing support for bilingual instructional practices.

To-Be: Competencies

Wagner et al. (2006) discussed competencies in the organization as being most effective when the professional development is focused versus random. Also essential to the effectiveness of the professional development is the job-embedded and continuous element. Last, the professional development must be constructed and collaborative.

Leaders of Juarez High School District should continue to actively increase the number of Latino and other minority teachers; however, they should also focus on providing adequate training to staff. Specifically, there needs to be training on culturally responsive teaching and self-awareness of the culture of the students and the community. Lindsey et al. (2010) encouraged school district leaders to increase self-awareness in cross-cultural settings and avoid phrases that make negative comments about what families should already know. Furthermore, Lindsey et al. pointed out having culturally proficient leaders will be beneficial when interacting with families. Culturally responsive teaching focuses on equipping educators with the knowledge, skills, and awareness they need to effectively engage with and meet the needs of students from diverse cultural backgrounds, including Latino students. It aims to create an inclusive and supportive learning environment that values and respects the cultural diversity of students in the classroom (Samuels, 2018).

Administrators should assess the widespread implementation of culturally responsive strategies among teachers. Training is recommended for teachers, focusing on impactful techniques such as accountable talk, effective conversation modeling, fishbowl exercises, and the use of talking chips. These methods, placing teachers in a facilitator role, empower students to lead the learning process. This approach not only benefits students by developing skills beyond high school, it also allows teachers to gain valuable insights into the diverse social, political, and economic contexts of their student populations (Samuels, 2018).

Building on the concept that teachers benefit from a deeper understanding of their students, it is essential to go beyond basic demographic sharing. District leaders should annually provide staff with comprehensive information about the student body, including the percentage of low-income students and prospective first-generation college attendees. However, to truly enhance empathy and awareness, district leaders should not only present these demographics but also delve into the implications for students. For instance, elucidating the challenges faced by students who lack guidance in navigating pathways to 4-year, 2-year, or trade schools is crucial. Teachers stand to gain a more profound understanding when specific hurdles are articulated, shedding light on aspects they may inadvertently take for granted.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored Juarez High School District through the lens of the four arenas of change or the 4C's. The 4C's are critical aspects of any district. Juarez High School District's commitment to student preparation is evident, but the current state of the 4C's indicates there is room for the district to improve. For example, the culture indicates there is a need to explore and go more in depth to provide enhanced and more individualized support for students and their families. The conditions mostly centered around diversifying the staff and making improvements

in the College and Career Readiness department. The competencies focused on developing a deeper understanding of students in order to better support them. Last, the current context of the district indicates more teacher training is needed to heighten awareness of student needs and refine the curriculum to have greater relevance.

CHAPTER SIX

Strategies and Actions, Implications, Policy Recommendations

In this chapter, I present a policy proposal and outline the strategies and actions that educational leaders can employ to comprehend the current state of their respective districts and establish a blueprint for progressive district enhancement. Implementing these measures is pivotal for advancing districts from good standing to a state of excellence.

Policy Statement

I am recommending a transformative policy that mandates all school districts with a majority Latino student population systematically address the five pillars I identified over the course of 6 years in order to improve educational outcomes holistically.

As part of the policy, all school districts in the State of Illinois with a majority enrollment of Latino students and families will hire a Latino Executive Officer (LEO) who is responsible for ensuring Latino students have access and opportunities to curricula that will ensure their transition to post-high school institutions, including colleges and trade schools. Furthermore, in nurturing and developing the academic and personal potential of Latino students, school district leaders will need to meet compliance measures on one of the five pillars each year:

- Improve social-emotional support
- Measure and improve student to staff connections
- Measure and support students' knowledge of college and post-high school options
- Engage families in small groups and one-to-one supports
- Value and be inclusive of Latino culture

The policy would be initially introduced at the state level before advancing nationally to ensure a scaffolded successful implementation. Data-driven assessments will be integral to

measuring the impact of these changes. The policy will establish clear parameters for each category, including reporting frequency and designated stakeholders.

Recognizing the significance of planning and adaptation, the policy will allow district leaders a preparatory year to select and present a focus area, fostering strategic planning. Exemplar projects for each category will be provided, offering guidance and minimizing the uncertainties associated with new initiatives. Grant funds tied to the initiative would necessitate transparent reporting, mirroring federal grant requirements.

Applying Peter Drucker's maxim, "We measure what we treasure," the policy emphasizes accountability through metrics and measurements. Districts showcasing improvement in targeted areas will receive bonuses to sustain this progress. Accountability structures will extend from the government to the local level, including school boards and parent committees. Districts will present to school boards three times yearly, ensuring continuous evaluation, reflection, and community involvement in strategic planning and complete the corresponding reports to the state.

In the initial presentation, the district leader will explain why the area of focus from the five pillars was selected and outline the corresponding plan. Subsequently, quarterly reports and the midyear presentation will be platforms for sharing progress. The concluding presentation will highlight the advancements made and facilitate reflections on successes and areas for improvement. Notably, during this final presentation, district leaders will actively seek input from the school board and the community regarding the strategy for the ensuing year. A noteworthy caveat within the policy is the mandatory inclusion of a board member on the team to ensure a holistic and collaborative approach to the implementation process.

