Taking Action: What School Leaders, Educators, and Mental Health Providers Can Do to Support Latinx Youth and Families

DISCLAIMER

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Institute of Research, Education, and Services in Addiction (IRESA)

The Institute of Research, Education, and Services in Addiction (IRESA) of the Universidad Central del Caribe leads the National Hispanic and Latino MHTTC. The Center serves as a national subject matter expert and a key resource for the workforce and communities seeking to address mental illness prevention, treatment, and recovery support to reduce health care disparities among Hispanic and Latino populations across the United States and its territories. In partnership with state and local governments, mental health providers, consumers and family organizations, Hispanic stakeholders, Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) regional administrators, and the MHTTC Network, the Center seeks to accelerate the adoption and implementation of mental health-related evidence-based practices.

National Hispanic and Latino Mental Health Technology Transfer Center

The mission of the National Hispanic and Latino Mental Health Technology Transfer Center is to provide high-quality training and technical assistance to improve the capacity of the workforce serving Hispanic and Latino communities in behavioral health prevention, treatment, and recovery. We disseminate and support the implementation of evidence-based and promising practices to enhance service delivery, promote the growth of a diverse, culturally competent workforce, and bridge access to quality behavioral health services. We are committed to increasing health equity and access to adequate culturally and linguistically grounded approaches.

The School-Based Mental Health Project (SMH)

The School-Based Mental Health Project (SMH) of the National Hispanic and Latino MHTTC works specifically with schools, organizations, and professionals to strengthen their capacity to provide culturally and linguistically responsive school mental health services. This initiative facilitates training, technical assistance, and capacity-building efforts led by experts in the field. Our goal is to increase awareness to attend to Latino students' mental health needs, promote the implementation of school mental health services that are culturally appropriate, encourage the use of promising and evidence-based practices, and disseminate information on practical strategies and implementation efforts of mental health services within a cultural context.

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Introduction

The Latinx proportion of the United States population has grown from 13% to 19% since 2000, reaching 62.5 million in 2021, and making up 54% of the overall population growth during that period (Zong, 2022). This underscores the requirement to better understand the unique needs and strengths associated with being an immigrant of Latin-American descent who may be facing divisive and stressful environments that undermine well-being. Environmental and acculturation stresses may negatively affect mental health, whereas positive ethnic identity and a strong value on family can be protective for Latinx youth (Robles-Ramamurthy, Sandoval, Londoño Tobón, & Fortuna, 2022).

Historically, public schools have served as a safety net system for many vulnerable children and families needing timely access to resources and supports for myriad social, health, and academic challenges. Yet, because significant lags remain in the process of translating scientific evidence into practice, school leaders, educators, and providers contend with delayed access to the kind of data necessary to inform their decisions and subsequent actions. This brief aims to highlight findings from a groundbreaking, contemporary research study and to translate those findings into policy and practice recommendations that could facilitate improvements in health and education outcomes for Latinx students throughout the country.

Overview of the Primary Study

"Pathways to Health / Caminos al Bienestar" (*Caminos*) is a project supported by two five-year studies occurring from 2017 to 2026 funded by the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

The *Caminos* longitudinal study follows a school-based sample of Latin American-origin families in suburban Atlanta, GA during youth's transitions from early through late adolescence. In 2018, researchers began collecting survey data from 547 middle school youth and, for half of them, their mothers. Youth were selected at random from 2017-18 school enrollment lists. To date, nine time points of survey data have been collected since 2018. From 2018 – 2022, surveys were conducted with youth and mothers every six months; survey data will be collected annually through 2026 (for a total of 13 time points). The sample is representative of diverse socioeconomic statuses, acculturation levels, and national origins.

