

# Making the Invisible Visible

**Strategies for Engaging  
Mexican Youth & Families**

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## Deutsche Bank

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## ABOUT THIS REPORT

The *Making the Invisible Visible* report documents promising practices that contribute to sustained community and education engagement over time with Mexican youth and their families enrolled in Anchoring Achievement Networks. It highlights the approach and methodologies that made the most impact at the point of service and the lessons that can be applied and carried into future efforts. While the focus is on Mexican youth and their families, it is our hope that this report can contribute to building the field of youth development to be more inclusive and to promote continued dialogue regarding equity and opportunity for all youth.



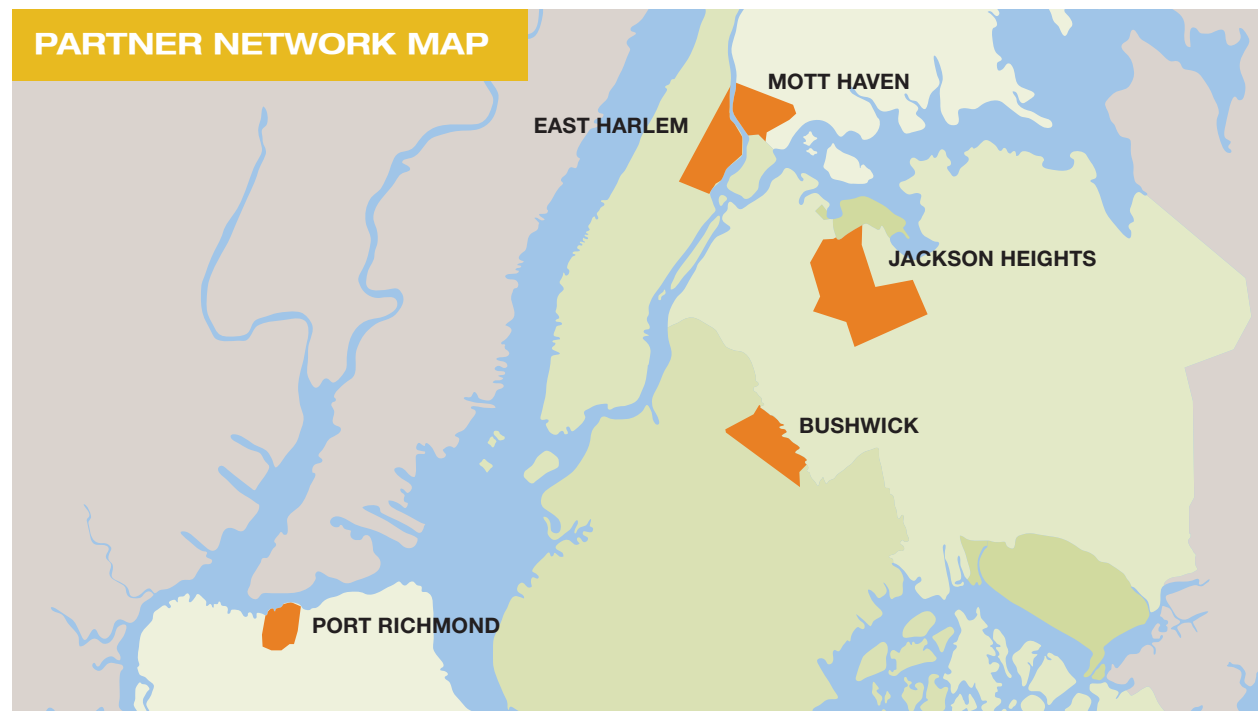
## INTRODUCTION: THE CONTEXT AND THE OPPORTUNITY

“Making the invisible visible is really powerful.”

These words were spoken by Maria Hinojosa, award-winning Mexican American journalist, during her 2017 keynote address for the Anchoring Achievement in Mexican Communities (AAMC) *Thought Leaders Forum* hosted by the Deutsche Bank Americas Foundation (DBAF). In her address, she described the importance of owning our stories and telling our personal narratives, to give voice to the voiceless whose experiences are often ignored and whose stories often go untold. This idea of “making the invisible visible” is the inspiration for this publication —by documenting practices that enhance community engagement and by highlighting core issues confronting communities engaged in change

efforts, we can create opportunities for immigrant youth to (re)engage with education. Making the invisible visible is both the challenge *and* the opportunity. How can we assist Mexican immigrant youth and their families as they begin to tell their stories of migration and working to thrive in the United States? How can we bring attention to their unique struggles and to forward a dialogue around how best to serve and educate them? How do we help immigrant youth navigate systemic barriers so that they and their families can thrive?

Anchoring Achievement in Mexican Communities (AAMC) was funded to respond to the challenges of disconnection among Mexican youth and families in NYC and to expand educational and economic opportunities for them. The Deutsche Bank AAMC grant program supported the



creation of borough-based education hubs that would deliver high-quality programs and services to youth and families of Mexican origin in New York City. Five “neighborhood Networks” (located in East Harlem, Mott Haven, Bushwick, Port Richmond, and Jackson Heights) were funded through this initiative and are highlighted in this publication. Through AAMC, the Networks seized the opportunity to raise awareness around the immigration experience and work to close the education gap for Mexican youth. Here, we present lessons learned from this effort to partner with communities to impact systems and institutions that often do not favor these youth or their families. Their successes are an example of what is possible when there is a thoughtful response to the challenge of improving outcomes for immigrant youth in NYC, and a concerted effort to tap into the collective strengths of a community to effect change.

Mexican youth represent a diverse, vibrant population and come from families that are resilient, resourceful and hard-working. The families that participated in this initiative illustrated this diversity, from those newly arrived from Puebla and Guerrero to 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Mexican-Americans; from families with fluency in Spanish and a working knowledge of English to monolingual families who only speak Mixtec or other indigenous Mexican languages; from families with no formal education to those who have been college educated. Each family had their own arrival stories, aspirations and unique accomplishments associated with navigating life, work and school in the United States. Mexican parents want the best for their children; they value

education and are eager to connect to services that will enable them to help their children succeed. Their stories highlight the communal strength that Mexican youth and families embody, to survive and thrive despite adversity.

In order to understand the experiences of Mexican youth and their families, it is necessary to talk about migration trauma and socio-economic conditions that often derail their hope for a better future. Nearly half of Mexican children in NYC grow up in poverty.<sup>1</sup> Low-income Mexican families struggle to make ends meet in neighborhoods where the cost of living is high and gentrification threatens their stability. Families struggle to find housing and higher wage jobs. They often come up against language barriers, anti-immigrant bias and other discriminatory policies and practices that adversely affect their ability to access educational opportunities and social services. These structural issues are daily realities in the lives of these youth and directly impact their development, academic achievement and the overall well-being of their families.

Many also live in fear of deportation. 3.5 million U.S. citizen children have noncitizen Mexican parents and the current threat of mass deportations threatens the stability of their families.<sup>2</sup> Whether youth themselves do not have legal immigration status or are being raised in mixed-status families (i.e. those with at least one undocumented resident and one U.S. citizen), their families often live on edge and in isolation, especially given the threat of increased immigration enforcement. In fact, studies establish a clear association between immigration

1 Mehrotra, A & Treschan, L. *Young Mexican-Americans in New York City: Working More, Learning and Earning Less*, Community Service Society. 2013. <http://www.cssny.org/publications/entry/young-mexican-americans-in-new-york-city>

2 Pew Research Center. *National Survey of Latinos*. September 11-October 9, 2014. [http://www.pewhispanic.org/2014/10/29/latino-support-for-democrats-falls-but-democratic-advantage-remains/ph\\_2014-10-29\\_nsl-politics-elections-35/](http://www.pewhispanic.org/2014/10/29/latino-support-for-democrats-falls-but-democratic-advantage-remains/ph_2014-10-29_nsl-politics-elections-35/)

policies and educational and mental health outcomes for youth.<sup>3</sup> In particular, undocumented youth can experience high levels of acculturative stress from immigration-related issues such as separation from family and academic difficulties.<sup>4</sup> The psychological costs of family separation associated with the migration process and with U.S. immigration procedures such as detention and deportation are well documented among children and may include symptoms of depression and anxiety.<sup>5</sup> According to one study, the most significant stressor for undocumented immigrants by far was the fear of deportation, which impacted immigrants' daily lives and was, for some, a constant concern.<sup>6</sup>

In the field of youth development, a lack of comprehensive, high quality programs for Mexican communities—particularly for those that are undocumented—underscores a lack of access to critical supports and social services. The continued growth of this community, coupled with economic and educational policies and practices that historically marginalize and relegate immigrants as forgotten or invisible, has serious implications for the field of youth development, the philanthropic community and the city as a whole. Especially when we consider the current anti-immigrant climate and hardened, ambiguous immigration policies that drive youth and families to be further disconnected and live in the shadows. These realities call for stronger advocacy for access to services and resources, for systemic change and for fundamental shifts that lead to greater investment and support of Mexican families. Increasing collective capacity to support immigrant youth requires

thoughtful, innovative approaches and long-term commitments to the well-being of these communities. Community organizations, educators and policymakers can work together to better serve Mexican communities and to strengthen the education pipeline for *all* immigrant youth.

