



AL ÉXITO MENTAL HEALTH STUDY

EXPERIENCES OF LATINX YOUTH IN IOWA



dream. learn. succeed.

This study was funded by the Mid-Iowa Health Foundation.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During 2018, Al Éxito operated 21 programs in 8 communities across the state of Iowa. During program sessions students identified numerous challenges they experienced related to stress and mental health. In response to these experiences, the Al Éxito organization conducted a study of the perspectives of Latinx youth on mental health care between March and May 2018. The mixed methods evaluation engaged 156 students from 11 programs in anonymous surveys and 60 students from 7 programs in focus groups. Participants attended programs in both urban and rural areas and were enrolled in both middle and high schools.

The organization implemented the study in hopes of answering the following questions:

- What are some factors affecting the mental health of program participants and their peers?
- What are the barriers Latinx youth face in accessing mental health care?

Results of the study indicate that youth experience stress at school, home and in their communities.

- The greatest source of stress experienced by Latinx youth was directly related to the political context in which they live, and included experiences with anti-immigrant harassment, changing policy implementation related to ICE, and the constant fear of family separation.
- In the mental health survey, 40.43% of students report feeling stressed about the potential deportation of themselves, a family member, or a caregiver often or almost every day. Students also identified that gender stereotypes and norms dictate how youth, especially boys, are able to manage their emotions and mental health.

Focus group participants identified a number of coping strategies, both positive and negative, which youth use to mitigate stress.

- These include receiving support from teachers, gaining knowledge of their rights, as well as using drugs and alcohol.
- Finally, youth identified barriers to accessing mental health services such as family attitudes and stigma, cost and lack of providers.

Overall, youth were encouraged by their participation in Al Éxito and thought the organization could take a larger role in supporting youth, parents and program facilitators to learn more about mental health care.

MENTAL HEALTH



The findings of this study informed the following recommendations and actionable steps that the Al Éxito organization can take to improve the mental health of Latinx youth in Iowa.

- Partner with school districts to ensure Latinx youth are provided a safe learning environment.
- Develop and distribute sample school policies which support Latinx students and families.
- Create and implement programming to address gender stereotypes and norms.
- Support school district professional development experiences specific to teacher expectations of Latinx youth.
- Support Latinx families' knowledge of and access to information and supports related to immigration and mental health care.
- Further study solutions to support the mental health of Latinx youth.

Overall, this study was the first in the state of Iowa to focus on the attitudes and experiences of Latinx youth related to mental health care. The findings provide crucial insight into how the current context in which Latinx youth live, work and go to school affects their mental health and what barriers prevent them from accessing mental health care services. Implementation of study recommendations would address some of the challenges faced by Latinx youth and families and build further understanding of systematic solutions.



MISSION

Al Éxito mission is to support the leadership development of Latinx youth through programming focused on college and career readiness, civic engagement, family support, and cultural celebration. In an effort to continue to meet its mission, Al Éxito identified the need to better understand how youth in the program understood mental health care after students participating in multiple program locations identified challenges related to mental health. Specifically, youth in the programs reported high levels of stress, and some students reached out to program facilitators or peers when experiencing a mental health crisis. Additionally, students and site facilitators reported escalated levels of stress in the Latino community related to the political climate of the past year.

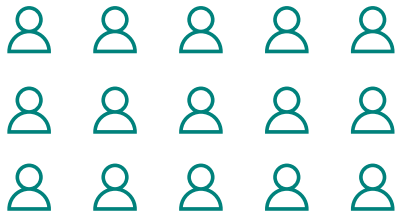
Although immigration-related stress and fear of deportation is not new to Iowa's immigrants, community members worried about the mental health of Latinos with the change of political administration. Iowa is home to the largest U.S Immigration and Customs Enforcement division (ICE) raid in the country which took place in Postville, IA in 2008 and devastated the small town after losing hundreds of community members. After the raid, many families that were left behind exhibited symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and schools reported an increase in behavior issues, and of students dropping out of high school to provide for their families. This historical context of immigration enforcement in the state, along with concerns from facilitators and students related to the mental health of program participants, led Al Éxito to prioritize students' mental health and wellness as part of the program.

As a result, the organization developed a study to inform Al Éxito of the issues affecting students' mental health and their perceptions of mental health care among their peers. The results of this innovative study, the first of its kind in the state of Iowa, will be used to inform program practices related to mental health, and to give voice to Latinx youth perspectives on mental health care which will be shared with stakeholders and program partners including mental health care providers, community leaders, state agencies, school districts, and the Latino community at large.