Demographics	United States[a] (Ages 0-17)	Metro Atlanta[a] (Ages 0-17)	Study Sample[b] (Ages 11-15)
U.S. born	94.3	94.0	88.1
Live in 2 parent household	69.3	75.1	67.3
At least 1 parent who…			
Has at least Bachelor's degree	19.5	22.2	27.6
Foreign born	54.4	74.4	78.6
Born in Mexico	37.8	48.7	45.2

a. Source: The Urban Institute. Data from the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series datasets drawn from the 2005 - 2017 American Community Survey. Data was filtered by year (2017), age (13-15 & 16 to 17), ethnicity (Hispanic), and region (Atlanta-Roswell-Sandy Spring).
b. Youth report only.

The *Caminos* project is examining how stressors and supports in youth's social environments shape family functioning and a range of indicators of adolescent health and well-being. Adolescents' mental health outcomes are measured by internalizing symptoms (e.g., depression, anxiety) and externalizing symptoms (e.g., conduct disorder, aggression, rule-breaking). Other adolescent outcomes include substance use, prosocial behaviors, and grade point average. Stressors examined include ethnic discrimination, COVID-19, and immigration threats. Supports examined include teacher, peer, and parent support. Additional factors assessed include traditional Latino cultural values as well as cultural gaps between parents and their children and between parents and the school.

The analytic approach utilized in the *Caminos* project primarily entails longitudinal, structural equation modeling techniques. These methods facilitate examining direct and indirect pathways linking extra-familial contexts with Latinx adolescent outcomes and offer a scientifically robust approach to analyzing constructs known to have measurement error. Future studies will examine chronic and acute stress measured by salivary and hair cortisol; findings from these studies will advance knowledge on biological stress processes experienced by today's U.S. Latinx adolescents. In addition, the research team is examining family, neighborhood, and youth protective factors that help mitigate risks. Findings will inform the development of preventive interventions and policies that can promote school success and healthy development for this population.

Recommendations for School Leaders, Educators, and School Mental Health Providers

Key education stakeholders can act to help mitigate the negative impact of ethnic discrimination and immigration threats on Latinx youth health and education outcomes, while also promoting family and cultural factors to maximize student thriving. Below are recommendations for best practices or evidence-based approaches that education leaders and/or school mental health providers in particular can implement to create the conditions necessary to enable student success.

Recommendations for School Leaders and Educators

School leaders exert a great deal of influence over established norms, culture, and priorities exhibited in any given school. Educators and staff also control the tone and set the expectations for classrooms and other school spaces. Therefore, their awareness of how to reduce harmful interactions among students, or between students and adults, is of paramount importance. The following recommendations are grouped by those that may be universally applied across a school to benefit all students, including Latinx youth, and those that may be targeted to counteract the negative impact of discriminatory treatment of Latinx adolescent students.

Whole School Strategies:

- Broad strategies recommended to promote equity, fairness and justice in school environments include enforcing inclusive and non-discriminatory policies, promoting respectful intergroup contact, and implementing effective programs designed to reduce prejudice and increase ethnic and racial identity through developmentally appropriate programming (Killen & Rutland, 2022). Whole school approaches to mitigate the impact of ethnic discrimination and stress among Latinx adolescents involve evaluating and modifying school policies and practices, adopting school-wide, trauma-informed or restorative practices, implementing professional development workshops about implicit bias and developing skills to address school-based racial conflicts, and delivering direct interventions to students to help them understand and manage the effects of racial stress and trauma (Saleem & Byrd, 2021; Saleem, Legette, & Byrd, 2022).

- Districts and schools typically have written policies promoting equity and inclusion and that challenge prejudicial behavior in schools and classrooms. School leaders should review their anti-bullying, harassment, and non-discrimination policies on an annual basis to make sure they are current, are aligned with district and state guidelines, reflect changes in social contexts, include clear definitions of terms, and outline specific consequences for violations to these policies. To address hostile, discriminatory remarks or behaviors exhibited by students or adults toward members of any marginalized group, there must be a confidential reporting process and clear procedures for investigation and response. Given the significant emotional, behavioral, and academic impact of ethnic discrimination and bias, school leaders should ensure students and families are aware of these procedures and encourage them to report threatening, harassing, or prejudicial behavior that they experience or observe. Timely response to these incidents is essential to build trust in leaders and encourage utilization of these systems of accountability.