The efforts of the Networks and the Anchoring Achievement in Mexican Communities (AAMC) initiative in leveraging relationships and implementing innovative program models and approaches has led to the achievement of the initiative's goals, including dramatically increasing access to services that deepened the breadth and depth of engagement of Mexican youth and their families in educational and workforce development programs. The story of AAMC makes a compelling case for promising practices that engage those most in need of effective education engagement and a renewed commitment to immigrant youth in New York City.

3 Barriers to Immigrants' Access, to Health and Human Services Programs; ASPE Issue Brief, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: Washington, DC. 2012. <https://aspe.hhs.gov/basic-report/barriers-immigrants-access-health-and-human-services-programs>

4 Arbona, C. Acculturative Stress Among Documented and Undocumented Latino Immigrants in the United States. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Science*. 2010. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4254683/>

5 Facing Our Future: Children in the Aftermath of Immigration Enforcement. The Urban Institute, 2010. <http://www.urban.org/research/publication/facing-our-future>

6 A Guide for Success in Secondary and Postsecondary Settings, U.S. Department of Education. 2015. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/focus/supporting-undocumented-youth.pdf>

# BACKGROUND

## The AAMC Initiative

In 2013, Deutsche Bank Americas Foundation (DBAF) established the *Anchoring Achievement in Mexican Communities (AAMC)* initiative to improve the long-term educational and economic well-being of children, youth and families of Mexican origin in New York City. AAMC was a three-year initiative designed to promote collective impact by funding and supporting sustainable partnerships (“Networks”) in each of the five NYC boroughs to provide access to comprehensive, high-quality educational programs and services to Mexican youth and their families. These neighborhood-based Networks (one in each borough) were comprised of multiple partners, including nonprofits, public schools, colleges, libraries and other community institutions. Networks were tasked with building on each other’s expertise and strengths to develop a spectrum of services that would be responsive to the needs of the Mexican community within a shared geography. The long-term goal of the Networks and the wider initiative was to strengthen the education pipeline for Mexican and Mexican-American students. The initiative had three phases: Planning, Start Up and Implementation.

## AAMC NEIGHBORHOOD NETWORKS

### Port Richmond/ Staten Island Network

Project Hospitality  
*lead agency*

Wagner College

Make the Road  
New York (MRNY)

El Centro del  
Inmigrante

### East Harlem/ Manhattan Network

Union Settlement,  
*lead agency*

LSA Family  
Health Service

Boys’ Club of  
New York

### Mott Haven/ Bronx Network

MASA-MexEd  
(MASA),  
*lead agency*

Parent-Child Home  
Program (PCHP)

Mott Haven Library

Committee for  
Hispanic Children  
and Families  
(CHCF)

### Bushwick/ Brooklyn Network

Opportunities for  
a Better Tomorrow  
(OBT),  
*lead agency*

Churches United  
for Fair Housing  
(CUFFH)

Academy of Urban  
Planning High  
School (AUP)

### Jackson Heights/ Queens Network

Internationals  
Network for  
Public Schools,  
*lead agency*

Make the Road  
New York (MRNY)

City University of  
New York (CUNY)

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## Phase 1: PLANNING

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The Planning Phase began with the proposal process. Through a planning grant, Deutsche Bank brought organizations interested in partnering together to conduct initial research and a needs assessment to better understand the educational needs of the community they were proposing to serve. The organizations also worked together on the development of a theory of change and met to collectively craft

a start-up and implementation plan. Out of this process five very different Networks formed and were funded to address the distinct needs of the Mexican community in each neighborhood. Three Networks (East Harlem, Port Richmond, and Mott Haven) were funded to provide services to young learners (pre-school through grade 3), and two Networks (Bushwick and Jackson Heights) were funded to focus on older youth.

### YOUNG LEARNER NETWORKS

Explicit focus on literacy and early childhood education

#### East Harlem, Manhattan

Reducing barriers to accessing strong early childhood programs and connecting families to wraparound services

#### Mott Haven, Bronx

Bringing new literacy and expanded educational supports to children, the toddler years through elementary school

#### Port Richmond, Staten Island

Forming home-school connections and parent leadership to boost 3rd grade literacy

### OLDER YOUTH NETWORKS

Explicit focus on academic and job readiness outcomes

#### Jackson Heights and Elmhurst/Corona, Queens

Creating a new high school to address academic needs and economic demands, and building 21st century skills

#### Bushwick, Brooklyn

Re-connecting out-of-school youth and their families to educational resources and to work

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## Phase 2: START-UP

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During the Start-Up phase, the Networks began the hard work of moving from the conceptualization of their proposals to executing on their plans. The Network strategy demanded real partnership: partners had to come to the table ready to align their efforts in order to operationalize their plans and reach their long-term goals. Partners met regularly and collaborated to identify methods of communication, hire staff, develop their initial recruitment strategies and build out their programs and services. Partnership was hard work, as was operationalizing the initial, ambitious proposals.

YDI was brought on during this phase as the technical assistance (TA) provider for the initiative and played an integral role as a thought partner in helping Networks navigate this transition from strategy to implementation. With their articulated theory of change, each Network began their work with YDI by participating in a facilitated process for developing an Outcomes Based Plan. This process helped partners create benchmarks for success, identify necessary resources, flag and troubleshoot challenges with service delivery and drill down on the strategies and actions that would achieve their desired impact.



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## Phase 3: IMPLEMENTATION

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During the Implementation phase, Networks were able to build on the momentum created in the early stages and focus on continuous improvement. Each Network leveraged the diverse skills and resources of their partner organizations and the community at large and demanded a high level of investment. In many respects, the Networks embarked on uncharted territory, providing home-based services for the first time, learning how to work with indigenous families or developing a new school model that would address the complex needs of unaccompanied minors. Staff were able to test out hunches and grapple with questions of capacity, methodology, effectiveness, and sometimes even mission. In an effort to increase the impact and sustainability of the initiative, each Network continued to innovate, engage new partners and expand their reach.

YDI's capacity building efforts centered around supporting each neighborhood Network to be able to achieve the following broader outcomes of the initiative:

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- Outcome 1:** Increase availability and accessibility of high-quality educational programs and services
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- Outcome 2:** Increase student and parent engagement in and completion of school and community-based learning activities
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- Outcome 3:** Improve academic performance and, where applicable, employment prospects

YDI provided customized on-site support to individual Networks by facilitating partnership meetings to strengthen ongoing communication, focus on common goals and continuous improvement, and tackle dilemmas of practice. To build capacity, YDI also offered training on youth development principles and facilitated coaching sessions with each of the Networks centered around outcomes planning, data collection, and sustainability planning. In partnership with NYU, YDI served as the convener of city-wide Network meetings to promote cross-Network sharing of information and ideas, data dialogues and culling of effective practices.

