



**LATINX**

youth

**REENGAGEMENT**

project



**February 2020**

King County Department of Community and Human Services

Children Youth and Young Adult Division



United Way of King County



# LATINX YOUTH REENGAGEMENT PROJECT

## **FUNDERS AND CONTRIBUTORS**

### **Funders:**

Many thanks to the Raikes Foundation and United Way of King County for funding this project.

### **Latinx Youth Reengagement Project Team**

Project Team members are listed below.

**Project Leads:** Maria Gonzalez, Jennifer Hill, Maria Guizar and Hannelore Makhani from King County, and Nicole Yohalem from the Community Center for Education Results

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# 1. REPORT BACKGROUND

King County Department of Community and Human Services (DCHS) Children, Youth & Young Adult Division, and the Latinx Youth Reengagement Project Team are pleased to present the Latinx Youth Reengagement Project report. We are also grateful to the thirty Latinx youth who shared their experiences and recommendations, and took time to participate in this study. As a provider of a wide range of employment and education services to youth and young adults ages 16-24 throughout King County DCHS is dedicated to addressing education and employment disparities faced by youth of color in our area.

As part of the King County Reengagement System, DCHS has worked with many funders and partners, including United Way of King County and the Community Center for Education Results (CCER) to support the implementation of a strong network of local providers who have the knowledge and capacity to serve 16-24 year olds in King County who are not in school or working.

We are dedicated to using quantitative and qualitative data and the voices of young people to identify how we are doing and guide where we need to improve our service delivery to promote the success of all students in our region. This project and report emerged from a growing awareness that Latinx youth in the area have disproportionately low credential earning rates in reengagement settings. In an effort to find out why this was happening King County and CCER conducted a series of six listening sessions during 2018 with Latinx youth who were enrolled in King County reengagement programs.

The feedback gathered from youth during the listening sessions identified several ways reengagement programs might better retain Latinx students, including the need for cultural representation in programs; access to relevant, practical courses; high expectations and support from teachers; and the need for flexibility and resources to address barriers to learning. However the project team recognized the limitation of hearing only from Latinx youth who were still enrolled in programs. This prompted a deeper second phase of work, with the specific goal of finding and hearing from youth who had tried the reengagement system but left.

This report builds on that initial work, and focuses on youth and young adults who have exited reengagement programs, prior to completion. We regard the feedback of these young people as critical to understanding the kinds of changes that are needed to increase retention of Latinx students in reengagement programs, and plan to use their recommendations to make necessary improvements. This information will benefit the whole system, which refers to a network of sites that provide services to students for whom traditional high schools does not work. These sites offer GED or high school completion pathways.

The purpose of this report is to summarize feedback from Latinx youth and young adults who have exited King County reengagement programs prior to graduation. We will use their suggestions to improve outcomes of Latinx students in these programs, all of which provide education and services to older youth, who have disengaged from traditional high school.

We believe that youth feedback and recommendations help us reframe assumptions about the reasons Latinx students exit school early, and underscore the power that they have to drive changes needed to foster student success.

## 2. REPORT METHODS

In order to create a respectful and trusting environment the Latinx students interviewed through this report were interviewed by Youth Advisors who self-identified as Latinx, and who were themselves enrolled in, or were recent graduates of reengagement programs. The self-reported race and ethnicity of Youth Advisors included two Mexican; one Lebanese; one Puerto Rican; one Filipinx/Black/Mexican; and one Nicaraguan.

The study began in May 2019 with recruitment of Youth Advisors. (See the attached Youth Advisor Recruitment flyer) The Latinx Advisors were provided a monthly stipend of \$150 for their participation of about 10 hours per month in the project. All were asked to commit to work at least one month on the project, and six Youth Advisors agreed to participate in the project. Of these, three spoke English only, and three spoke Spanish and English and all self-identified as Latinx.