I recommend this policy based on the recognition of persistent disparities faced by Latino students. By providing a comprehensive framework and allowing district leaders to focus on and address a minimum of one pillar per year, the policy will enhance effectiveness and collaboration. A unified framework among districts will encourage collective working, fostering organizational success, innovation, and overall well-being. This policy represents a vital step toward equitable education, acknowledging the collective responsibility to address disparities and create a conducive learning environment for all students. There are many components that are already occurring to some degree in school districts, but they need to be given more attention and resources.

Considerations for Decision Makers

The overarching objective is to positively influence the life trajectories of Latino students, ensuring they are well-prepared and presented with myriad options for their future. To operationalize these steps, my proposed policy statement serves as a robust framework, offering concrete guidance to district leaders, thereby shifting their focus from the uncertainty of "what" to the strategic deliberation of "how."

Recognizing the critical role of financial resources, my policy statement will require additional funds from the state to eliminate financial barriers that could impede the implementation of the five crucial pillars. In fostering a collaborative environment, the policy encourages collective knowledge-sharing among school districts. This collaborative ethos will be instrumental in allowing districts to leverage each other's experiences and insights for mutual benefit. In the subsequent paragraphs, I analyze the impact of my policy statement through various lenses, encompassing economic, political, legal, and moral and ethical considerations, to provide a comprehensive analysis of its potential implications.

Economic Analysis

The largest funding requirement will be for the addition of another position, particularly at the central office level. To support the implementation of this additional position, the state must secure funds to cover the majority of the financial burden. District leaders must budget effectively to execute action plans associated with policies not covered by the state. As districts transition from the planning phase to implementation, fund allocation will increase accordingly.

Another consideration is the cost associated with implementing programming for parents. Though many districts already offer such programs, accommodating parents' schedules, especially if events are scheduled during the evenings or weekends, could result in additional expenses. Furthermore, organizing field trips to college campuses might incur costs. However, proactive collaboration with colleges to share some of the expenses could help alleviate this financial aspect.

Political Analysis

It is crucial to note that Latinos constitute the second-largest racial/ethnic group in the State of Illinois, experiencing 45% growth since 2000, contrasting sharply with the state's overall population growth rate of 1% (Ahn et al., 2023). This demographic trend highlights a significant challenge for the state's prosperity, as evidenced by the educational disparity, with 32% of Latinos having not completed high school (Ahn et al., 2023). The health of the state's education system is of paramount importance to politicians who are aiming to attract businesses seeking a well-prepared workforce. Furthermore, politicians seek to improve education measures to ensure their reelection, underscoring the imperative for lawmakers to invest in positive changes to the education system to ensure the success of all students.

The involvement of school boards is crucial for implementing this policy. Not only will school board members receive presentations on the issue, they will also actively participate as part of the team responsible for policy implementation. Transparency and a data-driven focus are central to this policy, which may pose challenges for districts that have not been forthcoming with their school boards. Additionally, addressing potential resistance within the school board is essential, particularly if there is reluctance to prioritize the needs of Latino students. Drawing from personal experience, instances of prejudice and ignorance within school boards can hinder progress. For example, in a district where I previously worked, despite a majority Latino student population, there was a lack of representation and understanding among board members, resulting in resistance to programming aimed at addressing academic disparities. Notably, Latinos make up only 1.2% of school board members in the state, highlighting the need for increased diversity and cultural understanding within these decision-making bodies (Illinois Association of School Boards, 2022).

Legal Analysis

The legal implications of this transformative policy encompass several key aspects. The appointment or addition of a position within districts to spearhead implementation raises legal considerations related to employment, job responsibilities, and potential changes to existing organizational structures. The policy's initiation at the state level before transitioning to a national scale will require legal frameworks for coordination and collaboration between state and federal educational bodies.

The emphasis on data-driven assessments and reporting parameters signifies a commitment to transparency and accountability, aligning with legal requirements for public institutions. Clear specifications for reporting frequency and designated stakeholders will also

ensure compliance with legal data management and sharing standards. The preparatory year granted to districts, exemplar projects, and grant funds tied to the initiative will have legal considerations related to fair distribution, application processes, and compliance with grant regulations. Legal safeguards must be in place to prevent discriminatory practices and ensure equitable access to resources. Perhaps the biggest legal worry relates to the policy's accountability structures, including metrics, measurements, and bonuses for improvement. These necessitate legal frameworks for monitoring, evaluation, and the fair distribution of incentives.

The three required presentations per year, along with community involvement, are in line with the existing laws about public meetings, transparency, and adherence to local governance regulations. In recommending this policy, the recognition of the persistent disparities faced by Latino students underscores the urgency for a legal framework that promotes equitable education. The policy's focus on collaboration, transparency, and accountability aligns with legal principles governing educational institutions. The success of this policy will depend on its alignment with existing legal frameworks and ability to navigate potential legal challenges during implementation.

