



STATE EDUCATION RESOURCE CENTER
EQUITY | EXCELLENCE | EDUCATION



*“They Speak My Language, but Don’t Understand
My Culture”*

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Central Message:

**Speaking my language gives you access
to my words. Understanding my culture
helps you understand what those words
mean to me**

By the end of the session, participants will be able to:

- Identify practices that create safe, collaborative, and nonjudgmental relationships with families and communities
- Explain the difference between providing language access and developing a deeper understanding of a family's culture, experiences, values, and relationships with schools
- Examine how assumptions about language, culture, and family engagement can influence interactions between educators and families
- Identify at least two actions they can implement in their school or district to strengthen authentic family and community partnerships and improve outcomes for students

Welcome Activity

Who is in the room?

Where is your school in its family engagement journey?

- 1 You are welcome here
- 2 We translated this for you
- 3 We want to learn about you
- 4 We will change because of what we learned from you
- 5 This is your school too

WHEN YOU WERE A CHILD...

What kind of ideas did the adults in
your life have about families?

NOW AND THEN

How would you compare your ideas
now to their ideas then?

We Want To:

Build **safe, collaborative,**
and nonjudgmental
relationships with families
and communities to improve
outcomes for children and
youth



It looks like...

- Safe
 - Ask questions, disagree, admit they do not understand, or raise concerns without fear of judgment or retaliation
- Collaborative
 - Educators and families contribute knowledge, identify priorities, solve problems, and make decisions together
- Nonjudgmental
 - Educators approach families with curiosity rather than assumptions about parenting, culture, language, attendance, communication, disability, socioeconomic circumstances, or family structure

It looks like

- Respectful
 - Family knowledge about their child is honored and treated as expertise.
 - “Parents send us their best.”
- Reciprocal
 - Information, knowledge, and learning happen in both directions.

What would a family experience, see, and hear in a school where these conditions are present?

Shared Understanding and Definitions

Latino/a

What Does the Label Tell You?
What Does It Not Tell You?

Latino Families Are Not One Story

- Latino is a broad identity that includes tremendous diversity within and across communities
- Families may differ by nationality, race, migration experience, generation, language, socioeconomic circumstances, family structure, disability, religion, and previous experiences with schools
- Sharing a language does not mean sharing the same culture, values, experiences, or expectations

The Latino Community Is Not a Monolith



Multigenerational Families

- Established U.S. roots
- Understand institutional school structures
- Face historic, systemic marginalization
- Require active representation and shared leadership power



Newly Arrived Immigrant Families

- Immediate survival and economic needs
- Significant language access barriers
- Fear of immigration enforcement
- Require basic navigation tools and psychological safety

What does family mean for Latinos?

- Personalismo
- Respeto
- Collectivism vs. Individualism
- What counts as family
- Authority
- Shared responsibility

What does family mean for Latinos?



Personalismo

The foundational cultural preference for warm, face-to-face, relational interactions over cold digital notifications, emails, or letters



Respeto

In many Latino cultures, showing deep respect for educators means not questioning a teacher's or principal's authority

Latino Students in Connecticut Public Schools

508,402

public-school students statewide, 2024–25 (CT State Department of Education)

32.5%

Hispanic/Latino share of 2024–25 enrollment —161,679 students

497,764

total statewide public-school enrollment reported for 2025–26

11.1%

public-school students statewide, 2025–26 (CT State Department of Education)

Multilingual Learners

- Newcomers/recently arrived
 - Students who recently moved to the United States
- Long-term English Language Learners
 - Students enrolled for many years because they have not reached the thresholds needed to exit the program
 - Many were born in the U.S.
- Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education (SLIFE)