- School leaders and other adults can demonstrate support for Latinx youth by acknowledging the racialized experiences and anti-immigrant sentiment experienced by many immigrant students in and out of school, and how these threats may pose barriers to school attendance or full participation in learning. Recognizing the reality of racism and the toll it exerts, as well as the significant effort it can take for students, especially victimized or disenfranchised youth, to get to and to remain in school is often validating. School leaders invested in the development of safe school climates and the promotion of positive outcomes for youth of color are warned to avoid 'colorblind' approaches to improving school climate (Hazelbaker & Mistry, 2021). Such stances can effectively negate the role of institutional and structural racism and ethnic discrimination, invalidating students' reality and undermining a sense of belonging for youth of color who experience race-related stress (Baker et al., 2022).

- Conveying, both verbally and non-verbally, the importance of Latinx students' unique value to the school community can help counteract the negative impact of discrimination. Displaying positive messages about the importance of diversity, inclusion, and cultural competence sets a tone and conveys the guiding principles underlying school practices and policies. Furthermore, learning about and celebrating students' cultural, racial, and ethnic diversity can promote cultural pride and increase students' perceptions that their heritage is important and respected. This, in turn, can bolster a students' connection and engagement to school, improve academic performance, and reduce their risk of dropping out (Banerjee, Byrd, & Rowley, 2018).

- A valuable whole-school strategy that drives students' belonging and engagement in school is the use of cultural socialization practices. Cultural socialization refers to the process by which youth learn about a culture and develop an identity to that cultural group. By engaging in cultural socialization practices, school personnel may facilitate youth's internalization of positive messages about their cultures, and increase students' positive experiences in school (Saleem, Legette, & Byrd, 2022). Some examples of cultural socialization practices implemented in schools include: learning about history or historical figures from different cultural groups, celebrating cultural holidays, ensuring cultural symbols are visible throughout the school building, and using curricula that include multicultural examples.

- The ethnic discrimination experienced by Latinx youth and perpetuated by peers described in the studies above represents a type of intergroup social exclusion, which involves being rejected based on one's gender, race, ethnicity, religion, or other area of identity, resulting in prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory behavior. Interventions to reduce intergroup social exclusion among children focus on changing group norms, biases, and prejudice, along with enabling children to understand different sources of inequalities (Killen & Rutland, 2022). One intervention strategy that can reduce biases and ethnic outgroup attitudes involves the implementation of anti-bias programs in schools. Anti-bias programs can produce positive outcomes and reduce intergroup bias among majority group members, particularly when focused on engaging individual students (Ülger, et al., 2018). Although one-on-one interventions may be deemed more effective, classroom-wide, anti-bias programs are more likely to be implemented in schools due to their practicality and ability to reach a greater number of students. Ülger and colleagues (2018) note that attitude change is most effective and prolonged when multifaceted, multilevel approaches are used. Integrating anti-bias training into academic content whenever possible further promotes positive changes in attitudes toward individuals from diverse backgrounds.

- Modeling positive cross-ethnic relationships among adults can help youth develop better intergroup attitudes and increase their willingness to engage with youth of different racial and ethnic groups. When students witness cross-group relations in their educational settings, they are more likely to develop cross-ethnic friendships over time, enhance their capacity to take another's perspectives, and empathize with others' concerns. In addition, sharing a common identity to which members of different groups can all belong fosters positive intergroup attitudes and can inspire similar treatment of individuals from in- and out-groups (Tropp, White, Rucinski, & Tredoux, 2022). As a result, encouraging strong school or team identities and promoting shared goals for all students in a given school can help build relationships and reduce ethnic conflicts.