Moral and Ethical Analysis

Douglas-Horsford et al. (2019) and Gándara (2017) stressed the significance of school district leaders placing a higher value on counselors and other staff members who can support and engage parents of Latino students. This is especially true for those students whose parents struggled when they were in high school or are new to the country and did not complete their education in the United States. Focusing on providing Latino students with a high-quality education, along with knowledge about post-high school options and careers and the benefits and drawbacks of each, is the right approach for adequate preparation. Milner (2018) stated

education level is a strong predictor of most people's earnings, which then determines which kind of homes they can afford. This has a direct impact on where their children can go to school. Their income level can also determine their ability to work one job that will bring in enough money to take care of the household. In instances where one job proves insufficient, parents frequently resort to securing a second job to make ends meet. This inevitably curtails the time parents have available to allocate to their children. Nevertheless, in recognizing the indispensable role parents play, it is essential to note, as highlighted by Milner, that even in the absence of academic support, parents can contribute significantly through other means, such as offering encouragement, as discussed in Chapter 4.

Strategies and Actions

In this section, I detail the strategies and actions needed to implement this policy and make the proposed changes to guide future initiatives. Jim Collins's (2001) influential work, *Good to Great*, describes a transformative process encompassing six key transformative steps to elevate an organization from good standing to greatness. Collins described these steps as Level 5 Leadership; First Who, Then What; Confront the Brutal Facts and Hedgehog Concept; Culture of Discipline; and Technology Accelerators. For the purpose of this study and policy proposal, I am not covering the first step, Level 5 Leadership.

This policy is more important than ever because of the growing problems of racial and social inequalities in the United States that have been brought to the forefront in the policy arena (Douglas-Horsford et al., 2019). This policy provides an opportunity for researchers, policymakers, and advocates to bring about positive change. In Appendix C, the strategies and related actions are outlined as they connect to Collins's (2001) five essential transformative steps, and the subsequent narrative descriptions give further explanation.

First Who, Then What

Collins (2001) detailed how to take an organization from good to great and, therefore, gain great results and outcomes. In the first step, Collins emphasized the significance of assembling the right team. He often compared it to the common analogy of making sure you have the right people on the bus. Collins felt very strongly about this because "the right people don't need to be tightly managed or fired up; they will be self-motivated by the inner drive to produce the best results and be part of creating something great" (p. 42).

Therefore, the first thing district leaders will need to do is hire an LEO to lead the transformative change in ensuring the district is focused on one of the five pillars that will improve Latino students' education. In order to hire the best person available, whether internal or external, a well-structured search plan with a stringent timeline will be imperative to commence the work promptly. The state would create the criteria for this position and provide each district with the funding to secure this position. Some of the criteria for that position would be the following:

- Qualifications:
    i) Bilingual endorsement
    ii) Building-level leadership experience
    iii) Effective communication skills
    iv) Ability to lead a team and complete projects within the designated timetable
- District structure:
    i) Must be a cabinet-level position in the central office

ii) Must have a higher rank than the academic directors to ensure their directives are prioritized

Confront the Brutal Facts and Hedgehog Concept

Once the LEO is in place, the next step Collins (2001) delineated is to focus on the "what." I use the framework from my study's five findings. This strategic framework, similar to a district strategic plan, is a comprehensive document that outlines an educational institution's long-term vision, mission, goals, and strategies for achieving those goals in the district. This strategic framework is intended to address key findings from the current study:

- Finding 1: Extracurricular activities and quarantine are directly correlated to improving social-emotional support
- Finding 2: Program differences are directly correlated to measuring and improving student to staff connections
- Finding 3: Role of college in students' futures is directly correlated to measuring and supporting students' knowledge of college and post-high school options
- Finding 4: The crucial influence of family on students is directly correlated to engaging families in small groups and one-to-one supports
- Findings 5: Latino cultural comfort zones is directly correlated to valuing and including Latino culture

LEOs and their team will guide the work to select which area district leaders want to focus on first, and then develop timelines and ways to measure progress. They should also see if any of the goals can be accomplished concurrently. This comprehensive approach will guide and focus efforts in fostering a thriving educational environment. In order to measure progress, Collins (2001) believed it necessary first to understand the current state of things; he called it

embracing the brutal facts of reality. Though some uncovered data may be unfavorable, the necessary steps for change can be identified only with a comprehensive understanding of the situation. Some of the data might also be critical to understanding and leveraging the current strengths to excel in the task.

The LEO and their team will need to incorporate the four essential practices into their team norms that facilitate trust and open conversation: lead with questions not answers; create a culture where leaders are engaged in dialogue and debate, not coercion; conduct autopsies without blame; and have "red flag" mechanisms (Collins, 2001). Specifically, in Collins's (2001) idea to "conduct autopsies without blame," he cautioned groups not to assign blame and to instead search for understanding and learning from their mistakes. Having "red flag" mechanisms encourages creating a climate where the truth is heard and people feel safe bringing information that may not be popular to the foreground. This team undoubtedly will uncover things that, despite district leaders' efforts, may be hard to hear.