It was out of one of these facilitated meetings that the idea of documenting the work of the Networks was born. Network leaders felt strongly about the importance of raising awareness and creating a collective understanding of what it takes to effectively engage Mexican youth and their families in traditional and nontraditional ways, believing that, as one Network leader said, "what we are doing does not fit into a box." The goal became to effectively capture how Networks were able to reframe youth and family engagement in order to elevate the practices of the field and ultimately the experiences of immigrant youth and their families.

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## INITIATIVE IMPACT

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### AAMC NETWORK KEY SUCCESSSES

**Increased engagement and expansion of high-quality youth and family programming across AAMC Networks as evidenced by:**

- Exceeded enrollment goal of serving one-third of Mexican youth in catchment areas
- Over 18,000 points of contact with Mexican youth and families over the course of three years
- Networks serve as referral hubs—combined over 1,200 referrals for medical, housing, legal support and other social services.
- Parents and children show improvements in language development and parents see themselves as able to contribute to their children's academic success.
- Improvements in reading proficiency levels on standardized tests.
- Improved academic performance for older youth, including increased attendance in school, High School Equivalency attainment, and vocational credentials earned.

*Neighborhood Networks Supporting Mexican Immigrant Communities in New York City. Report on Deutsche Bank Americas Foundation's Anchoring Achievement in Mexican Communities Initiative. Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools, April 2017.*

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## REPORT FRAMEWORK

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This report focuses on three guiding questions: (1) What are the “buckets” of promising practices that lead to engagement and the achievement of outcomes for the Anchoring Achievement Networks? (2) How have Networks redefined engagement and what are the lessons that can be extracted for local and national application and field-building? and (3) What are the implications for policy and practice?

This report draws on YDI's work on the ground with administrators, staff and other stakeholders over the course of the initiative, including site

visits, coaching sessions, partnership meetings and conversations with program participants themselves. In collaboration with NYU Metro Center, focus groups and interviews with key staff were conducted during the final year of funding through the DBAF grant. A review of the evaluation report by NYU Metro Center, Network stewardship reports and consultation with Network coordinators also provided data to support the documentation of the specific practice methodologies that produce results for programs working with Mexican youth and families.

# SPOTLIGHT ON PROMISING PRACTICES

YDI believes that the sustainability of programs depends in part on understanding what works in the field of youth development and across community-building initiatives. In mining the results of AAMC and the success of the Networks in reaching desired outcomes, we were able to identify six key areas of promising practices, explored in detail below. These are “the how” of the outcomes that were manifested by the five Networks:

**1** **Place Families and Communities at the Center**

**2** **Operate from a Strength-Based & Relational Approach**

**3** **Value and Demonstrate Cultural and Contextual Fluency**

**4** **Conduct Grassroots Outreach & Recruitment**

**5** **Provide High Touch Services**

**6** **Cultivate Authentic Participation**



BUSHWICK NETWORK

1

### **Place Families and Communities at the Center**

Recognize that families are critical to positive youth development and that youth outcomes are best achieved in the context of a supportive, engaged community. Networks work to continuously reframe and prioritize family engagement. They view the stabilization of families as central to long-term educational and economic well being of Mexican youth.

2

### **Operate from a Strength-Based & Relational Approach**

Adopt a perspective that focuses on what is right with youth and families rather than what is wrong. Implement programs and practices that build on existing strengths and foster engagement through supportive relationships and community building. Networks are deliberate about providing services, support, and opportunities to Mexican youth and their families that are strength-based, holistic and relational.

3

### **Value and Demonstrate Cultural and Contextual Fluency**

Cultivate knowledge and understanding of cultural values, norms and expectations in order to navigate cultural constructs with ease and intention. Cultural fluency is strengthened by contextual fluency through a deep understanding of and responsiveness to the issues and needs of particular communities. Networks provide culturally competent services across the engagement continuum and are sensitive and responsive to complexities associated with the Mexican immigrant experience.



#### **4 Conduct Grassroots Outreach & Recruitment**

Engage community outreach as a model for making connections, sharing information and building participation of youth and their families over time. Networks effectively reach the Mexican community through intentional efforts marked by a “listen and learn” approach and grassroots “on the ground” engagement in the community.

#### **5 Provide High Touch Services**

Offer comprehensive services that are tailored to meet the distinct needs of youth and their families. Networks provide wrap-around services to address educational, health and economic barriers facing the Mexican community. These services are characterized by intensive touch points that demand greater effort of coordination, resources and time.

#### **6 Cultivate Authentic Participation**

Design and sustain programs that promote voice and choice. Young people and their families gain confidence through opportunities to lead and impact the world around them. Networks encourage genuine engagement and empowerment of Mexican youth and families to take on challenges and make decisions that matter in their lives.

# 1

## Families and Communities at the Center

“...in order to bridge the education gap or really help children improve their academic performances, you have to work with the parents and help the parents to be able to feel like they understand the education system, but also, if they have their own education goals, for them to be able to achieve them, or to be able to achieve better employment opportunities, or immigration status, so I think working with both the parents and the children was probably the ... Initially, that was not supposed to be how the Network was going to work, but I think we realized that that was what was needed.”

—EAST HARLEM NETWORK STAFF

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### Overview

At YDI, we see families as central to programs and the communities they serve, and recognize family engagement as a powerful methodology that leads to benefits for youth, families and programs themselves. While YDI has observed first-hand the challenges youth workers and educators regularly face as they try to involve families in meaningful ways, AAMC stands as a stellar example of how to be effective in family engagement.

**Important to this success was each Network’s decision to reframe their work with Mexican**

**youth to include the authentic engagement of families. While the goal was to achieve youth outcomes, both youth and families were seen as the primary audience for Networks.** Each Network approached the work viewing families as allies and thought partners and as central to the development of young people. Developing interactions between programs and families that were strong and positive, helping families access needed services for their children, and increasing families’ involvement in their children’s education became central to each Network’s theory of change.

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### Practice in Action

The two-generational approach (parent-child centered services) was especially central to the three Networks serving young learners. The Port Richmond and Mott Haven Networks each offered signature programs, the *Promotores* Program and the Parent Child Home Program (PCHP) respectively, that focused on working closely with parents over time to support their child’s educational development. The *Promotores* Program directly supported 56 families in programming focused on language development, home-school connections, economic stability and local parent leadership. A key program in *Promotores* were parent-child literacy classes, led by faculty and master’s students from Wagner College who engaged in one-on-one and small

group instruction with moms and their children. The Mott Haven PCHP engaged families via home visits to promote school readiness by increasing the verbal and nonverbal interaction between the parent and child through modeling using carefully selected educational books and toys. The program had 100% retention. “When you create the space, they come and they show up and they participate” noted Cesar Zuniga from PCHP.

The East Harlem Network shifted their approach after Year 1, as the partners recognized that factors beyond the educational needs of the child called for a much higher level of parent engagement than initially planned. The Network expanded the breadth of its family support

work to include case management for close to 300 Mexican families. They also offered family engagement programs including family reading nights, immigration and financial literacy workshops, and *Intercambio de Lenguas*, a language development program co-facilitated with the Endangered Language Alliance. Networks also frequently incorporated family fun into programming, including hosting *Convivios*—social gatherings where people come together to celebrate important milestones and share a piece of themselves in community, and traditional Mexican holiday celebrations like *Día de los Muertos* and *Día del Niño*. Parents enjoyed the celebrations and gatherings as they “reminded them of parties back in their hometowns.” Network coordinators reported that the events promoted sustained engagement as they honored participants customs and helped families build community.

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Networks provide targeted services to parents to help them understand their role in their children’s development and make informed decisions about their education. For example, parent workshops offered at MASA included *Math & Common Core Standards*, *Navigating Parent-Teacher*

*Conferences*, *Positive Discipline*, *Immigrant Student Rights*, *Nutrition*, *Ancestral Medicine*, and *Abriendo Puertas / Opening Doors*—the nation’s first evidence-based comprehensive training program developed by and for Latino parents with children ages 0-5. “We’ve had to do a lot more support and work around making them feel comfortable with getting involved in their children’s education, not only advocacy and advocating for resources, but actually saying “I know you don’t know how to read and write, but you can tell when your kid didn’t read the book” (Aracelis Lucero, Mott Haven)

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The Bushwick, Jackson Heights and Port Richmond Networks each hosted programming in local schools and developed strong, reciprocal relationships with partner schools to promote family engagement in education. In Bushwick, staff worked closely with administrators at AUP, one of their partner high schools, to increase communication with families. The opportunity, for example, to attend and connect with parents during parent-teacher conferences gave staff insight into family related issues that impacted students’ attendance in school and participation in the program.