METHOD

As the statewide leader of programming serving and supporting Latinx students and families, Al Éxito sought to evaluate the attitudes and perceptions of Latinx youth related to mental health. This included gaining a better understanding of student experiences at home, school, and in the community. Between March and May of 2018, Al Éxito conducted focus groups with 7 programs across the state of Iowa. An interview guide consisting of 15 questions was created and guided the semi-structured focus groups. All focus groups were audio recorded and the interviewer took notes. Audio recordings were then transcribed. All focus groups transcriptions were coded by two independent evaluators who identified themes. Participants were not identified in the recordings or in the notes and remain anonymous. The program also conducted an anonymous survey in 11 program sites across the state of Iowa. The survey included 21 items which measured students' attitudes and perceptions of mental health using Likert scales, multiple choice, and true/false questions. Data were aggregated across program sites and reported using descriptive statistics.

THE PROGRAM SURVEY WAS COMPLETED BY 156 YOUTH



= 10 people

Ages 4 to 19

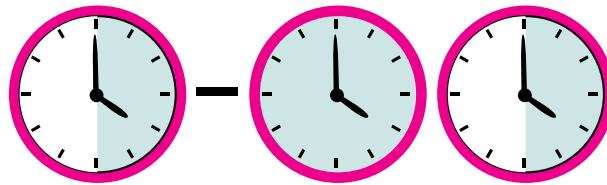
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focus groups included both participants, with the remaining group including only female participants.

Like the program survey, focus groups included participants in

URBAN (n=2)
and RURAL COMMUNITIES (n=5)
who were enrolled in BOTH MIDDLE (n=4) and HIGH SCHOOL (n=4).

EACH FOCUS GROUP TOOK ON AVERAGE 30 MINUTES TO 90 MINUTES



Approximately,

60 | **YOUTH** participated in the focus group

During each focus group participants responded to open-ended questions about mental health issues, including the root causes and impacts, how these issues are related to school, and how these issues affect the Latino community. Overall, most groups were responsive to the topic of mental health with most students reporting to have had at least one previous conversation on the topic. There was a rough consensus among participants that the topic of mental health was relevant to their school and that it was important to talk about in the Al Éxito program.

RESULTS

Data analysis identified four broad themes which capture student experiences both in managing their own mental health and supporting the mental health of those around them. These themes include identification of multiple sources of stress, barriers to mental health care, strategies and behaviors used to cope with mental health issues, and the systems of support (including Al Éxito) which promote mental health. These themes were not confined to one area of the youths' lives (e.g., home, school, work) but, existed across many ecologies. Students also recognized that they were becoming more aware, perhaps as a result of Al Éxito programming, of how the context of their lives impacts their own mental health.

“

At this point in our lives is when we realize, and we start to notice things going on around us. Like, people now are getting more politically involved, and that affects us and it affects our work in schools because in some schools we are talking more about it and what's going on recently like current news. And seeing all that, I guess we're not used to it yet

”

Al Éxito student participant

This reflection highlights the heightened vulnerability that Latinx youth face, as they navigate the normal challenges of adolescence in an anti-immigrant political context, all while developing a sense of identity, completing their education, and developing the skills necessary for success in life after high school.





SOURCES OF STRESS

Focus group participants identified multiple sources of stress. These sources were not exclusive to students' personal experience but included their perceptions of the stressors experienced by their friends and other peers. Themes emerged from the data which identified the current political climate, identity, school, and family as the greatest sources of stress. The most prevalent theme was the political climate and included the impacts of President Trump's harsh rhetoric and pervasive fear of family separation due to ICE and deportations.