Another step Collins (2001) outlined is his emphasis on effectively implementing the Hedgehog Concept, which means the LEO and their team must maintain an unwavering focus on the essential, which entails adeptly identifying what is crucial and disregarding the extra. The strategic plan will be the foundation, and the team will need to make sure everything connects back to the five pillars of the strategic framework:

- Improving social-emotional support
- Measuring and improving student to staff connections
- Measuring and supporting students' knowledge of college and trade schools
- Engaging families in small groups and one-to-one support
- Valuing and including Latino culture

The second part of the Hedgehog Concept is that once the team has selected the area of focus, the LEO will need to analyze multiple data points to guide their next steps. Which area data points they select will depend on which area of focus they have selected.

Improving Social-Emotional Support. Students' social-emotional well-being is important. Gándara (2017) stated "significant evidence shows that making social and medical services available to families and students in need helps reduce absenteeism (a major correlation of low achievement) and increase student engagement in schools" (p. 11). In order to determine the needs of their students, school leaders must give a social-emotional screener annually to all students to identify any students who may need support but do not know how to seek it out. To complement this support, school district leaders could provide an annual unit about mental health, healthy coping skills, and support resources that will bolster students' social and emotional well-being.

In his book, *Rac(e)ing to Class*, Milner (2018) discussed how school personnel generally have good intentions to meet students' needs, but they rarely talk directly to them. Milner pointed out most schools have no systematic way of hearing students' voices. This policy would address this gap in school districts. It would require district leaders to give a survey each marking period to students in Grades 6 through 12, asking three questions: identify three friends they can count on, two adults they trust in the school, and one activity/club in which they are involved. If the student does not have anything for one of the three categories, they will receive a Tier 2 level of social-emotional support. Gándara (2017) pointed out that involving students in school activities can improve their engagement in school. The LEO and team would aim to increase student participation each year, and include the progress in presentations to the Board of Education.

To enhance the variety of clubs and activities available, school district leaders could establish a process for students to propose new activities, fostering greater student involvement and ensuring diverse interests are accommodated. Improving awareness of extracurricular opportunities could also boost participation. District leaders should organize a sports and activities fair at the beginning of the school year and distribute brochures detailing available options, including time commitments and responsibilities, dispelling misconceptions about clubs and activities being overly time-consuming. Additionally, the leadership team could explore alternative formats for clubs and activities to accommodate diverse student schedules. For instance, for high school students with after-school work commitments, morning clubs could be offered, and clubs and activities during study hall or lunch periods could provide additional options for increasing involvement.

Measuring and Improving Student to Staff Connections. It is crucial for students to have strong connections with school staff, and it falls on district leaders to measure and enhance these connections. Currently, every district in the state is required to complete the 5Essentials survey, providing insights into organizational strengths and areas in need of improvement. However, the reporting of this data back to districts takes months. To better use such data, district leaders could implement an annual midyear in-district survey to assess the relationship between students and teachers/counselors/staff. Over time, this data analysis can help identify trends, such as specific subjects or teachers associated with student disconnection. Though school leaders cannot solve students' challenges at home, providing teachers with additional training can help them better understand students' difficulties and demonstrate empathy toward them. Implementing professional development sessions to support teachers in making these shifts

would be crucial. District leaders would need to create different opportunities to hear directly from students, such as:

- Create student committees to provide feedback on feelings of being included to take place during school.
- Solicit feedback from Latino teacher groups.
- Conduct exit interviews when students drop out. Data will be analyzed by the team and shared every year with the Board of Education (BOE).
- Incorporate goal setting in all classes.

In addition, district leaders would need to ensure school counselors' caseloads are lower than the state average so they can spend more time with each student. With the lower caseloads, district leaders could require a minimum number of times counselors would need to meet with students on their caseloads. In addition, school counselors would be required to facilitate quarterly team-building activities with students on their caseloads.

Measuring and Supporting Students' Knowledge of College and Post-High School Options. School district leaders should implement a College, Career, and Technology curriculum for elementary, intermediate, and high school. Based on this curriculum, district leaders should create pre- and post-surveys to measure the effectiveness of the curriculum presented. For example, at the high school level, district leaders would measure students' understanding of post-high school options, such as different types of colleges (e.g., 2-year versus 4-year college) and the difference with trade school pathways. At the end of the year they would analyze the pre- and post-survey data to check for growth. This would help them adjust to the curriculum the following year.

Starting as early as kindergarten, teachers in each grade level will collaborate to incorporate explicit career education into their curriculum. District leaders will make sure there is alignment between the grade levels so there is no repetition of careers. This approach will ensure students are exposed to a variety of career options each year, allowing them to explore a wide range of opportunities by the time they reach high school. In the beginning, it is to be expected the majority of students will not have a proper understanding of college and career readiness. However, the increase in programming and earlier exposure to this curriculum beginning in the intermediate grades will improve this over the years.