## 2

## Strength-Based & Relational Approach

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### Overview

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Two youth development practices emerged as critical to engaging Mexican youth and families: taking a **strength-based** perspective and focusing on **relationship-building**. The starting point with youth was that of building from their strengths and talents and making connections that build trust and commitment to the program. Staff also affirmed the strengths and efforts of families they worked with and recognized the work of parents as important.

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### Strength-Based Perspectives

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Effective programs recognize that all youth and families have strengths and are valued as resources and partners. YDI facilitated PYD trainings for Network staff designed to increase awareness of the strength-based approach and other PYD principles, and to help shift the lens from challenges to opportunities and from deficits to assets. AAMC service providers were thoughtful and deliberate about engaging the Mexican community as experts in their own experience and as participants who offer a unique and important perspective. **Networks emphasized “leading with the positive” and tapping into family strengths, especially in the context of approaches that have historically marginalized these families and worked with them from a deficit-based perspective.**

“We never believed in the ‘build it and they will come model.’ Although locally, people knew us and trusted us, with new families, we really had to do the work. That meant making them feel welcomed, respected, heard, honored, appreciated, like it was a partnership, and supporting them the best way we could.”

—ARACELIS LUCERO  
MASA, MOTT HAVEN NETWORK



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## Practice in Action

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Network staff believed in the community's willingness to engage and in their capacity to create their own solutions. This belief in the potential for meaningful change in the lives of Mexican youth and their families was apparent in each Network's theory of change and plan for reaching their proposed outcomes. Similar to Paulo Freire's concept of a 'Pedagogy of Hope', Networks operated from a premise of, "modeling hope", using a strength-based discourse in staff meetings and professional development with line staff, teachers and caseworkers.

The young learner Networks were structured to teach parents skills and to increase awareness around literacy and child development. However, it was equally important to staff to have parents recognize their own strengths and resources, which they believed added as much value to children's positive development as learning new skills. As one of the Wagner College professors leading the Promotores Program literacy classes observed, "A lot of times, in the literature, it's

always focusing on how can we help families join programs like this, and focusing more on models to say, 'What you're doing hasn't been working, and this is the way we do it in the American educational system'." In contrast, AAMC neighborhood Networks reinforced Mexican family values regarding education, affirmed the parent's way of teaching respect and good behavior in school, and provided opportunities for parents to share their own insights about how to influence their child's performance and well-being at home or in school.

In activities with youth and families, Networks highlighted the impact and richness of living "in two worlds" and of being multilingual. They also found it was important to demystify the notion that children won't learn or perform as well in school if they speak more than one language, a widely held belief. It was important for indigenous Mexicans to preserve their native language traditions and take ownership of their narratives.

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## Relationship Building

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PYD places relationship building at the center of all interactions. Trust, and making participants feel welcomed and connected, becomes the basis for participation. This guiding principle is aligned with the concept of *personalismo*, the emphasis on personal connection, which is highly valued in the Mexican community. **Networks understood the role *personalismo* plays in promoting connectedness and thus spent time upfront investing in relationship-building with youth and their families.** These enduring relationships formed with families led to sustained engagement over the three years of the AAMC initiative.

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## Practice in Action

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Networks are thoughtful and proactive about creating a warm, welcoming environment for participants. Aracelis Lucero from MASA in the Mott Haven Network observed: “We were always making sure that the place felt welcoming if people were new to the center/agency—making it familiar and accessible by leveraging cultural practices, food, things that were important and mattered to them, making them feel like there were people that not only cared but that would be supportive and answer their questions or connect them to services. Sometimes this just looked like providing a safe space for people to share concerns and feel like they were being heard and were not alone because others were experiencing similar things.” Building relationships by meeting families where they are coming from in terms of cultural and linguistic fluency was essential to cultivating long-term work together.

Staff across Networks gave families enough space and time to grow in their autonomy and feel comfortable navigating, accessing and participating in services. They worked from the premise that building trust is a gradual process. Networks understood that until community was built, parents would not necessarily share openly about their immigration status or the fact that they might be illiterate. There was a level of self-consciousness and sometimes shame parents felt that was released when the feeling of safety was created. As Wendy Miron of the East Harlem Network noted, “Parents dropped off their kids at head start and talked to me about a lot of different things on a daily basis. Not just when they needed to see me for a specific issue...Being able to stay closely connected to the parents about what’s going on in their lives so that you can better help them—I think that’s how you gain their trust.”

The Jackson Heights Network was intentional about when and how their peer mentors interacted with students at the Pan American International High School in order to facilitate meaningful touch points between mentors and their mentees. Staff understood that genuine engagement with the curriculum would only happen once relationships had been built. As a member of the Jackson Heights Network stated, “The important piece was that relationship piece. Again, it was always meeting the students where they’re at- mentors making themselves available during lunch and having lunch with the students; being in the classrooms with the students to develop those relationships.”

In Port Richmond’s Promotores program, Wagner College professors worked with education and early childhood student teachers to help them move beyond any language barriers that existed to figure out how best to build relationships with students and their moms during their literacy instruction. The professors recognized the importance of making genuine efforts to connect with the moms in their program by prioritizing “human connection:” not shying away from taking that step to go talk to a mom or demonstrate something; using eye contact and body language when words were not sufficient; and attempting to speak Spanish whenever appropriate. “When teachers don’t speak the language, they feel uncomfortable, so they will focus on the translator. I would tell them, ‘Talk to the families, and make that connection that way.’ That was a thing that we ended up saying quite a bit: ‘Talk to the mom, don’t talk to us. Talk to the mom.’” (Rhoda Frumkin, Wagner College, Port Richmond Network)

### 3 Value and Demonstrate Cultural & Contextual Fluency

“It became a great challenge ...to work with parents and teachers from different cultures and traditions that were willing, but perhaps didn’t have the skills needed to establish the kinds of relationships that all of us in this partnership thought was important. We see a lot of the literature about intercultural exchanges and sharing about traditions, culture and language... but not enough about the intentionality that is needed for this kind of work.”

—KATIA GONZALEZ  
WAGNER COLLEGE, PORT RICHMOND NETWORK

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## Overview

Effective programs that serve immigrant youth and their families demonstrate cultural fluency; that is, they understand the behaviors, attitudes, policies and structures needed to work effectively cross-culturally (National Centre for Cultural Competence, 2006). We intentionally use the word “fluency” here as it connotes the knowledge, comfort and navigational skills that effective youth workers and educators working with immigrant youth and their families demonstrate. **Among programs working with Mexican families (and Latino families in general) it is especially important to incorporate cultural constructs (*personalismo, respeto, confianza, familismo*) that counter the community’s experience with unwelcoming and/or intimidating institutions.**<sup>7</sup> The strongest programs demonstrate cultural awareness, implement culturally responsive practices, and have a tight grasp on contextual issues, such as the educational and environmental factors impacting the community and the community’s unique needs. Networks demonstrated both knowledge of and sensitivity to the cultural values and expectations of the Mexican community, as well as a deep understanding of the issues impacting their lives and the development of young people in particular.

“[We] provide a lot of supports, but if the structures, the will, and I guess the cultural competency or fluency aren’t in place, then no amount of support is going to help.”

—MARGUERITE LUKES  
INTERNATIONALS NETWORK FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS,  
JACKSON HEIGHTS NETWORK

“New York has a habit of painting the entire Latino/Hispanic community as Spanish. Like I’m going to eat Spanish food. Or ‘You’re Spanish’? And so when you go to the Mexican community, it’s like ‘No. I’m Mexican. I’m proud to be Mexican.’ ...There is this identity with that. You really have to hone in on it as well. In many ways, they are very separate from the larger “Spanish” culture in New York.”