The Youth Advisors were trained in July and August 2019 and taught how to administer interview tools, code, analyze and identify major themes in the data. They also learned about the importance of confidentiality, and using consent forms. Youth Advisors provided input into the content of the interview tool, drawing upon their own experiences in the program. They piloted the interview tool, and made adjustments in the final version. (See the attached Latinx Reengagement Interview Tool). Interviews were conducted between July 2019 and January 2020.

Youth Advisors were encouraged to include this work experience on their resume. In addition to learning basic research and interviewing skills several youth also developed communication skills, and presented the initial survey findings at a September 2019 Reengagement Network Meeting.

The initial intent was for the Latinx Youth Advisors to conduct all 30 of the interviews. Because of transportation challenges, which made it difficult for some young adults to get to interview locations, and King County staffing changes, the decision was made to have half of the interviews conducted by Youth Advisors and half by bilingual County staff who also self-identified as Latinx.

The interview pool was identified by partner programs working with King County staff, using reengagement program completion data to identify students who had left before graduation. Interviews with Latinx youth who had attended a variety of different reengagement sites were conducted to get a more comprehensive idea of the issues raised by young adults. The youth were contacted by phone, and/or email, and invited to participate in the project. Interviews were set at safe locations convenient for people to meet. For example, interviews were held at restaurants such as Panda Express, Starbucks, McDonalds, organizations that they knew, such as Consejo Counseling & Referral, and at the homes of young people who were caring for children, and were not able to readily leave their home. The Latinx Youth Advisor and a King County staff person conducted interviews together. Interview respondents were given a gift card to honor their expertise and participation in the project.

The interview data, demographic data, reengagement site information and interview responses to 10 questions (described in section 4) was entered and coded by King County staff, and main themes were identified. Interviews ranged from 35 minutes to 1.5 hours, averaging 57 minutes.

# 3. DESCRIPTION OF INTERVIEWEES

**Overview:** Thirty individuals were interviewed. A total of 17 different reengagement programs were named by youth, and some youth attended more than one of these programs. The majority were female and the largest ethnicities identified were Mexican and Salvadorian. Youth self-reports of race and ethnicity and circumstances reflected the diverse generational status, language and socioeconomic status of Latinx students. Three (3) only spoke Spanish; twenty-one (21) spoke Spanish and English; five (5) spoke English only and one (1) spoke English, Tagalog and Samoan. Their ages ranged from 15-24. Half were 18 or 19 years of age. One-third was responsible for taking care of children or other family members. The youth lived in ten different King County cities. Burien was the most frequently cited residence, and home location for one-third of the youth.

**Gender:** The interview pool included 13(43%) male and 17(57%) female respondents.

**Parenting Status:** Two of the thirty young people were parents, and eight were caretakers for children or older adults.

**Ethnicity:** The self-described ethnicity or race of respondents included in order of frequency: Mexican 14 (47%); Salvadorian 4 (14%); Nicaraguan 3 (10%); Mexican, Salvadorian 4 (7%); Mexican, White 2 (7%); Mexican, Filipinx, Samoa 1 (3%); Chilean, Native American, Black 1 (3%); Mexican, Albanian 1 (3%); Guatemalan 1 (3%); and Chilean 1 (3%) youth.

**Reengagement Sites/Alternative Programs:** Sites which interviewed youth attended include, in alphabetical order: Big Picture, Career Academy, Career Link, ELL Excel Pathway at Highline College, Federal Way Open Doors, iGrad, Graduation Alliance, Green River Open Doors, Highline Learning Center, Internet Academy, New Start High School, Puget Sound Skills Center, Southeast Interagency, Southwest Youth and Family Services, Truman High School, YouthSource and WA Youth Academy.