The State of Illinois is already in the process of proposing increased financial allocation for CTE programming. In the Weekly Message on January 3, 2024, State Superintendent Tony Sanders pointed out that there have not been any updates to the evidence-based formula in many years. He pointed out that CTE across the state has grown tremendously despite a lack of increased funding from the state. He is proposing changes to the formula to account for and encourage further growth in CTE programming based on student enrollment, multiplied by a per student Area Career Center rate. His proposal will also have a focus on career exploration in Grades K–8 as well as an addition of a Regional CTE system leadership based on a daily rate using the median regional high school principal salary. Last, he will require high-quality CTE programming for Grades 9–12. State Superintendent Tony Sanders's proposal primarily emphasizes CTE, and my proposal extends this focus to include explicit education on college and trade school options. This comprehensive approach aims to better equip students for their future endeavors (Sanders, 2024).

Many of the interviewed students lacked a comprehensive understanding of college, including the distinctions between options like community colleges and 4-year institutions, as

well as their long-term implications. Integrating explicit education about college and trade schools into various content classes could address this need. With reduced caseloads, school counselors could collaborate with teachers to deliver this education effectively. Alternatively, inviting representatives from higher education institutions to present at schools is another viable option. Sapp et al. (2015) emphasized the importance of partnerships between K–12 districts and higher education institutions to facilitate a smoother transition for Latino families, stressing that this support should begin before high school. Early exposure to college experiences can foster college awareness and aspirations among students. Other ways this can be accomplished would be to have school districts have the following:

- College and career fairs
- Field trips to different college and trade school options
- Monitoring to see if there is any correlation between the high school programming and students' choices post-graduation

One key component Juarez High School District needs to include is tracking the number of students who go to 2-year college, 4-year college, trade school, entrepreneurship, or straight into the workforce once they graduate, which can provide valuable insights, including potential high school program participation correlations. Data collected can enable district leaders to see whether there is any correlation between the types of programs the students participate in and the options they choose post-high school.

Engaging Families in Small Groups and One-to-One Support. Spencer and Wilson (2023) highlighted the importance of involving the entire family because students of Latino descent are typically influenced by their family or parents more than their non-Latino counterparts. Currently, most districts support families using the mass programming approach.

For example, they might have a session on ways to support their child in high school. However, more often than not, these sessions are not well attended. District leaders have even resorted to having these options virtually with only minimal improvement. In order to make a more significant impact in connecting with families, school district leaders need to have family counselors assigned, similar to the Enlace program at Juarez High School District. However, instead of making it a Tier 3 support, it should be provided at Tier 1. These counselors can provide small group and one-to-one support and education for parents. Some of the areas the family counselors can address are the following:

- Essential information to navigate high school successfully, like attendance and graduation requirements, how to check students' grades, and the best way to communicate with teachers
- Academic support available during and outside of school hours
- Different options for post-high school
- What students can do beginning freshman year to set themselves up for success in post-high school options
- Parenting, biological aspects of changes in teens (e.g., impulse control)
- Mental health for parents and students

Another way school district leaders can support families is for elementary school district leaders to connect families with high school district leaders. Castellanos and Gloria (2007) found that positive influences from family and community support are related explicitly to Latino student persistence. High school can present more challenges for students and require more perseverance. Empowering families and building bridges between the elementary and high school districts can be a game changer for families in navigating the high school system.

Valuing and Including Latino Culture. It is vital that "Latino students see themselves as essential to our nation, which has flourished because of its diversity, not in spite of it" (Gándara, 2017, p. 11). Outside of Hispanic Heritage Month, the curriculum often does not hold space for sharing Latinos' contributions to the United States, both in the past and present, so students can be supported as they develop their identities and sense of belonging. There are many ways teachers can nurture the assets these students bring to school, such as their optimism and persistence in difficult circumstances. Not all Latino students are bilingual; however, teachers can celebrate the language and cultural practices students bring to the table (Gándara, 2017).

School districts must provide mirrors and sliding doors. The idea of mirrors refers to incorporating the students' Latino culture in different aspects of the school; for example, having Latino culture reflected in the decoration of the school—murals and displays of prominent Latino figures are one way to do this. Districts can also celebrate the culture of Latino students, such as the Mother's Day celebration on May 10th versus the American celebration occurring the second Sunday of the month. Though students need mirrors, it is also essential to have sliding doors, which refers to learning about other cultures outside of their own.

An example would be school districts partnering with districts with different student demographics. Depending on the school district, this might be accomplished within the districts. The partnership can include having students do a transfer program where they go to another district/school with a student demographic that is different from their own a few times a year. It can also be working in groups virtually across districts/schools. The goal would be to prepare students for the real world by making them as well-rounded as possible.