- Discrepant disciplinary practices that unfairly punish youth of color more often than White youth for the same infractions can exacerbate tensions and conflicts in school. Restorative justice practices are widely used in educational settings to move from a punitive approach to addressing misbehavior, to one that is relationship-based and encourages responsibility and repair of the literal or figurative damage done. Such a compassionate approach promotes empathy and recognizes that misconduct is typically indicative of an underlying, unresolved issue needing attention. This is particularly relevant in light of study findings demonstrating the association between school racial-ethnic discrimination and heightened trauma experienced by Latina students that predicted later rule-breaking behavior among these previously victimized girls (Meléndez Guevara, White, Lindstrom Johnson, Nair, & Roche, 2021). Restorative practices can help remediate these interpersonal conflicts in a way that acknowledges the damage inflicted on multiple individuals (Cavanaugh, Vigil, & Garcia, 2014) and that encourages reintegration of students as part of the school community.

- Fostering opportunities for youth and family voice in school planning, decision-making, and continuous quality improvement activities related to health and mental health policies and programs can increase the commitment, utilization, and impact of these interventions (Doll, Nastasi, Cornell, & Song, 2017). Obtaining youth and family perspectives on the design, implementation, and evaluation of school mental health services has long been a best practice and guiding principle of effective mental health programming. Yet, the success of school-family collaborative strategies to improve mental health outcomes for youth is uniquely dependent on the approval of education leaders and the presence of effective school engagement practices. Furthermore, maximizing the participation of non-English speaking families requires awareness of the scope of language needs and an investment in resources that can facilitate meaningful involvement from diverse members of the school community (Gabriel, Roxas, & Becker, 2017).

Classroom-Based Strategies:

- Studies have shown that introducing activities that promote peer support and encourage the development of cross-ethnic friendships can counteract harmful social norms that exclude others. Castro and colleagues (2022) found that participation in an intergroup dialogue program improved Latinx students' sense of connection through a shared identity of migration. School leaders can encourage teachers and staff to create opportunities for students to work in diverse teams on collaborative projects and engage in joint problem-solving in the classroom. Empathy-promoting activities, such as cooperative learning experiences, employ curricula that affirm positive identities and increase positive intergroup contact among students to build empathy and trust.

- In addition, safe and structured intergroup contact among youth from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds has the potential to enhance awareness of racism and interest in taking action to promote racial equity in and out of school environments. These interactions at the classroom level can include explicit discussion of societal inequalities and their effects on youth's lived experiences to motivate social change among youth from all groups (Tropp, White, Rucinski, & Tredoux, 2022).

- School leaders and teachers can advocate for the incorporation of a multicultural curriculum, integration of culturally relevant materials in classroom education, use of prejudice reduction interventions, and the engagement of students in critical reading and discussions about the history of different minoritized groups. With the encouragement of school leaders, teachers can work to develop an environment in which they demonstrate interest, understanding, and/or acknowledgement of the cultural background and practices of their diverse students (Fu et al., 2022).

- Despite the many competing priorities school leaders must manage, protecting the resources for school-based art programs, including arts-based therapies, can be essential for students who need to process difficult emotions, but who struggle with lower English language capabilities, or who are unable or unwilling to utilize more traditional talk therapies (Berberian & Davis, 2019). School leaders can partner with art therapists in community-based organizations or through local colleges or universities to offer or expand the clinical support to students who may have more intensive mental health needs.

Recommendations for School Mental Health Providers

Mental health providers working in schools regularly engage in a wide range of activities that support the promotion of health, seek to prevent mental illness, detect emerging problems, and treat existing conditions that impede student development and learning. Recommended interventions for school mental health providers to consider are grouped by those that support promotion/prevention, early intervention, and treatment aims for marginalized Latinx adolescent students.

Mental Health Promotion and Prevention:

- Fostering emotional and physical safety in, and a sense of belonging to school are critical to learning for all students (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013). In addition to helping to implement positive school climate initiatives benefitting all students, school mental health providers can advocate for activities that specifically increase Latinx students' feelings of safety and belonging. Working to ensure school-wide activities reflect the experiences of the entire school community helps communicate the school's antiracism and anti-oppression values, practices, and policies.