— ADRIANA LOVERA  
BUSHWICK NETWORK

“The international schools are schools that receive people from all around the world. In these schools students can use their home language, practically what they do is to learn English in Spanish. I mean, it’s easy for the students to communicate and for the teacher to provide the explanations in Spanish. For example, when my son arrived four years ago he did not know to talk in English, he arrived two months before finishing the school year, and he was able to get good academic results. He initially was able to talk in Spanish to understand the English. I think that helped him a lot. Also they are talking with their classmates in the same language and that helped him to build relationships and friends.”

—PARENT IN JACKSON HEIGHTS NETWORK

<sup>7</sup> Calzada, E, D. Cortes, and Fernandez, Y, *Incorporating the Cultural Value of Respeto Into a Framework of Latino Parenting*, *Culturally Diverse Ethnic Minor Psychology*, Jan., 2010.

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## Cultural Fluency

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**AAMC Networks were aware that culture impacts service delivery and worked at understanding the complex dynamics (such as communication, language, identity, customs and, beliefs) involved in cross-cultural interactions.** Intentionality around providing culturally competent services across programs emerged as critical to the sustained engagement of Mexican youth and families.

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## Practice in Action

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Staff honored and celebrated customs and traditions while recognizing that Mexicans are not a homogeneous group. Efforts were made to acknowledge diversity within and across the Mexican population. For example, Network staff in East Harlem held *Cinco de Mayo* events and made sure to provide music and activities that reflected and were of interest to the families. As one Network staff member reported, “we hired a brass band from *Guerrero* as opposed to the traditional mariachis... one of the fathers was almost in tears because he said it reminded him of his hometown....[we had] different folk dance groups, but making sure that they’re representing a diverse population in Mexico because I think sometimes we get lost in the stereotypes of Mexican culture.”

Networks actively validated home language whenever possible. For example, The East Harlem Network launched indigenous language workshops in partnership with the Endangered Language Alliance; and the Port Richmond Network purchased bilingual, culturally relevant books for their literacy classes. Moms read to children in Spanish and students read the same books in English. The Internationals schools that formed part of the Jackson Heights Network embrace instruction that incorporates

Individuals took time to learn and understand the delicate elements and nuances of a culture. By acknowledging their own assumptions and being conscious of not reflecting and enforcing mainstream western values on participants, staff could learn and grow in their cultural competency. Staff across the Networks talked about taking the time to dig in and understand the mindsets of the parents, especially among those organizations for which working with the Mexican population was new. This meant being open to changing the planned curriculum to fit the population, testing out hunches, and/or scrapping activities or services that were not relevant or responsive to the needs of the community.

Three Networks hired Coordinators of Mexican descent, and all Networks employed Latino staff, many who were immigrants themselves. The Jackson Heights Network was deeply thoughtful about selection of peer mentors, as one member noted: “That was part of the theory of change ... having peer mentor students who look and talk and had similar experiences as the students they were working with would be more effective, and that students would be more engaged.” Network coordinators stressed that while having Mexican and Latino staff was certainly a positive, what was even more important was hiring staff with the competencies that make them effective, including self-awareness, openness to learning and sharing, and the ability to have intimate interactions.

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Port Richmond staff visit Mexico and used pictures, vocabulary and travel experience to bring curriculum to life for students and families. They used graphic organizers based on pictures and materials from Mexico, including baskets and aprons that mothers in the program had brought in themselves. This instructional focus helped teachers increase engagement in the classroom while still reinforcing literacy practices.

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## Contextual Fluency

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**It was crucial to the success of Networks that service providers understood the effects of the social and environmental context of the neighborhoods they served.** While Networks brought extensive knowledge, experience—and history serving immigrant communities—Mexican youth and families in particular, they also demonstrated interest and commitment to learning and responding to the complex issues impacting the positive youth development of the youth they served.

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## Practice in Action

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In supporting the work of their high schools, Internationals Network for Public Schools builds teacher capacity around understanding literacy needs, understanding language development needs, and understanding students' constraints that are beyond their control. They also emphasize sensitivity to contextual issues that may interfere with school attendance. Liliana Vargas from the Jackson Heights Network noted, "The reunification issues where you have older students who are back with their parents for the first time since they were little, which can often cause issues in school...and at home. There's just a recognition that is not purely an academic."

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Networks were also responsive to adult literacy needs. *Alfabetizacion*, teaching adults to read and write, became a pointed need to address. Parents wanted to learn English to help their children, but had no formal education and required Spanish-language remediation before they could dive into learning English. Networks quickly mobilized to offer instruction on-site or refer families out to other programs.

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Networks also facilitated gatherings, workshops, and informational sessions on immigration, students' rights and tenant laws, in an effort to respond to community questions and fears.

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Networks took the necessary precautions to protect participants' privacy and status whenever possible. For example, "Know Your Rights" workshops were closed to guests, as families felt anxious about people they did not trust knowing their legal status. Similarly, no pictures were taken during *Plazas Comunitarias* so as not to embarrass parents who did not want others to know they could not read or write. In Bushwick, Network staff provided sensitivity training on immigration issues to agency staff in order to prepare them to appropriately address issues like request of social security numbers or obtaining a green card for a young person.

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Networks partnered with other providers and institutions to make additional services available to the community, such as the Mobile Mexican Consulates, which provided critical services including renewals of Mexican passports, consular identification documents, and filing of birth certificates.

Something as simple as sending letters home to parents who don't speak English and have low literacy levels can become a barrier to engagement. Networks found ways to be mindful about communication, so as not to exclude families. Both East Harlem and Mott Haven made it a practice to prioritize families who needed translation services and whenever possible accompany them to ensure they could communicate during doctors visits or IEP meetings.

## 4

# Grassroots Outreach and Recruitment

“In new markets or in different catchment areas, it’s a very intensive, grassroots kind of building of a campaign to get people recruited into the program, so there’s a lot of emphasis put on the marketing of the program and showing up places and making sure that people see our logos and really understand that this is a real tangible thing...Once they’re in the door, I think the services speak for themselves and you find very quickly that there’s a word of mouth effect that is pretty powerful. I think word carries when a program is high quality and their folks are well trained and taking care of you.

—CESAR ZUNIGA, PCHP, MOTT HAVEN NETWORK

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## Overview

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The community organizing model proved to be an effective approach that, along with high-quality programs and services, led to the engagement of more than 18,000 Mexican youth and families over the course of the first three years of the AAMC initiative. **The driving philosophy behind the outreach strategy, as expressed by Networks, was “not waiting for participants to come but going to where they are.”** This is the approach to recruitment taken by all Networks across the initiative—a community-based approach that was proactive, aggressively grassroots, and characterized by the following:

- Extensive street outreach
- A “listen and learn” approach
- Drawing on the knowledge of current participants to access new participants
- Enlisting the help of participants, contacts in the community and local business owners
- Tapping into formal and informal Networks

Across Networks, lead agencies described the recruitment phase as quite intensive. The level of effort and investment of resources required to engage participants cannot be overstated. The key to success was balancing the goals of meeting deliverables (i.e. enrolling one-third of the Mexican population in their geographic area and beginning service delivery), with building trust and establishing a presence in the community. The latter has to come first, and takes time and resources. Once Networks establish themselves, they do not have to recruit participants so fervently. In fact, by the end the initiative’s second year, programs had waiting lists for their services.

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## Practice in Action

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Getting to know people in the community and finding the time to listen to them and learn what was going on in their lives was key to recruitment. For organizations with less experience working in the Mexican community, “on the ground” engagement surfaced as critical to increasing the visibility of these Networks in the neighborhoods they sought to serve. As Leah Hebert from the Bushwick Network noted, “We were new in the

Mexican community, so we really had to make 10 times the lift to get our name out there and what services we were providing.” Networks spent time upfront making face-to-face contacts with residents in the community by canvassing the area, handing out flyers on street corners or at soccer games, going to parks and tabling at community fairs, walking into neighborhood taquerias and conducting targeted outreach at New York City Housing Authority housing projects, and community workshops.