Additionally, district leaders should focus on hiring a diverse workforce that is representative of the student demographics. Districts can support this goal by creating Grow

Your Own Teacher programs as mentioned in Chapter 5. School districts can interest students in pursuing teaching degrees by having a higher focus on college and careers. As an additional incentive, school boards can offer a signing bonus if they are elementary or high school district graduates.

Culture of Discipline

Though some pieces of the strategic framework may already be in place within school districts, I chose to adopt Collins's (2001) steps to move from good to great because I want to empower district leaders to focus on the five pillars of the strategic framework. The next crucial step involves developing a culture of discipline, as emphasized by Collins, which involves empowering the team within consistent constraints and giving them both freedom and responsibility. This process begins with focusing on the who, then on the what, with the composition of the LEO and the team being critical. The team should consist of self-motivated and self-disciplined individuals who require minimal management. Maintaining an open mind and recognizing that greatness is achieved through a cumulative process is essential. The team will achieve great outcomes if each step, action, and decision is tied back to one of the five pillars. Clear communication channels, designated points of contact, and timelines are vital for success. In the initial stages, constructing robust structures and systems will ensure sustainability, especially amid potential personnel changes. For instance, building partnerships and collaborating with families, other school districts, the ROE, trade schools, colleges, and alumni will be necessary for the implementation of some of these steps.

Technology Accelerators

The final step Collins (2001) outlined was integrating technology accelerators to augment existing efforts. The LEO and the team will require a creative and expansive mindset regarding

technology's potential roles. For instance, leveraging technology can foster a robust and enduring connection with students post-graduation. The team must establish an efficient system for collecting and storing students' contact information to achieve this goal. A crucial additional step involves guiding students in creating new email addresses as their school-issued addresses will expire. Alternatively, a streamlined process could involve migrating everyone's emails upon graduation to a standard Gmail address, which will ensure continuity and address the often-overlooked aspects of students creating professional-sounding email addresses. Embracing these technological solutions will allow school district leaders to advance in the evolving landscape of education and student communication.

By tapping into former student success stories, leaders can motivate current students and establish mentor programs, thus fostering a supportive network. By leveraging virtual platforms, district leaders can facilitate connections between current students and higher education institutions through virtual visits and student panels, broadening educational horizons. Furthermore, technology offers the opportunity to engage with families meaningfully through virtual means, enhancing communication and involvement in the educational journey. The LEO and the team can transform and enrich the educational experience by embracing these technological innovations, creating a dynamic and interconnected educational community. It is important to note that Collins (2011) highlighted that it is not so much about the use of technology as in the internet, but rather, the idea that organizations must adapt and be reflective. The district is currently doing many things to reach families. However, having technology as an accelerator can take what they already have, build on it, and add new things.

Conclusion

The objective of this study was to comprehend the perspectives of Latino high school students regarding their high school experiences and post-high school options. In addition, I sought to investigate the influence of high school programming on shaping these perceptions. Through an analysis of interviews with 14 students participating in different programs within the Juarez High School District, where approximately 90% of the student population is Latino, the study encompassed programs such as KEY, Enlace, CTE, and the general education program. Though certain findings were consistent across programs, others highlighted program-specific differences and benefits.

I developed two research questions to frame my study. The primary research question was: What are Latino students' perspectives of their high school experiences and their post-graduation options? The secondary research question was: What are the factors that play a role in their plans post-high school? The decision to conduct individual interviews, as opposed to focus groups, was intentional to provide students with personalized attention and a confidential setting, allowing them the freedom to express their thoughts openly on each question

Five specific findings and interpretations were detailed in Chapter 4. Within the school context, the programming the students were enrolled in had a high level of impact on their high school experiences, primarily their relationships with teachers and counselors, which then affected their perspectives on post-high school options. Also, within the school context was the involvement of extracurriculars and the lasting impact of the quarantine. Beyond the structured confines of high school programming, the study highlighted the crucial roles played by family and Latino culture in shaping students' perspectives on their high school experience and post-high school options. Intertwined with the school program and family was the students' levels of

understanding of college and other post-graduation options. It is extremely challenging to venture into something you do not know, and for many students, going to college, especially a 4-year college, was exactly this.

In Chapter 5, the organizational change plan highlighted the current state at Juarez High School District as it relates to the four arenas of change: context, culture, conditions, and competencies. In addition, this chapter highlighted an outline of the ideal or the "To-Be" within each of the four arenas of change with an explanation of what shifts need to occur in order to improve. Some of the changes will be systemic by having more individualized support for students and families, such as what currently exists within some of their specialized programming of Enlace and KEY. In addition, more teacher training is needed to heighten awareness of student needs and refine the curriculum for greater relevance.

In Chapter 6, I introduced a transformative policy proposal aimed at proactively addressing the persistent educational disparities experienced by Latino students in school districts. This policy is specifically designed to tackle the root causes of inequities through a systematic 6-year approach. This approach focuses on the five pillars of the strategic framework, which directly align with the five findings from my study:

- Improve social-emotional support
- Measure and improve student to staff connections
- Measure and support students' knowledge of college and post-high school options
- Engage families in small groups and one-to-one supports
- Value and are incisive of Latino culture

Emphasizing collaboration, transparency, and accountability, the policy not only aligns with legal principles but also represents a crucial step toward creating a conducive learning

environment for all students. As we envision an educational landscape characterized by collective working, innovation, and overall well-being, this policy stands as a testament to our commitment to fostering equitable education and empowering every student for a brighter future.