*A more detailed look at the ages of respondents follows:*

Age: The respondents ranged in age from 15-24. Years of Age	Number/Percent
15	1 (3%)
16	2 (7%)
17	5 (17%)
18	8 (27%)
19	7 (23%)
20	5 (17%)
21	1 (3%)
22	0 (0%)
24	1 (3%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>30 (100%)</b>

*Youth lived in many different parts of South King County. These included, in alphabetical order:*

Residence	Number/Percent
Auburn	4 (13%)
Burien	10 (30%)
Des Moines	1 (3%)
Federal Way	3 (9%)
Kent	3 (9%)
Renton	1 (3%)
Sea-Tac	3 (9%)
South Park	2 (6%)
West Seattle	1 (3%)
White Center	2 (6%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>30 (100%)</b>

# 4. YOUTH RECOMMENDATIONS

Youth responded to a set of closely interlinked questions designed to document their:

- Reasons for leaving high school before graduating and recommendations for the help they wished they had received;
- Reasons for leaving the reengagement programs and impressions of what worked/what did not work;
- Recommendations for helping young people to successfully complete reengagement programs; and
- Career aspirations.

*Their responses are presented below.*

## Reasons for Leaving High School

Their main reasons for leaving high school fell into the following areas. Some youth left to **support their family** by babysitting or going to work. Several reported that **stressful events** in their home life were critical factors, often citing issues such as homelessness or divorce. Others said that the lack of **transportation** to school was a barrier. **Mental health** and **substance use** issues were also identified. **Peer influence** was a factor, as some youth said that they had friends who had dropped out of school, and pressured them to do the same. In addition, some attributed **disciplinary actions** to their withdrawal. Against this backdrop it is disheartening that some students reported that they felt **negatively targeted by school support staff (teachers/counselors)** because of low grades, a disruptive home life, race, and other issues that caused them to fall behind in school. Despite facing these types of challenges, some also said that they received **little or no connection to school support staff**.

“I gave up, the pressure at home was stressful, my parents in their culture don’t understand doing extracurriculars, they just want you straight home.”

“I got in trouble for little things like talking, or wearing a hat, things that didn’t interfere with my learning but made it so I didn’t feel welcome, also I didn’t want to do the work if I could easily test out of it, it felt like a waste of time.”

“I remember a teacher telling me, c’mon you’re a 12th grader, you should know this.”

## What Would Have Helped?

Deficit based assumptions about Latinx students are wrong. Latinx students have extraordinary strengths.

Youth reported that the high school environment should include opportunities for youth to:

- Develop personal relationships with school support staff and teachers;
- Get more individualized assistance from instructors and school support staff;
- Engage in activities that align with their career and personal interests;
- Be held accountable to higher standards; and
- Be supported, rather than shamed, by teachers, who made them feel they are not on track.

# Student Impressions of Reengagement Programs

## Why They Left

It was clear that some students left reengagement programs for personal reasons tied to economic survival. Some had to go to work to support their family and put food on the table, and at least one-third were vital caregivers to other family members. Others reported that balancing school and work was overwhelming. Others questioned the relevance of their reengagement education, noting that more focus on practical issues, like careers or banking would have been useful. In addition, as with their experiences with traditional high schools many felt that mental health and transportation services would have been useful. Some explained that they were not close to school staff, and did not feel that the staff fully understood or responded to their personal or academic needs.

At the same time, as the next section below shows these impressions and experiences were not universal. Students liked many different aspects of the reengagement education.



**“I left because I needed to get a job to help support my family and my baby, school, plus work, plus taking care of a baby, I felt like I didn’t have enough time to do it all. It was exhausting!”**

Youth feedback demonstrates that the reins of reality are strong. No matter how good the education is, if students cannot afford to engage in it because of family demands, or because they do not see themselves as being appreciated, cared for, or understood, or do not have mentors with whom they identify.

## What They Liked About Reengagement Programs

Students appreciated some of the unique characteristics of the reengagement programs. In particular, they liked being connected to staff that cared about them and were relatable. They also thought that the more flexible schedule of these programs gave them a greater chance to meet their family caregiving and work responsibilities. Some said that they thought their schools provided them with the individualized assistance that they needed (and had often not received in high school). They also noted that being able to communicate with staff using text messages as a form of check-in and follow-up was useful. Perhaps most importantly they liked “not being blamed for where they were at” academically.