- School mental health providers can employ multicultural consultation practices, a culturally sensitive approach to address the cultural values of individuals from various cultural groups, to inform the delivery of preventive supports that can help reduce tensions stemming from racial and ethnic discrimination perpetuated by staff and/or students (Ingraham & Meyers, 2000). Furthermore, school mental health providers can encourage inclusive and respectful climates by serving as consultants and supporting teachers, to help them to become aware of their own behaviors, actions, and attitudes that might undermine the institutionalization of welcoming and equitable classroom environments necessary for students of color to thrive and excel (Fu et al., 2022).

- School mental health providers play an important role in addressing prejudice by facilitating positive cross-group interactions that take into consideration youth's varied stages of development and their psychological readiness for engaging in direct intergroup contact. Acknowledging the anxiety some students may feel about addressing biases and discrimination, and encouraging supportive norms for intergroup contact, will allow school mental health providers to boost students' confidence about forging relationships with members of other groups. By providing opportunities to envision the course of interactions with outgroup peers and developing behavioral scripts that may be applied to future interactions, direct intergroup contact may feel less intimidating and yield more success (Tropp, White, Rucinski, & Tredoux, 2022).

- Social and emotional learning (SEL) programs are widely used in schools to build student skills and competencies and create equitable school environments. Some would argue that typical SEL curricula mirror the values and beliefs of White, middle-class Americans and do not adequately reflect the experiences of minoritized youth (McCall, Romero, Yang & Weigand, 2022). Many SEL interventions do not incorporate culturally responsive content and none are known to address racism and its role in student mental well-being (McCall, Romero, Yang & Weigand, 2022). As a result, school mental health providers can lead efforts for cultural adaptations to school SEL programs by advocating for youth-informed changes to the program and incorporating examples or exercises reflective of the enrolled student population.

Early Identification:

- School mental health providers have valuable specialized skills in screening and assessing for various student mental health conditions or behavioral concerns. The prevalence of traumatic experiences for Latinx students in the Camino study suggests that screening for trauma exposure among students remains an important part of any school mental health program. Inquiries about fear of detention and/or threats of deportation of family members need to be included as part of early identification processes, especially for Latinx students. Two versions of the Family Fear of Deportation Scale for youth, validated by Cox and colleagues (2022), and their associated questions can complement typical provider assessment protocols used in schools.

- In addition, screening for trauma is particularly important for Latinx students accused of rule-breaking, substance use, or behavioral infractions to help identify any underlying root causes that may precede and explain acting out behavior. School mental health providers striving to advance equity in schools, and given their position of influence, can advocate for the use of remedial or restorative interventions instead of punitive or exclusionary disciplinary actions, such as in- or out-of-school suspension, for violating school norms or rules.

- Given the toll additional childcare responsibilities may impart, school mental health providers can explore partnerships with community partners and/or social support programs to expand childcare options for families in need and reduce the burden on older siblings. School-based providers and case managers can identify emergency child care programs for essential workers and financial assistance to subsidize child care for families with young children. Furthermore, school staff can inform parents about their state's Child Care and Development Block Grant program (Adams & Henly, 2020) and help identify options for child care financial assistance, including reliable afterschool programming.

- Selective intervention strategies tailored to the needs of students' families and caregivers can also advance student functioning. As part of their role, school mental health providers may conduct family workshops on prevalent issues like those related to Latinx stress and parental conflict. Preventive strategies can foster closer parent-adolescent relationships and minimize familial conflicts. These skill-building workshops might include information on adolescent development, effective limit-setting behaviors, and ways to cope with typical child-raising challenges, as well as how to address the unique stressors associated with acculturation differences impacting some Latinx families.

- Community forums can allow parents to express their concerns with education leaders and school mental health professionals and bridge the gap that sometimes exists between parents and educators around divisive issues. Providing a forum for families and caregivers to talk about any concerns with their children's racial traumas and stressors can facilitate resolutions and help shape professional development for educators that might improve the tension that can exist between home and school.