The outcomes of this study carry the potential to revolutionize the way school districts allocate resources for delivering a high-quality education for all but especially with Latino students' needs in mind. This endeavor is deeply personal to me, as I found echoes of my own experiences while interviewing the students. Their aspirations, like being a positive example for other Latinos, resonated with my journey. Being the first in my family to attend high school in the United States required me to depend on the school to guide me. I experienced a similar need being the first to graduate college and complete a master's degree; though my family members were my biggest cheerleaders, they were not able to offer advise based on firsthand experiences.

Even for those Latinos who are already in the professional world, it is challenging being the first in our family to achieve milestones and we often find ourselves in a position where our family cannot offer insights based on their experience. We grapple with an enduring glass ceiling, as doubts about our ability to tread an uncharted path can hinder our progression to administrative or higher-level roles. School district leaders can significantly contribute to providing the necessary support for students by implementing the changes identified to adequately supporting Latino students. The framework proposed in this policy provides school district leaders a pathway of tangible actions and strategies, enabling them to furnish students with an educational environment in which they can develop confidence and be provided the tools they both need and deserve.

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Appendix A

Student Interview Guide

1. Topic: Outside school
General question: How have issues that are important to you been addressed in your school experiences?

One or more of the following questions will be discussed
What are you interested in/passionate about outside of school?
How do you spend most of your time outside of school?
Do you have a job outside of school? What made you want to work?
Are you involved in any sports or clubs at school?
Are you involved in any organization outside of school (ex: church group)?
What role models do you have outside of school?

2. Topic: In school
General question: How would you describe your overall experience in high school?

One or more of the following questions will be discussed
How would you describe your high school to a stranger?
What has your experience been like with your school counselors?
What has your experience been in the Enlace/KEY/Career and Technical program?
What has been the benefits to the program?
What has been the drawbacks to the program?
In what do you think the high school program has affected your decision on what you want to do after high school?
Prior to being in the program what was your experience with technical careers?
How would you describe the culture/vibe of your school?
In what ways has this high school helped you be successful in school?
What role models do you have in school?
How would you describe your motivation to do well in school?

3. Topic: Ethnic (and linguistic) identity
General question: How would you describe your identity? How important is this identity to you?
One or more of the following questions will be discussed
How would you describe your identity (Mexican, Mexican American, American, Hispanic, Latino, Latinx, etc.)?
What is the most important part of your identity?
How has where you went to high school impacted your identity?
How does where you live impact your identity?
How important is this identity to you?
How important is your identity to your learning in school? school experiences?
What languages/dialects are spoken in your communities and families?
How do you use language in school? out of school? with friends? with family?

4. Topic: Familial, socioeconomic, and migratory background
General question: Can you describe your family and community where you live?

One or more of the following questions will be discussed
Where you are from?
Can you describe your community/communities?
Can you describe your family?
What do you like the most about your family or community?
In what ways is your family supportive of your education?
Who would you consider your role models at home?

5. Topic: College and career background/knowledge
General question: Can you describe the careers/jobs of people in your family?

One or more of the following questions will be discussed
Do you hope to follow any of the careers/jobs of anyone in your family?
What are the experiences of college-going of family and friends?
What do you know about college?
What do you see as the benefits of college going?
What do you see as the disadvantages of going to college?
What is your earliest memory of college going?
Do you believe anyone can go to college?
If going to college.. What kind of college are you going to? What helped you make that selection?
What do you know about technical careers?
What do you see as the benefits of technical careers?
What do you see as the disadvantages of technical careers?

6. Topic: Future
General question: What are your plans right out of high school?

One or more of the following questions will be discussed
What are your plans after high school?
What factors affect your plans the most?
How long has this been your plan?
Do you have a backup plan, if so what is it?
Does your family affect what you want to do after high school?
How do you define success?
Is there anything else you would like me to know?

Appendix B

As-Is, To Be Chart

CONTEXT	
As-Is	**To Be**
KEY & Enlace programs	Expand components of KEY & Enlace mentor programs
CTE program	Expand CTE program
General education program	
Partnership with local community college	Expand partnership with local community college
Dual credit courses	Increase promotion & offering of dual credit courses
	Add senior focus
CULTURE	
As-Is	**To Be**
District promotes Latino culture	More in depth work that builds student's pride in their cultures such as a class on Latinos in American history
Welcoming environment to parents Programming to connect families & administration	More targeted and one on one supports and continued connections with administration
Family support	Tailored programming for families
CONDITIONS	
As-Is	**To Be**
Staff more diverse than other high school districts	Continue to focus on diversifying staff
Family liaisons	Expand family liaisons services
College and career focus	Tailor support for families, more targeted

	information beginning freshman year on college and other post-high school options
District does not track college applications, admissions, or how many students go on to college	District tracks college applications, admissions, and how many students go on to college
A variety of clubs available 27% of students involved	Expand clubs and diversify offerings, increase participation from students Partner with community college and different trade schools
Value in sports	Continue to value sports & provide support to allow more students to join
COMPETENCIES	
As-Is	**To Be**
First Wednesday of every month there is a half day so teachers can have professional development	Culturally responsive teaching Sharing the demographics of the student body and families such as percent low-income, percent future first generation college students and implications on students with the staff Education for staff on Latino culture, such as how to embed into the curriculum
Have instructional coaches	Keep instructional coaches

