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## Learning Community program empowers Latino parents to better guide their children in school and life

By Dan McCann / Special for the Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties May 14, 2018



Alejandra Villa holds daughter Elliana during graduation ceremonies for the Family Learning program offered by the Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties and OneWorld Community Health Centers. Alejandra grew up speaking Spanish. Today, she's fluent in English and prepared to help her children in school and in life.

Courtesy photo

"I feel more confident as a parent."

"I feel so proud of myself because I can help at school now."

One by one, in a classroom in the heart of South Omaha, they share their inspiring stories of accomplishment and pride, confidence and hope – and they do it in a language that not-too-long ago was completely foreign to them: English.





In one of six celebrations starting in late April, the Learning Community of South Omaha graduated 15 women from its three-year Family Learning program. The graduates are all busy Latina mothers with young children; they grew up speaking Spanish; and they chose to enroll in the program for the sake of family and future.

“Since I came here, that was one of my goals, that I was never going to use my child to be translating something for me,” says Lilia Ponce, a mother of five and participant in the Learning Community Center of South Omaha’s Family Learning program.

In a sector of the city bustling with immigrants, the center, a partnership between the Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties and OneWorld Community Health Centers, is taking a holistic approach to impacting two generations at once. It’s well-established Family Learning program incorporates English for Parents classes, parenting skills workshops and goal-setting in-home visits.

“The parent is the first, best teacher for their child, and I know we are empowering parents with this program,” says David Patton, CEO of the Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties.

That is the aim – helping parents help their children in school and in life.

“When I have confidence at school, I can trust myself to talk to the teacher and ask the questions that I have,” says Eduwiges Santana Rubio, a Family Learning participant.

She, Ponce and 10 other women are gathered on an April morning in one of the center’s three classrooms. Just a fraction of the center’s Family Learning participants, they have lived in Omaha for varying lengths of time but share several commonalities: they are all busy, Latina mothers with





These Latina moms say workshops and English classes designed for parents gave them skills to build relationships with teachers and actively support their kids' learning almost right away.

Chris Christen/The World-Herald

young children; they grew up speaking Spanish; and they chose to enroll in the program for the sake of family and future.

“There is something we lose when we don’t grow in English,” says participant Coco Pacheco.

Those in attendance say learning English has increased self-confidence and engagement in their kids’ learning, helped build relationships with teachers, and more.

“Before it was uncomfortable for me because I don’t speak English and I can’t have the communication with other parents. But now, I offer myself as a volunteer,” says participant San Juana Maldonado.

The Family Learning program is open to parents associated with 11 high poverty schools in South Omaha who have newborn to 6-year-old children. For those whose children are prekindergarten, the center offers onsite Child Learning classrooms. It is all offered at no cost to participants.

“What we’ve asked from them in return is their time and their effort,” says Anne O’Hara, program director.

Between the progressive English classes twice-a-week, the twice-monthly parenting workshops and regular in-home navigator visits, participants can expect a monthly commitment of about 32 hours. Additional programming, including Cooking Matters classes with the Visiting Nurse Association and financial literacy with First National Bank of Omaha, is also available.





Class work continues with home visits. These moms love working with their own educational navigator to use new skills. Helping with homework; reading daily as a family; and college planning are all part of family goals that become part of everyday life.

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“Being in the program, I feel like a better human being,” says Pacheco. “I know how to cook better. I know how to communicate better. I know how to understand my kids better.”

In addition to the anecdotal stories of impact, the program’s effectiveness is backed by data. For the third year in a row, students with parents in the program demonstrated higher attendance and proficiency rates. Their standardized test scores exceeded comparable students at the district and state level.

“That is really gratifying,” Patton says. “We know we’re making an impact.”

Participant Patricia Paniagua says, “When I receive the grades for my daughters, I always say, ‘Congratulations, you made it. I’m so proud of you!’ My girls say, ‘No, thanks to you because you support us every day,’”

The Learning Community Center of South Omaha recognized its latest class of Family Learning graduates in multiple ceremonies this spring. The honorees included six of the 12 women who shared their experiences for this story, including Blanca Lopez.

“I feel happy because my kids are proud of me, and I am proud of them,” she says.

Alejandra Esqueda, another spring grad, is considering college now: “Even though it’s a little hard with kids, I’m hoping to do it and get a good job.”



So far, the Family Learning program has been adopted by one Omaha Public School, Gateway Elementary. O'Hara hopes to see it expand: "We have a wait list of at least 200 families here at the center. I would love to grow the program, particularly having it within more schools."

To learn more about Family Learning at the Learning Community Center of South Omaha, visit [learningcommunityds.org/family-learning](http://learningcommunityds.org/family-learning).

"Each time we come here, we are home... and better than home sometimes. Here, the coffee is always ready," Pacheco jokes – in English.



Child learning rooms make it possible for parents to invest their time weekly for three years in the Family Learning program offered at the Learning Community Center of South Omaha. Here, recent graduate Alejandra Villa checks in on daughter Elliana.

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