Political Climate. Throughout the focus groups, participants identified a number of “sources” of stress in their lives and the lives of other Latinx youth. Sources of stress were not isolated to one area of the youths' lives, but rather came from multiple settings, including home, school, the Latino community, their town or city and nation. The most frequently discussed source of stress was related to the national political climate; specifically, anti-immigrant sentiments voiced by political leaders, including President Trump. While these xenophobic and racist views were voiced nationally they echoed locally, reverberating through the school and community. Within discussions of political climate, students most frequently discussed President Trump and his contentious presidential campaign, the messages of which were not limited to the campaign trail, but rather repeated and directed at students by emboldened school and community members. Al Éxito student participant shared, *“we were in Hy-Vee and the card wasn't working and the guy behind us was like “That's why you should go back to Mexico.””* Al Éxito

student participant talked about the stereotypes a friend's family associated with him, *“eventually her grandma started telling other parents and friends of hers that I was like a rapist, drug dealer and tell your kids not to hang out with me” and his efforts to change their thoughts, “...then [I] started going out for sports and showing them that [I'm] not what they think I am.”* Al Éxito student participant also reported class discussions in which other students “... were talking a lot about the wall and how you won't be able to go back to Mexico and if you do you won't be able to come back” and events where others were “making fun of Mexican culture.” Such events and discussions weren't limited to one-time occurrences but sometimes represented concerted campaigns to the detriment of Latino students. “Kids in our grade that brought like stickers and shirts about our president and started wearing them...” in an effort to “be mean” and “tease” Latino students. These actions left students, “really offended and scared.” Another student shared that, “right now there's a lot of stress

or depression going on **'cause of our president,'** and a program facilitator stated that immediately after the election students experienced "a lot of stress, worry, more high anxiety."

Fear of family separation. The stress associated with the political climate was not limited to the rhetoric of the presidential campaign but extended to the reality of immigration policy and family separations. This reality affects not only students, but their family and friends. One student mentioned that friends "already have stress at school and also stress at home wondering, 'cause they don't know what's gonna happen with their family." Such uncertainty **"...can make you paranoid, like, maybe everything scares them."**

1. Students shared multiple examples of their parents discussing deportation and separation with them, **"my mom told me something about they took a girl's dad, they deported him. My mom was crying. I think it's kind of messed up because you're losing somebody that you love."** Such examples are significant and represent potential reality for many students, since the majority of program participants live in mixed-status households. **"I saw that this one girl got home from school and she arrived home with her mom getting pushed into a deportation truck and she was just crying and it's just sad knowing that that could happen to you one day."** Participants also shared the impact of the trauma of family separation, or the constant threat of such trauma. Students identified family separation as a factor contributing to "mental health illness" including stress, anxiety and fear.
2. Students shared that such stress follows students to school because **"they don't know what's gonna happen with their family."** Students report that family separations cause loneliness even when students stay with other family. As one participant shared, having a parent deported "affects everything" including grades, mood, and other aspects of mental health. Fear of family separation has increased as a result of changing policy implementation at the federal level. Students report increased knowledge of immigration and customs enforcement (ICE) and police activity and discussed increased numbers of people getting pulled over and asked to show documentation. As a result, multiple students

described family conversations about leaving the United States. Al Éxito student participant, **"you know your parents talk about 'oh we need to move, we need to leave now' or something and you get affected 'cause of your parents being in this spot, too."** Students discussed that even though they may be documented themselves, the reality of undocumented family members is difficult to navigate. Additionally, students discussed the fears their undocumented parents feel when driving and, as a result the pressure students feel to obtain a driver's license and take care of the driving needs of their family.

3. In addition to fearing police and ICE officials, students expressed fear of community members and employers who may report individuals to immigration officials. Such fear left students feeling **"angry," "sad," and "scared"** and also drove students and families into seclusion. Students described situations in which parents were too scared to leave their house to go to work and school.
4. Al Éxito student participant, **"They're all nervous, maybe anxious, they don't know what to do. They might not be able to go out as much... and they tell their kids 'you can't go play you have to go straight to school and home' and stuff like that."** Seclusion also impacts the children in these families as one participant shared, **"...the little kids, some of them are starting to get these [mental health] symptoms earlier just because their families are choosing not to go outside as often or not to enjoy life because they fear that if they go out somewhere that an ICE agent is gonna show up, or now with SF 481 that it's gonna be able to be for police to do all that, so now they have even more fear and little kids are having to step up a little more when they shouldn't have to."**
5. Multiple students described anticipation of the extra responsibility family separation would create in terms of caring for younger siblings, and how such stress could impact their younger family members. Al Éxito student participant, **"...they see their parents stressed or their older siblings and they wonder what's wrong with them so they're not enjoying their childhood how they should. And, also the teenagers that do have**

Mental Health



younger siblings, they're already thinking about how to be second parents in case something were to happen to their parents."

This sense of not knowing what will happen to their family in the future, or what their role in their family will be, was also reflected in the mental health survey.