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Networks tapped into local knowledge and developed partnerships with trusted institutions. Network coordinators frequently talked about how links made with community churches, for example, played a significant role in the recruitment process. The idea of “transferring trust” was important, as participants were more likely to trust neighborhood Network staff if they had been introduced by a church leader or met Network staff through an organization they were already connected to in their community. OBT (Bushwick Network), for example, leveraged their relationships with three local churches to gain access to Mexican youth and their families. The East Harlem Coordinator focused her energy on establishing a presence and getting to know the families in the Early Head Start programs at Little Sisters of the Assumption (LSA), one of the key partners in the East Harlem Network.

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MASA (Mott Haven Network) and MRNY staff (Jackson Heights Network) leveraged their deep roots in the Mexican community to get the word out. MASA, for example, was able to tap into many of the formal and informal Networks Mexican families were a part of, such as *Guadalupano* groups, Herbalife or other sales groups, cultural groups and the Mexican consulate.

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In their effort to increase participation of Mexican youth and parents, the Bushwick Network attended and organized various community events, distributed over 2,000 bilingual resource guides designed to assist Mexican families find and use resources in Bushwick, and were featured on the Mexican Consulate’s radio show “La Hora Consular” to promote their monthly parent workshops.



## **ANCHORING ACHIEVEMENT IN MEXICAN COMMUNITIES**

LOGO BY BUSHWICK NETWORK

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Branding became important to the outreach process in terms of logos, description of services, flyers, and more. East Harlem and Bushwick each create their own logos, paying attention to cultural sensitivities and to details such as choosing the correct translation of Anchoring Achievement into Spanish, ensuring the logo and other outreach materials reflected Mexican cultural identifiers; and capturing all partners in Network descriptions.



## 5 Provide High-Touch Services

“Everything is connected...You’re sitting there learning the life story of a person and their migration to United States [for] the intake we do for legal services. You can’t just sit there and ignore the fact that they tell you that they’ve been through domestic violence or that they don’t have food or that they have a kid who’s been depressed and who tried to commit suicide. You’re not asking. Sometimes those things just happen...as an agency we’ve had to learn very quickly how to respond or not respond and set priorities.”

—ARACELIS LUCERO, MASA, MOTT HAVEN NETWORK

### OVERVIEW

Youth-serving community-based organizations that work effectively with immigrant families provide critical support services to help stabilize families when necessary. They go beyond limited traditional family engagement approaches to deeper interventions that provide wrap-around services to address educational, health and economic barriers. **Each of the AAMC Networks operated from the premise that economic and home stability was directly connected to young people’s ability to thrive in school and other education settings.** Networks in turn provided a range of supports to promote family stabilization. Central to their efforts were comprehensive, customized services tailored to meet the distinct

needs of youth and their families, such as access to a food pantry, domestic violence counseling and referrals, navigating landlord disputes, as well as legal and financial counseling. High-touch services required flexibility and responsiveness in real time and generally demanded greater effort with regards to coordination, resource allocation and time. As one East Harlem Network member reported, “Part of the challenge was finding the resources -...and culturally competent staff to be able to work with families in this way.” Nonetheless, parents overwhelmingly reported the supports they received as particularly valuable to them and their children.

### Practice in Action

Though not always a part of their original proposed plan, Networks develop formal referral systems, case management services, and partnerships with other social service providers to respond to the fluid needs of families, especially immigrant families navigating unfamiliar systems in a new language. Networks quickly recognized the need to expand and formalize the way they assessed family needs and how to most efficiently link families to resources.

Support services for the Jackson Heights and Bushwick Networks often centered around providing

immigration counseling, such as attorney referrals, passport application or double nationality, crisis planning around deportation, and financial planning. The Bushwick Network reported 1050 hours in immigration consultations alone.

The Port Richmond, Mott Haven and East Harlem Networks adopted a structured intake process that helped move many families from crisis to stability as well as make successful referrals for supporting their children’s academic achievement. Intake services were strength-based and comprehensive in nature, structured to learn as much as they could about the families: identifying the types of activities they engaged

in at home, documenting their migration history, assessing parental reading levels and habits, and determining needed academic support services.

Networks often made multiple referrals per family and invested time in doing whatever was necessary to address barriers to academic achievement, including accompanying families to public assistance appointments, doctor's visits and Individualized Education Program meetings. As one member of the Port Richmond Network observed, "We added entitlement work and service referrals for each of our families. This assistance helped to stabilize families economically and provide a safety net for our literacy work."

The Bushwick Network also developed a referral and case management system to address urgent situations and provide support for youth around barriers to participation in the program, including making referrals to community agencies that could assist with domestic violence and substance abuse cases, as well as making frequent calls to parents to engage them in problem-solving around issues impacting their lives and the lives of their children. Participants also received assistance finding employment, connecting to out-of-school youth programs, college and financial aid advising, applications to schools, interview and resume preparation, finding internships, and other services.

## 5 Cultivate Authentic Participation

“We have ample non-systematic evidence that participants are extremely satisfied with the quality of their experiences and are more connected to the community. For example, parents in the program have become school leaders, both according to the principal and by their own reports, speaking up at meetings, representing the school at important NYC DOE policy events, and bringing other parents to the school”

—EXCERPT FROM PORT RICHMOND NETWORK END OF YEAR REPORT

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### OVERVIEW

In a youth development context, authentic participation is associated with an environment that fosters voice and choice and meaningful opportunities for participants to contribute to programs and to their communities. It is more than consistent attendance in program activities or seat time. Organizations that value authentic participation engage participants as partners and resources and help them gain confidence through opportunities to impact issues that matter to them. The research on positive youth development is extensive and posits that opportunities for authentic participation increase engagement.

Across the board, authentic participation was a cornerstone of the five Networks. **Programs led with a desire to listen to and share power with youth and their families. They created formal and informal venues for leadership and collaborated and organized with participants around important issues impacting the Mexican community, including education and immigration reform.** YDI believes that central to their success in sustaining engagement over time, was each Network’s commitment to building the capacity of youth and families to advocate for themselves and participate in decision-making.

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### Practice in Action

Networks demonstrate a deep commitment to promoting civic engagement, and alongside families they serve, tackling public policy issues and other structural barriers that stand in the way of the academic achievement and economic well being of Mexican youth and families. There has been a concerted effort in AAMC programs to increase parent knowledge so that they can be informed on the issues and can feel empowered to mobilize around making change. While MASA (Mott Haven Network) and MRNY (Jackson Heights) have been at the forefront of organizing communities around issues impacting immigrant youth and families, every Network has been involved in advocacy work throughout the life of the initiative. Families enrolled in the Networks have joined citywide coalitions including the New

York Immigration Coalition, NYC Coalition for Educational Justice, speak at City Hall and other forums, have marched in solidarity for immigration reform and organized to support the Dream Act.

Staff in the Port Richmond Network reported that based on their interactions with families, they noticed an increase in parent leadership within their literacy sessions (e.g. taking ownership of leading activities, writing, presenting, and bringing in culturally relevant examples and artifacts). Parents in Port Richmond also have a seat at the decision making table. They consistently take part in Network partnership meetings, meetings with funders, and participate in advocacy/community organizing events. The Promotores program also works to prepare families to be advocates in their child’s education.

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The Bushwick Network engaged parents and youth in OBT programs to go out into the community with staff to distribute flyers and meet people in the community. They shared testimony about the program and helped to promote AAMC within the community.

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Youth in the Bushwick Network also participated in an elective class, offered to the four schools on the Bushwick Educational Campus, where they learned about their immigrant histories, wrote their own narratives, and gained skills on how to self-advocate and serve others.

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The MRNY program in Jackson Heights enrolled community members in a wide array of programs and services aimed at improving educational and employment outcomes including ESL and workforce development programs. For some of these youth, these programs resulted in students transitioning to MRNY positions.

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**“... you’re basically actually creating intentional ways to hear from the parents what is meaningful to them and how they make meaning out of things. That way you’re delivering what they need and not just what you think they need...”**

—CESAR ZUNIGA, MOTT HAVEN NETWORK

At the start of the initiative, MASA (Mott Haven Network) created a Parent Committee which is still functioning to date. The parent leadership group has their own budget, fundraises and is charged with setting the top priorities that are voted upon by the larger parent body. Through this process, the Parent Committee determines the agenda and chart of work for parents for the remainder of the year. In addition to their involvement in helping to push the organization’s mission forward, parents attend programs themselves and are invited to provide feedback about the organization and the changes they want to see.