Interventions:

- School mental health providers have valuable specialized skills in screening and assessing for various student mental health conditions or behavioral concerns. The prevalence of traumatic experiences for Latinx students in the Camino study suggests that screening for trauma exposure among students remains an important part of any school mental health program. Inquiries about fear of detention and/or threats of deportation of family members need to be included as part of early identification processes, especially for Latinx students. Two versions of the Family Fear of Deportation Scale for youth, validated by Cox and colleagues (2022), and their associated questions can complement typical provider assessment protocols used in schools.

- School mental health providers strive to create safe and accessible spaces for students experiencing distress and needing to process their feelings and traumatic reactions. Mental health offices can represent safe havens for Latinx students experiencing ongoing racial-ethnic discrimination, harassment, or bullying. As part of the course of treatment, providers can support students' capacities to use healthy ways to cope and respond to hostile incidents and frequent microaggressions in ways that maximize their academic and social-emotional well-being. Problem-focused coping strategies, for example, have been shown to effectively mitigate the harmful consequences of perceived discrimination with students demonstrating symptoms of depression and anxiety, as opposed to emotion-focused strategies (Forster et al., 2022).

- A common method of assistance offered by school mental health providers can be categorized as microinterventions. Microinterventions aim to "(a) validate a client's experience of reality, (b) express their value as a person, (c) affirm their racial or group identity, (d) demonstrate support and encouragement, and (e) reassure them they are not alone" (Fu, Leff, Carroll, Brizzolara-Dove & Campbell, 2022). Racial microaffirmations, one type of microintervention that includes strategies that affirm the dignity and integrity of others, have been shown to buffer the negative impact of discrimination and microaggressions among those who employ such strategies.

- Implementing evidence-based trauma interventions are important ways that school mental health providers can mitigate the impact of trauma on student functioning. For example, Cognitive-behavioral Interventions for Trauma in Schools (CBITS) are effective at reducing post-traumatic symptoms (Allison & Ferreira, 2017) and are delivered as part of individual or group therapy. The findings from the Camino study suggests that such an intervention may yield additional value if delivered to students separately by gender in light of reported differences in experiences and impact.

- When family therapy is conducted, school mental health providers need to remain sensitive to the obstacles families may experience that prohibit their ability to follow-through with referrals to services outside of school. Heightened anti-immigration actions and related media coverage worsens Latinx adolescents stress levels, especially when they have family members who have a more tenuous immigrant status. These worries can limit the utilization of social services or family assistance programs that may expose them to greater harm or risks, preventing them from taking necessary steps to attain improvements in their social, economic, or environmental conditions.

Conclusion

Despite progress toward leveraging the strengths and addressing the unique needs of Latinx youth, the *Caminos* project highlights remaining areas for improvement. Schools can play a crucial role in addressing stressors and adversity impacting vulnerable students. This brief highlights findings from the *Caminos* project, as well as resources and practical recommendations for enhancing the role of schools as safe and supportive places for all students. School leaders, educators, and staff are encouraged to serve as visible allies to marginalized Latinx students and implement individual, social, and environmental interventions to help Latinx students feel safe and valued.

Schools are encouraged to implement trauma-informed and restorative justice practices that promote safety, equity, inclusion, fairness, and justice, and help break patterns of discrepant disciplinary practices. Whole school and classroom initiatives that use multicultural curricula, foster collaboration and connection through the formation of intergroup activities, and employ cultural socialization practices can advance understanding and empathy between students to inspire healthy cross-ethnic relationships. Furthermore, promoting family engagement, as well as leveraging protective values of *respeto* and *familismo* in culturally appropriate collaboration with families and communities, increases the likelihood of family participation in school and improves outcomes for Latinx students. School mental health providers should employ a diverse array of student and family supports, implementing whole school and classroom strategies that ensure mental health promotion and prevention for all, early identification of students who may need additional support, and interventions for students with more serious concerns while remaining sensitivity to the unique cultural factors affecting Latinx youth. Together these strategies will strengthen Latinx youth and family well-being, as well as cultivate an environment where all members of the school community can flourish.

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