While 29.23% of high school students worry about how their own immigration status will impact their future, 62.30% worry about how their family's immigration status may impact their future.

- Overall, in the aftermath of a presidential campaign which espoused xenophobia as a public policy position, students have lived between the public experiences in which school and community members vocalize support for Trump and the private continual threat of family separation. Participants identify this position between the public experiences and private threats as a source of stress, leading to anxiety, anger, sadness, and fear, not only for students but also for their family members, younger siblings, and friends.

RESULTS OF THE FOCUS GROUP

CONFIRMED BY AL EXITO MENTAL HEALTH SURVEY

59%

of students (n=156) have experienced "fear anger or uncertainty due to anti-immigrant sentiment"

56.94%

have experienced "fear anger or uncertainty due to mine or a family members immigration status."

40.43%

of students report that they have felt stressed about "the potential deportation of myself, a family member, or caregiver"

Often or almost every day (11.76%).
28.67%

Furthermore, students report that as a result of these emotions, they experience "trouble focusing at school or completing assignments"

28.85%

Insomnia or Lack of Sleep

17.95%

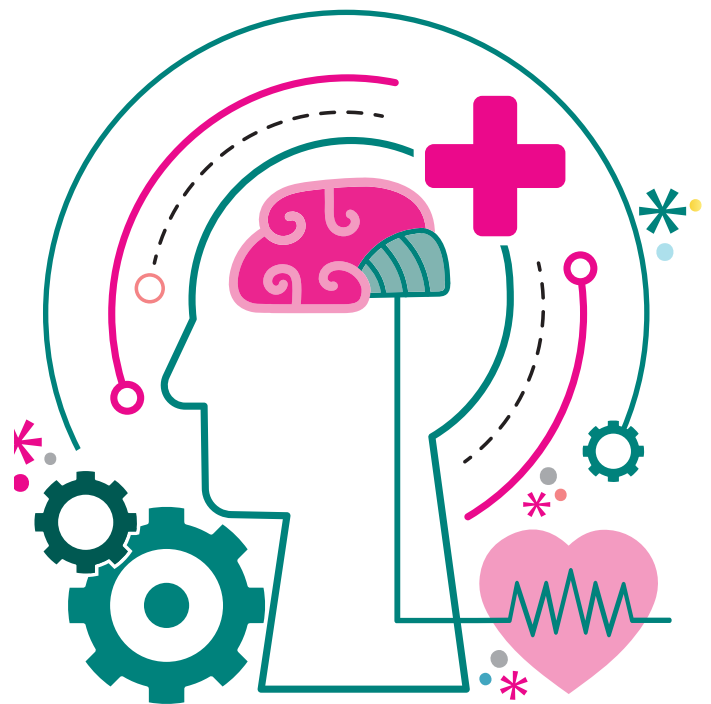
and a "change in regular eating habits"

15.38%



Identity. Aspects of student identity, including gender identity and sexual orientation, was the second most frequently discussed source of stress which emerged from the focus groups. In a number of instances this stress was related to community and cultural norms about gender. Al Éxito student participant

"I think it's one of the those things, where I feel like often time people hide themselves and feel afraid to be open and honest about who they are and I think that that can really take a toll and be damaging to someone's mental health especially because that can become a burden and you know someone's sexual identity or gender identity or anything pertaining to who they are as individuals that makes them, them- their socioeconomic class, their race, religion, shouldn't define, it shouldn't have to define them even though it's a part of them. Yeah, I think that a lot at our school, I think that people really do struggle with that and finding their place when there's not a lot of people to lead by example."



KEEP YOUR MIND HEALTHY



Gender stereotypes. When discussing aspects of identity in relation to stress, the most frequently mentioned was gender. Across all focus groups, students discussed the influence of gender on how students are able to discuss their feelings. Overwhelmingly, students shared that it was **“easier”** for girls to discuss their feelings compared to boys and that, **“[boys] can’t like express themselves how girls express themselves.”** Students describe it as **“hard for guys”** to have discussions related to feelings. Some students suggested that this difference was due to attributes of girls, such as girls’ ability to be **“there for each other,”** or that **“most girls like to express their feelings.”**

Other students suggested that it was due to the boys’ traits, such as **“guys just don’t like to share,”** **“they jar it up somewhere,”** **“they have to be tough,”** or that **“guys...are just more isolated sometimes and they don’t really wanna show their emotions cause they don’t wanna tell everybody how vulnerable they are.”** One student shared that **“guys”** can talk to each other about **“certain issues...like girls,”** but can’t talk with each other about mental health issues such as **“depression, anxiety and stuff like that.”** Some participants were able to recognize that stereotypes and social norms influenced student perspectives on this issue.