## LESSONS FOR THE FIELD

This section highlights findings from the AAMC Networks that are important to share with the field. The implications of our findings were evident on two levels. On a programmatic level, the strategies outlined in the Promising Practices section of this publication speak to the range of practical solutions to the challenges of cultivating and sustaining partnerships with Mexican families and young people. At a systems level, our findings illustrate the structural issues at play that undermine positive youth and community development through legal, policy and institutional barriers that negatively impact immigrant communities. The deep involvement of the Networks in advocacy efforts to influence public policy, coupled with their work on the ground with Mexican families, afforded networks substantial insight into how structural and systemic issues affect immigrant communities and the well-being of their young people. Accordingly, we offer a set of recommendations we believe that capture the work ahead for CBOs, schools, policymakers, funders and other stakeholders interested in closing the achievement gap for Mexican youth and families.

### **REFRAME:**

#### **Disrupt Narratives that Pathologize Mexican Communities & Construct New Narratives**

Mexican families are often constrained by narratives that are biased and deficit-based. Mexican- Americans face stereotypes that alienate youth and have significant effects on their learning. The recommendation from youth workers and educators in AAMC Networks is clear: We must begin by changing the language we use and the pejorative narratives we choose to tell about these people and these communities. For example, it's important to stop using terms like "illegal" and "alien." Instead, we need to continually humanize immigrant youth and families. Such humanization practices require that we stop limiting immigrant youth based on preconceptions of their capacities. Instead, we need to understand immigrant youth and families from a strength-based perspective, focusing on the resilience and drive it takes to care for one's self and one's family in the face of innumerable barriers and hardships. The field of youth development can and should build upon the assets already existing in these communities.

**The Networks posit and promote narratives that place Mexican and Mexican American children and families at the center—narratives of young people who work hard to achieve their dreams of going to college; of families with remarkable stories of hard work and sacrifice to do right by their families despite the conditions that threaten their stability; of parents who value education, provide great support for their children and encourage them to persevere in school.**

## **COMMIT:**

### **Engage Stakeholders in Continuous Conversation around Effort & Outcomes**

“So, past the age of 18, you have a lot of young adults that are of Mexican descent, they’re already considered adults and they are off of the radar.”

—LEAH HEBERT, BUSHWICK NETWORK

“Schools are disincentivized for serving [this] population ... they are held accountable for graduating students in four years...In some areas, schools are held accountable for reclassifying students as English-proficient as quickly as possible, which doesn’t serve [these] students well.”

—MARGUERITE LUKES, JACKSON HEIGHTS NETWORK

To successfully assist immigrant families and communities in attaining positive outcomes around both academic and non-academic needs, organizations must make a long-term commitment of effort, time and resources. “They must be in it for the long haul.” This reality echoed throughout the initiative, manifesting as tension between meeting targets, providing in-depth services, and maintaining quality. The clear lesson was that every success with a family member requires multiple touch points, with them as well as with other services providers, and required the extensive investment of staff. To work successfully with any given individual, staff must identify, outreach and meet with families to engage them in services, visit programs to assess compatibility with stated needs, assist in completion of paperwork, accompany families to meetings (often provide translation services) and follow-up to ensure consistent engagement with programs once enrolled.

Through this initiative, stakeholders gained a nuanced understanding of the tremendous capacity required to thoroughly conduct outreach, recruitment and enrollment for young people and their families and to sustain engagement. To build the collective strength of community-based organizations, capacity building is needed to capture the investment of time and resources required. For example, a tremendous amount of effort and organizational infrastructure is required to implement grassroots outreach and ensure target program enrollment figures. However, organizations often struggle to collect data that accurately reflects the effort undertaken. “The increased emphasis on accountability has sometimes forced community-based organizations (CBOs) to maintain a myopic focus on outcomes that are easily measurable but not necessarily the most important.<sup>4</sup> Underfunded nonprofits can feel overwhelmed by the intense emphasis on producing evidence-based outcomes, especially if evaluation feels like an add-on rather than being aligned with and integrated into program goals.” The need for increased capacity and support around Staff leadership, data management is critical to the sustainability of these programs. Funders, CBOs and community Networks have an opportunity to continue to build together to get better at capturing efforts required to leverage initiatives such as the AAMC into lasting successes.

## **FUND: Make Greater Investment in Programs & Resources to Stabilize Families**

“It’s about really believing that there are strengths in these communities, and particularly in the Mexican community. The strengths are basically rooted in this sociocultural experience that the Mexican community...has experienced... you’re talking about folks who...decided to uproot from what was familiar to them, walk across the desert if that’s the case, and take a lot of chances. Typically, they’re more resilient, robust, even healthier.”

—CESAR ZUNIGA, PCHP, MOTT HAVEN NETWORK

The greatest challenge cited by all five neighborhood Networks was limited funding and resources for the level and intensity of programming and services needed to adequately meet the needs of the population. There is a need for investment in immigrant communities to support youth development programs with strong family engagement practices that provide the kinds of intensive services and supports which stabilize families. The scarcity in resources is particularly notable as it relates to undocumented families who need the services the most in order to be able to access high-quality health, legal and social support services.

In addition, it is critical to fund and sustain the sort of collective impact models that the AAMC Networks represent. Increased funding is needed to cover the costs of organizational staffing and the resources required to sustain partnerships and deliver comprehensive services. These efforts are a solid investment: when Networks are intentionally responsive and consistently engaging youth and their families around their needs and the needs of their communities, there is evidence that youth thrive, families are stabilized, and communities are transformed.

Greater investments in strategic partnerships like the AAMC Networks can go a long way in supporting families of Mexican origin across neighborhoods, boroughs and the city, and help accelerate economic and social mobility for one of NYC’s fastest growing immigrant population.

## **EDUCATE: Design & Sustain Educational Programs for Immigrant Youth**

Educational programming specifically targeting the needs of immigrant youth is critical to addressing achievement and opportunity gaps. With the Pew Research Center projecting that, by 2050, more than one-third of the nation’s school children“ younger than 17 will either be immigrants themselves or the children of at least one parent who is an immigrant,” Associate Professor Natasha Kumar Warikoo says that schools will need to rethink classroom strategies, family engagement practices, and how to best navigate cultural divides. Educational policies and initiatives that incentivize collaboration between schools and CBOs to collectively better serve immigrant youth and align with what youth and families want and need would go a long way in strengthening the education pipeline for Mexican and Mexican-American students. On a systems level, there is a gap in educational programs for older immigrant youth which is not being sufficiently met by alternative models such as YABCs and Transfer schools. Investments in new, innovative models for this population, such as the school plan proposed by the Jackson Heights Network, which has yet to receive the proper support or funding, must be considered and funded. New models must explicitly address barriers to entry; be responsive to the needs of undocumented students, newcomers and unaccompanied minors, by implementing school practices that address their unique psycho/social, legal and instructional needs, i.e. for students who don’t speak any English or for those who need flexible schedules in order to work to support their families back home. Some immigrant education advocates are calling for an immigrant liaison in every school; an expanded effort to support immigrant families to connect to services and resources; an implementation of restorative practices in all schools; and, the establishment of cultural competency standards for the school system.<sup>8</sup> These recommendations are consistent with the Networks’ work. Supporting educators, administrators and institutions to understand and promote cultural and contextual fluency is a pivotal lesson for the field.

<sup>8</sup> See Teachers Unite and TeachDreamNYC, <https://teachdreamnyc.com/>, and the NYC Immigration Coalition 2016 Immigrant Opportunity Agenda, <http://www.thenycic.org/sites/default/files/2016%20City%20Recs-ALL.pdf>



## **ADVOCATE: Support High Impact Advocacy with Strong Partnerships & Alliances to Increase Collective Capacity**

The AAMC initiative made strikingly clear the need for adult literacy services in Mexican and immigrant communities. Adult education funding often does not cover Spanish language programs and, while Mexican adults are explicitly interested in learning English to help their children and themselves, many have little to no formal education and needed remediation in Spanish to address this gap. Access to adult literacy services for immigrant families provides a viable pathway to ESL programs. This is key to continuity of services for families: to navigate immediate needs and find innovative strategies to engage disconnected youth and their family members in programs that will provide skills and knowledge for their advancement as students, workers and active community members.