**“Teachers are more insightful than traditional school, they ask questions and help you stay on track.”**

## What Would Have Helped?

Supporting the holistic needs of Latinx students is crucial.

Youth recommended that reengagement programs include the following resources and strategies;

- Onsite or close proximity to free childcare;
- Instructors and support staff who listen to, take the time to understand and know them;
- Transportation;
- Career-focused education;
- Curricula, networking and leadership activities that celebrate Latinx culture, ideas and values;

- People of color whom they relate to and look like them, who have the time and skills to be mentors; and
- Access to chemical dependency and culturally accessible counseling and mental health services.

It seems that the clock is ticking too slowly for some youth – or more accurately that time is passing them by. Student accounts of what they did after leaving high school and reengagement programs show that some worked on and off, or participated briefly in other programs. Others babysat, or hung out with friends. Some said they developed habits that could jeopardize their health or future dreams.

Notably, all had aspirations, including one youth who wanted to start a business and others who had career goals that included law enforcement and medicine careers, and employment as a cosmetologist or mechanic. It was evident from the comments of Latinx youth that the crafting of educational experiences that embraced and cultivated these dreams would be well-received and more captivating.

**“Have more activities, more cultural programs and projects to learn about people’s ancestry, where they came from what their culture looks like, I think more people would want to come to school if we did things like that.”**

**“...more guidance, more active recommendations, schools to be able to help more with language barriers, having a peer or teacher advising ELL students, and also mentoring for options of where to go career wise.”**

**“Have interesting classes, talk about topics that impact people’s real lives.”**

**“It’s easier to cooperate with someone who you look like and have things in common with.”**

## 5. REPORT USES

We are pleased to report that the process of interviewing youth has benefited individual youth, and the overall provider system. Seven youth who were interviewed ended up re-enrolling in re-engagement programs. To date, five are still enrolled. Two of these young people, however, had to leave school to get employment, so they could support their families. This underscores how young people who have dropped out of reengagement programs could be very beneficial and catalyze their return to school. At the same time the data reveals that young people and their families face daunting economic challenges that make school attendance difficult, if not impossible. The call to action for broader family-focused assistance is needed for these students to stay in school.

Youth feedback underscores that intentional efforts to collect and use Latinx student input helps create inclusive reengagement environments which promote student leadership, engagement and success. The cultural capital, knowledge, aspirations and strengths of Latinx students must be recognized and embraced.

The youth recommendations in this report have been shared with over forty reengagement providers at the Reengagement Provider Network. Furthermore, they have been used to inform the DCHS Latinx Student Engagement project grant requests that were released by DCHS in November 2019. Staff from King County and Youth Advisors formed teams to review the grant requests.

Four reengagement providers (Green River Community College, Career Link, El Centro de la Raza and iGrad) received grant awards in December 2019. The award period for these grants is January 1, 2020 through June 30; 2020. The panels then drew upon the Latinx interview data when reviewing grants to provide suggestions that would strengthen the services of grantees. For example, in response to this feedback, all grantees will be creating opportunities for students to rate or provide feedback on teachers



and case managers to increase accountability to students. One grantee will take steps to provide mental health services that are provided by a Latinx counseling agency, and will involve students/youth advisors in the selection of mentors. Another grantee will implement strategies to encourage student involvement in purchasing relevant books and curricula, and focus on increasing support for English Language Learner students to pass state tests. Yet another will involve young people in facilitating healing circles and engage district staff, including counselors and instructors in their work. Also, consistent with the intent of all to promote

Latinx leadership and feedback one grantee will examine Latinx student satisfaction with their program.

Each of the grantees will attend the King County Reengagement Provider Network monthly meetings, and will have opportunities to share what they are doing and learning.

In addition, DCHS will receive funding from the Annie E. Casey Foundation Generation Work initiative to increase Latinx enrollments, leadership and persistence in reengagement programs.