One student shared that **“guys have to, like, live up to the stereotype...”** and another stated, **“... a lot of the times when guys express emotion it’s frowned upon.”**

Students recognized that repressed feelings can have negative impacts. Al Éxito student participant **“...I feel like guys that don’t express their feelings to like other people...they’re tearing themselves down because they’re not trying to show what they actually think”** and external, **“they keep that all inside, they act out”** which can lead to office referrals. Al Éxito student participant pointed out that counseling might better support students, stating,

“ [teachers are] just like ‘go to the office,’ like, leave me alone. But, like, instead of the office they should go to the therapist or something like the counselor. ”

Failure to express emotions can also negatively impact a student’s peer group. Al Éxito student participant,

“ I feel like some guys when they have problems at home or stuff like that...but instead of being whatever they feel inside they just let it out on other people. It could

happen in girls but I feel like it more so happens in guys because they don't express their feelings." Students also shared that if boys were to share their feelings with their peers, they would be taunted with comments like "bro shut up, like, don't be talking about that" and are seen "as weak if they show any other emotion than happiness."

" Al Éxito student participant, they feel embarrassed to talk to another guy about their feelings because they're trying to be manly." Sometimes such comments would target a student's strength or sexual orientation, including "they'd get called gay if they're like 'oh I'm not feeling too well today like me and my parents got into a fight" they'd be like 'that's gay why are you being such a wimp" or "oh you're gay 'cause you're talking about your feelings."

Sexual orientation and gender identity. Students also identified sexual orientation as an element of identity that could be a source of stress.

" Al Éxito student participant, I know everybody has their own opinion about certain people let's say you're transgender, or part of the

LGBT community, there's some people that are gonna judge you for that. "

Participants report that while the experience of gay and lesbian students has improved **"a little bit,"** to make school fully inclusive **"there's definitely more that needs to be done."** Al Éxito student participant shared that gay and lesbian students are subject to "jokes," and instances where other students acted **"gay"** then said **"no homo."** One student shared, "I've had a couple incidences here at the high school regarding my sexuality and like somebody saying something or making a comment as they walked by but that happening specifically the day after the election I'm sure it's not isolated." Students also reported incidents where a lesbian couple was subject to different school policies than a straight couple related to kissing at school and an instance where a gay student was subject to harassment for participating in a school organization that traditionally had been made up of girl members. Students also discussed how gay and lesbian peers may experience stress in their homes and with their families. Students report that parental perspectives on sexual orientation depends on "if they are super religious" or "how they were raised... if they were raised being told that's wrong." For example, students shared anecdotes of students hiding their sexual orientation from their parents, or

students who "came out" to their parents but were rejected for their sexual orientation and the stress that these experiences can cause.

School. Students identified several aspects of school that served as a source of stress for them. This included relationships with their peers, school policies, interactions with teachers and the overall workload required of them.

Students report instances of



school bullying and strained peer relationship, including 15.38% of students (n=156) who reported being concerned with bullying at school on the survey. Students report that cliques exist in their schools, and one student reported that he was making efforts to befriend a student who was socially isolated. Multiple students shared experienced being subject to racism and homophobia at school, including numerous instances where other students in their school were sent home for wearing shirts that promoted white supremacy. Participants in the focus group expressed frustration

with suspension as punishment in these instances, stating that school administrators “just think it’s easier for them to not have to deal with the kids so just suspend them so they can go home,” and how this is ineffective to combat the racist behavior.

EXPERIENCED CONFIRMED BY THE 2017 PROGRAM SURVEY

71.9%

of Al Éxito participants reported that they “have been called names or slurs that I find offensive” at school.

Such instances of harassment and microaggressions were not only perpetrated by students’ peers but also teachers. In much the same way that local racism and xenophobia is attributed to national political rhetoric, students reported that teacher expression of these same political viewpoints emboldened other students to create a hostile learning environment at school.

While some instances of this was direct, “last year there were some teachers that were saying that they agreed with everything that Trump said and they would say those things to their students” others were more indirect, *“they don’t say straight up ‘I don’t like Latinos’ but they just make it uncomfortable sometimes because they let out some hints of, like, ‘I think this is good’”* (referring to politics).