Further, advocacy for adult literacy needs as a multi-generational support strategy is critical to broadening the scope of funding streams that provide Spanish language literacy and services like the *Plazas Comunitarias*. *Plazas Comunitarias*<sup>9</sup> initiated by the Mexican National Institute of Adult Education, follow a Spanish language curriculum aimed at fostering Spanish remedial skills among adults. *Plazas* were implemented by several organizations in the Networks. However, these programs still require significant staff and volunteer capacity and only address a small portion of the education needs among Mexican families. The Networks, in collaboration with Lehman College's Jaime Lucero Institute, took advocacy action on the issue of adult education. Several members of the Networks asked the NYC Council to increase investment into educational programs operated by community-based organizations assisting the Mexican community; increase high school equivalency programs; increase digital literacy, native language literacy in Spanish, and English proficiency, and more. This example of advocating for adult education policy is reflective of both the power of connected Networks like AAMC and a large and growing movement of immigrants, educators, organizers, community organizations and elected officials collaborating to protect the safety of immigrant communities and families.

<sup>9</sup> Medina, Y. Volunteer-Based Adult Education Programs for Hispanics. *Reforma*, 2011. [http://www.reforma.org/article\\_content.asp?edition=2&section=1&article=39](http://www.reforma.org/article_content.asp?edition=2&section=1&article=39)

## **INNOVATE:**

### **Encourage “Out of the Box” Solutions to Partner with Youth and Families**

The work of the Networks demonstrated that immigrant youth require an innovative approach to outreach and engagement; and that service providers need flexibility to be able to innovate. Community members and partner organizations must develop trust and test out different ideas. They need opportunities to refine strategies based on emergent findings. Across the Networks there were many examples of innovation, from the Network in Queens that designed a school for disconnected/never-engaged immigrant youth, which would be the first of its kind in the nation once approved; to the indigenous language workshops offered in East Harlem focused on promoting and preserving indigenous languages of Mexican families while supporting basic English fluency. Another example of innovation is in Port Richmond Network’s Promotores Program. In answering the call of developing a parent-child literacy course for the Network, Wagner’s Education and Early Childhood departments completely revamped their Master’s-level curriculum and restructured their work with student teachers to develop a hands-on, bicultural model benefitting both their student teachers and Port Richmond families participating in the program. These examples from across the Networks demonstrate that creative reimagining, taking risks and developing new models for youth and family engagement should be the norm, not the exception.

# CONCLUSION

The greatest proof of the promise of Positive Youth Development by the Anchoring Achievement Networks is in the remarkable outcomes each of the Networks produced, particularly with respect to the sustained engagement of Mexican youth and their families. Three major takeaways can be drawn from the findings in *Making the Invisible Visible*:

**Positive youth development (PYD) practices, when implemented with intention, lead to high-quality and high-impact interventions.**

PYD is a way of understanding and thinking about young people. It is the lens through which youth workers and educators—and families, communities, funders, government and society at-large—engage and interact with youth. PYD emphasizes connection, preparation and authentic participation. The Anchoring Achievement Networks demonstrated that the principles and practices of PYD—caring relationships, intentionality and leveraging youth and community leadership capacities—were in their organizational structure, or DNA; from outreach to intake, from instruction to case management, rich PYD practices and principals were embedded in every interaction.

**Cultural and contextual fluency are core competencies for educators and community organizations.** To better serve immigrant youth, educators must become well versed in how to effectively connect with and serve young people and families from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds. This includes valuing diversity, understanding the dynamics of cultural interactions, being culturally self-aware, and

institutionalizing cultural knowledge. Further, cultural and contextual fluency requires an equity framework. Demographic changes in New York City demand that the field of youth development and education create programs, classrooms, and spaces that not only mine the cultural gap, but also cultivate and promote what some educators call ‘*equity literacy*.’<sup>10</sup> Equity literacy’s key principle is that supporting cultural competency must be supported by knowledge of inequities.<sup>11</sup> This also means that there is an ongoing attention to issues like xenophobia, racism, transphobia, homophobia, sexism, and economic inequity. Capacity building in this area will help to develop the field to be more inclusive and effective in promoting equity and opportunity for *all* youth.

**Youth outcomes are best achieved in the context of a supportive, engaged community.**

The work of the Networks affirms that *positive youth development is community development*. This is a concept that isn’t at the forefront of discourse, despite the research and evidence that family and community engagement yields stronger results for young people.<sup>12</sup> In order to make strides in creating a safety net for young people and supporting their educational and developmental growth, we must engage their families. The greater lesson for the field, and possibly the heaviest lift, is that community development with immigrant communities, and in particular families living in poverty, requires that we go a step further and commit to doing the work of partnering with and helping to stabilize families. The well being of young people is incumbent upon the well-being of the communities they live in, and vice versa.

10 Swalwell, K. *Why Our Students Need Equity Literacy, Teaching Tolerance*, The Southern Poverty Law Center, December, 2011. <http://www.tolerance.org/blog/why-our-students-need-equity-literacy>

11 Gorski, P. (2013). *Reaching and teaching students in poverty: Strategies for erasing the opportunity gap*. New York: Teachers College Press.

12 Armistad, P.J. & Wexler, M. *Community Development and Youth Development: The Potential for Convergence*. The Forum for Youth Investment, April, 1997. [http://forumfyi.org/files/1\\_CDYD\\_PC.pdf](http://forumfyi.org/files/1_CDYD_PC.pdf)

This report speaks to the need to make the invisible visible; while also appreciating that it is NYC's Mexican and Mexican American individuals and community that are the authors of their own narrative. The practices highlighted in *Making the Invisible Visible* illustrate how the education, youth development and community development fields can support and partner with marginalized, immigrant communities. These practices defy systemic barriers and reflect frontline organizations' collaboration with families that prioritize young people's well-being and educational success. In this report, we provide a summary of both what is working and what still needs to be done. Many of the challenges and trends which sparked the launching of Anchoring Achievement may still exist, including Mexican born youth achieving educational success at lower rates than other immigrant groups and the growing number of Mexican youth born and growing up in NYC who are not succeeding in school.<sup>13</sup> However, the Networks stand as models for implementing practices and interventions that make a difference at the point of service. We believe their stories serve as inspiration and a resource for field building, as well as a resounding call to action.

13 Mehrotra, A & Treschan, L. *Young Mexican Americans in New York City: Working More, Earning and Learning Less*, Community Service Society, March, 2013.

## About the Author

Maria Garcia has over 25 years experience in youth development and education, as a service provider, administrator, capacity builder and advocate. In her role with the Youth Development Institute, Maria led the technical assistance efforts for Deutsche Bank's Anchoring Achievement in Mexican Communities Initiative and served as a thought partner with the Networks. Maria grew up in the Bronx and is the proud daughter of Dominican immigrants. She holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Economics and Latin American Studies from Wesleyan University.



## About YDI

The Youth Development Institute (YDI) advances the positive development of young people by promoting the principles and practices that enable them to thrive. YDI has led the field in promoting Positive Youth Development in New York City for 25 years by developing innovative program models, serving as a technical assistance provider to numerous City initiatives, supporting organizations to bolster their youth development programming, and providing organizational development support. For further information, visit [www.ydinstitute.org](http://www.ydinstitute.org)



## About Anchoring Achievement in Mexican Communities

Deutsche Bank Americas Foundation's Anchoring Achievement in Mexican Communities (AAMC) initiative was launched in 2013, with the goal of improving the long-term educational and economic well-being of children, youth and families of Mexican origin in New York City. Through a collaborative structure, the effort supported five "neighborhood Networks" that provided access to comprehensive, high-quality educational programs and services. YDI served as the primary technical assistance provider for the Anchoring Achievement initiative.





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