Culture

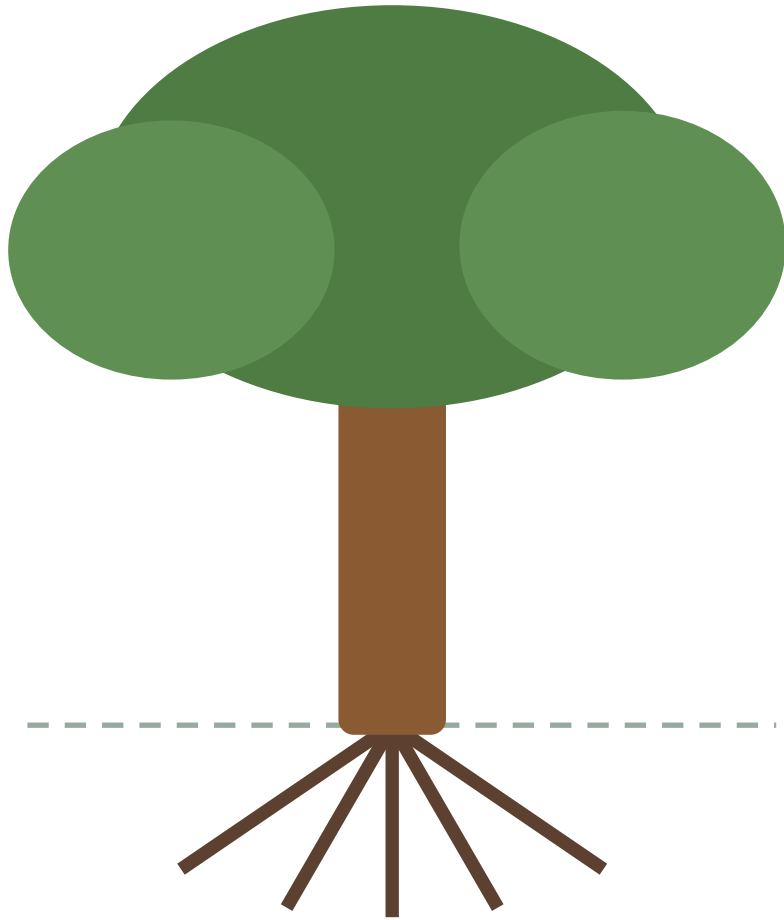
- “...the shared implicit and explicit rules and traditions that express the beliefs, values, and goals of a group of people”

(Kalyanpur & Harry, 2004)

Why Is Culture Important?

- It shapes our ***values, assumptions, interpretations, conversations,*** and the ***actions*** we take (Love, 2009)
- It is ***a powerful lens*** through which we ***select*** and ***interpret*** what we observe (Lindsey et al., 2003)

Three Levels of Culture



1

Visible Culture: Leaves / Above Ground

What we can see: food, music, celebrations, language, traditions

2

Behavior & Social Expectations: Trunk / Near the Surface

How people interact: communication, respect, time, roles, authority

3

Deep Culture: Roots

What drives meaning: values, beliefs, worldviews, history, and trust

Adapted conceptually from the MyWorldAbroad Culture Tree model.



Visible Culture: Leaves / Above Ground

These are often what schools emphasize when they say they are “celebrating culture”

- Food
- Music
- Clothing
- Celebrations
- Language

- Art
- Dance
- Holidays
- Flags
- Visible traditions



Behavior & Social Expectations: Trunk / Near the Surface

The interaction patterns just beneath what is immediately visible.

- Communication styles
- Greetings
- Eye contact
- Concepts of time
- Expressions of respect
- Family roles

- Relationships with authority
- Disagreement
- Decision-making
- Expectations of educators and children
- Approaches to conflict



Deep Culture: Roots

The values and experiences that give behavior its meaning

- Values, beliefs, and worldviews
- Concepts of family and authority
- Beliefs about education
- Definitions of respect
- Spirituality
- Collective or individual responsibility

- Ideas about success and independence
- Attitudes toward institutions
- Historical experiences
- Community memory
- Trust

Activity: What We See and What We Miss

- As you watch an episode, notice what is visible, how people interact, and what cultural values or experiences might be influencing what you observe
- Identify:
 - Leaves
 - Trunk
 - Roots

Family Engagement

Full, equal, and equitable partnership among families, educators, and community partners to promote children's learning and development from birth through college and career

(CSDE, 2018)



Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Family Engagement

Culturally responsive and sustaining family engagement is an ongoing partnership in which schools recognize, respect, respond to, and actively sustain families' cultural and linguistic identities, while ensuring that families have meaningful opportunities to build relationships, share their knowledge, participate in decisions, and influence their children's educational experiences

Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Practices and Strategies

Strengthen trust, communication, and shared
decision-making

From Traditional to Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Family Engagement

TRADITIONAL

The school informs and invites. The school celebrates culture, but its practices stay the

Recognizes culture, but it is still school-directed

Learns about families

Responds to cultural differences

Incorporates students' experiences

Makes school more accessible

Invites family participation

"We see you"

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE AND SUSTAINING

The school learns and shares power.