Appendix C

Strategies and Actions Chart

Collins's Steps	Strategies and Actions for an Initiative to Better Support Latino High School Students and Improve Quality of Education
First Who… **Then What**	● District leaders will need to hire a Latino Education Officer (LEO) ○ Must be a cabinet-level position in the central office ○ Must have authority over all of the academic directors ○ Must have bilingual endorsement ● The LEO will create a team made up of school leaders ● Once the LEO is in place, they & the team will focus on the following framework: • Improving social-emotional support • Measuring and improving student to staff connections • Measuring and supporting students' knowledge of college and post-high school options • Engaging families in small groups and 1:1 supports • Valuing and including Latino culture
Confront the Brutal Facts (Yet Never Lose Faith) **And** **The Hedgehog Concept (Simplicity within the Three Circles)**	● The LEO and team will select at minimum one area of focus per year along with stringent timelines: ● Improving social-emotional support ○ Conduct social-emotional screenings to support students even if they do not seek it out by asking students to identify ○ During each marking period, give each student a survey to measure and seek to improve the number of students involved in sports/clubs. It will ask students to identify: ■ 3 friends they can count on ■ 2 adults they trust in school ■ 1 activity/club they are involved ○ Create the opportunity to have clubs during study hall and lunch periods ○ Sports/Activities fair ○ Annually deliver a unit about mental health ● Measuring and improving student to staff connections **Feedback** ○ Student survey for students regarding interactions with teachers & counselors ■ Professional development to support teachers in concerns that arise from surveys ○ Create student committees to provide feedback on feelings of being included to take place during school ○ Solicit feedback from Latino teacher groups ○ Conduct exit interviews when students drop out. Data will be

Confront the Brutal Facts (Yet Never Lose Faith) **And** **The Hedgehog Concept (Simplicity within the Three Circles)**	analyzed by the team and shared every year with the Board of Education (BOE) ○ Incorporate goal setting in all classes **School Counselors** ○ Caseloads lower than the state average ○ Minimum times counselors should see caseload students ○ Quarterly team builder activities with students in caseloads ● Measuring and supporting students' knowledge of college and post-high school option ○ Implement college, career, & technology curriculum for intermediate years, middle school, and high school on options after high school & careers ○ Host career and college fairs ○ Survey students to gauge their understanding of college and trade school (BOY and EOY) ■ Use data to drive the college, career, & technology curriculum ○ Track the number of students going to college, trade school, entrepreneurship, or into the workforce ○ Field trips in high school to different college and trade school options ○ Monitor to see any correlation between the types of high school programs the students participate in and school connections and post-high school option selections ● Engaging families in small groups and 1:1 support ○ Counselors assigned to families like those of school counselors ■ Provide small group and 1:1 or group education on navigating high school education and post-high school options. ■ Education for families on ● Essential information to navigate high school successfully like attendance graduation requirements, how to check students' grades, the best way to communicate with teachers ● Academic support available during and outside of school hours ● Different options post-high school ● How freshmen can begin to prepared for post-high school options ● Parenting, biological aspect of changes in teens (e.g., impulse control) ● Mental health for parents and students ○ Partner with feeder elementary schools to begin connecting with families ● Valuing and including Latino culture

	○ Mirrors and sliding doors approach ○ Focus on hiring a diverse workforce ○ Grow your own programs
A Culture of Discipline & Technology Accelerators	● The team will have the freedom and responsibility to work on the area of focus they have identified from one of the five pillars ● The team will create a structure to keep communication flowing to all of the important stakeholders (including parents and BOE) via quarterly reports ● Communication should be clear with a designated point person and timelines ● In the beginning, there will be a lot of building structures and systems to sustain the work even if there are personnel changes. ● The team will need to build partnerships with the feeder schools, other nearby LEOs, the Regional Office of Education (ROE), colleges, universities, and trade schools ● Connect with high school graduates that have gone on to successful careers
Technology Accelerators	● The team will use technology to enhance the work they are already doing and think outside the box about the role technology can play ○ For example: ● keep connected to students after graduation ● tap into former student success stories to motivate current students & to create mentor programs ● connect current students with higher education institutions via virtual visits, & student panels ● connect with families in meaningful ways virtually ● purchase system that will help track students after elementary through post-high school