The comments of the 30 youth hearken back to their high school experiences, instilling an “if only this could have happened” feeling. As a result, this report will also be shared with the comprehensive high schools which students attended, as well as other K-12 partners, the Puget Sound Educational Service District, and the Washington State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction.

Finally, we are excited to announce that we will be sharing the results of this report at the Nepantla Cultural Arts Gallery in Seattle, which is owned by Jake Prendez, a renowned visual artist, and strong advocate for youth empowerment and the power of positive reinforcement.







# Latinx Youth Wanted!

We are seeking Latinx young adults to serve as advisors on a research project. You will help us develop and implement interviews that help us understand why some Latinx youth are leaving their programs before graduation.

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## REQUIREMENTS:

- Be enrolled in (or recently graduated from) an Open Doors reengagement program
- Personally identify as Latinx (Latina/o or Hispanic)
- Enjoy working with and talking to different people
- Have about 10 hours per month to commit to this project

## The project will be ongoing through March 2020

You must be able to commit for one month and may decide to renew your commitment each month.

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## BENEFITS TO YOU:

- Gain unique **leadership** experience
- Learn and practice **research skills**
- Contribute to **improving** programs
- Build your **resume** and gain **references** for future employment

Receive a \$150 stipend for each month of participation!

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## CONTACT US IF YOU ARE INTERESTED

Email: [mgonzalez@kingcounty.gov](mailto:mgonzalez@kingcounty.gov), [aaria@uw.edu](mailto:aaria@uw.edu)

Call or Text: (206) 384 1358



# LATINX REENGAGEMENT INTERVIEW TOOL

Date of Interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Location of Interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Young Adult Interviewer Name: \_\_\_\_\_

King County Interviewer Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Interview Start Time: \_\_\_\_\_ Interview End Time: \_\_\_\_\_

Hi (*Insert Name*), thank you for meeting with us today. We really appreciate it. We are talking to you to get ideas for how we can improve Open Doors/Re-engagement programs.

Before we talk we need to review and sign the Assent Form.

If you don't mind we want to check a few things and add a little more information to our database.

## Background Information

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Name of programs: \_\_\_\_\_ Number of Programs: \_\_\_\_\_

When did you attend? \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_ Birthdate: \_\_\_\_\_

Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_

Family Information: Race/Country of origin: \_\_\_\_\_

Where do you live now? City: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip Code: \_\_\_\_\_

Languages spoken: \_\_\_\_\_

Contact email: \_\_\_\_\_ Contact phone: \_\_\_\_\_



What were your reasons for leaving high school?

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Looking back to high school, was there anything that adults could have done to have helped you to stay in school?

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We were also wondering what your life was like after you left high school the last time? What did you do?

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## Open Doors/Reengagement Questions

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Now we are going to talk about your experiences in the Open Doors/Re-engagement programs.

1. How did you find out about the Open Doors/Re-engagement program you attended? Why did you enroll?

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2. What worked well for you in the program? For example, what were some of the best things that happened?

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3. What are the main reasons you left the program before graduating? What would have helped you stay?

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4. Looking back, is there anything that could have been done to help you or other young people like you to successfully complete the program?

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5. We really need your suggestions. Is there anything you haven't mentioned yet that adults in Open Doors/reengagement programs could do to better support young people like you in pursuing your educational goals?

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6. At this time what are you doing? For example, are you in school? Are you working? Are you taking care of children?

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7. What kind of career would you like to have? What kind of help do you need to accomplish your dreams? Would you like to talk to someone about the kinds of education or training that are available in the community?

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8. Is there anything else you want to share with us?

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**Thank you very much for answering these questions. Your comments will help improve the Open Doors/Reengagement Programs. Here is a gift card for being a consultant to us and for participating in this survey.**

To find out more about the Latinx Reengagement Project, please contact  
Maria Guizar, Opportunity Youth System Manager [Maria.guizar@kingcounty.gov](mailto:Maria.guizar@kingcounty.gov).