Culture is protected, and practices change

Protects and sustains culture

Learns from and with families

Treats cultural and linguistic diversity as assets

Creates space for identities and languages to continue developing

Examines whether school practices pressure students toward assimilation

Shares influence and decision-making

"You belong here as you are"

Practices for Culturally Sustaining Family Engagement

1 ACCESS

Can families obtain information in languages they understand?

2 Welcoming Environment

What does a Latino family experience upon entering the building?

3 Culturally Responsive

Do we change our practices based on what we learn?

4 SUSTAINING

Does the school value and preserve languages, cultural knowledge, identities, relationships, and strengths rather than expecting assimilation?

5 BELONGING

Are families known, valued, heard, respected, and able to influence what happens in the school community?

Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Practices

- Language access is not cultural understanding
- What counts as a family
- Communication styles(Verbal and Non-Verbal)
- Representation
- Power
- Learning about the families and the students
- Commitment
- Equity

Key Takeaways

1 Language access is necessary, but language access alone is not cultural responsiveness

2 Culture influences behavior; it should never be used to stereotype or predetermine what a family believes

3 Latino families are culturally, racially, linguistically, generationally, and socioeconomically diverse

4 School intentions and family experiences can differ significantly

Key Takeaways

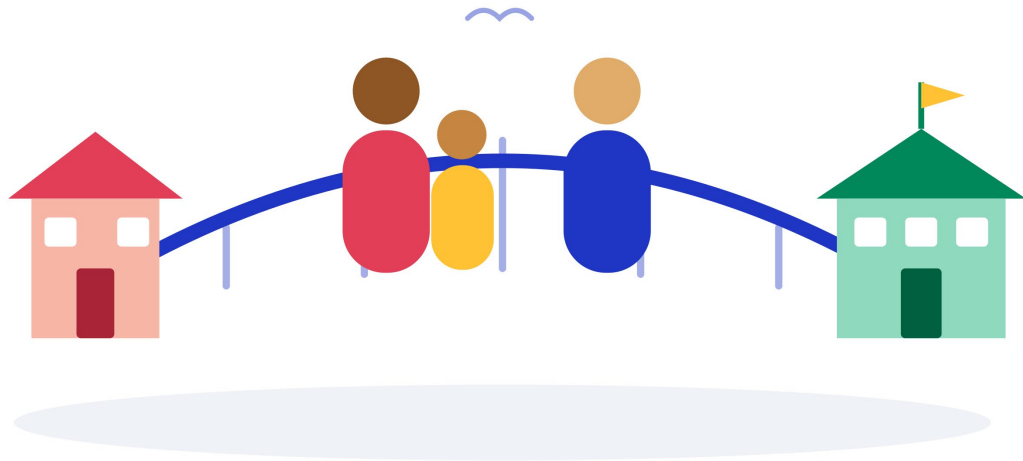
5 Inviting families is not the same as sharing influence

6 Culturally sustaining leadership asks schools to protect and value cultural and linguistic assets rather than requiring students and families to assimilate

7 Belonging means more than being welcomed. It includes being known, heard, valued, and influential

8 Reflect on this question: Does this family have to learn to fit into our school, or is our school also willing to learn, adapt, and change because this family is part of our community?

Three reminders



Families are assets, not problems to solve

Families are experts on their children and lived experiences

Partnership is measured by impact, not simply by the school's intentions

Final Reflection

- One action I will take or practice I will change in my work with families...
- Language access matters because...
- Understanding culture matters because...
- One assumption I want to examine is...
- One thing I will do differently with Latino families is...
- My two action commitments are...

Contact Us

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