This is consistent with findings of the 2017 Al Éxito program survey, 40.9 percent of students reported that they “have been stereotyped for being Latino by my teachers” with 24 percent reporting that this

happened “rarely,” 14 percent “sometimes,” and 2.9 percent **“frequently.”** Specifically, students cited examples of classroom discussions of “the wall,” teacher comments about “how you won’t be able to go back to Mexico, and if you do you won’t be able to come back” and a teacher joking that a student visiting Mexico might not **“make it back in time before the wall.”** Such public displays in the classroom gave permission for certain student behaviors, such as students chanting **“Donald Trump! Build the wall!”** at Latino students in the hallway.

Students also identified school policies as a source of stress. Specifically, school policies related to absences which occur when students travel for extended periods of time to visit family. Schools do not accommodate such trips, and as a result of prohibitive school policies students often return to school facing, questions like, **“don’t you know you’re gonna be behind on credits, you might not graduate”** which feels unfair because the students involved, **“worked so hard and now all of a sudden they’re gone on a trip for like a month and you possibly won’t graduate.”**

Students shared that often they are unaware of such trips, such as *“situations where they just found out and they have to go as soon as possible and they can’t just wait for 10 days because let’s say their mother is dying,”* students also report that sometimes they are surprised to learn of a trip because their parents failed to tell them or provide advance warning.

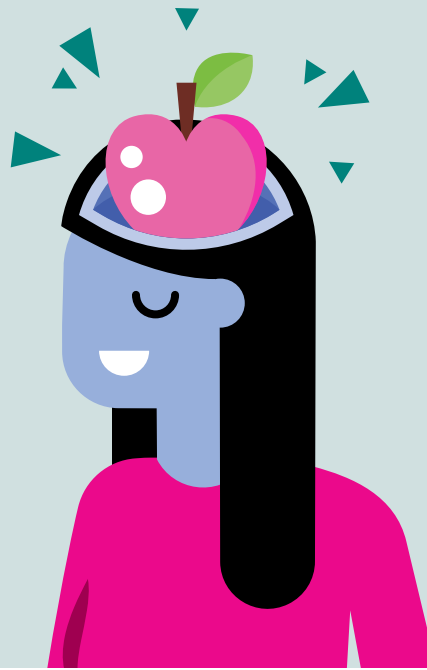
These extended trips out of the

country were seen as inevitable due to being separated from family in their home country and participants felt that additional support was needed to ensure students are able to keep up academically after their absence. While such absences were at times unanticipated, such trips were discussed frequently in focus groups. The fact that such trips affected multiple students suggests that they are common; therefore, it would benefit schools, students and families for districts to anticipate these absences and create policies which provide the academic supports to ensure student success upon their return to school.

Finally, students express that they feel stress associated with their classes and workload in school, *“...like the people that take higher (level) classes, often I see that [they] have the most stress going on with them because they do have a lot more pressure on them to do good and to turn in things on time.”* In a high school focus group, students referred to a Des Moines Register article reporting that 8% of Central Academy students had attempted suicide and 25% had fantasized about suicide in the past year, while discussing the stress and anxiety that higher level courses caused.

However, stress isn’t only experienced by students in high level courses or the result of high expectations. Regardless of academic track, students experience stress with the need to *“prove” their competence to teachers, “[I] feel like I have to do good [in middle school] in order to be seen as a good person in high school. I don’t*

Mental Health



wanna let people down...” Furthermore, the low expectations of both teachers and peers causes stress,

...students go through a lot here because of people who doubt them. I’ve had a couple friends, I’m one of those people as well, where we’ve had a lot of people doubting us and making us feel like we’re not worth what we believe we are worth and they make us believe, they’re putting like ideas in our head making us believe that we won’t make it far in life just because of our grades in school or our attendance.

Family. At home students identify family and finances as sources of stress. Students discussed home responsibilities, including helping their family financially, as well as additional family responsibilities contributing to overall stress. These issues were seen as affecting them not only at home, but often times issues at home would manifest at school or make school more stressful. The pressure of being good students and family members and to help their family financially made it hard for students to balance their school and family responsibilities. Al Éxito student participant,

“I think we have a lot of stress because us high school students, we’re like already, people are shaping us to be adults for the future so we have jobs, we have school work, we have younger siblings, and so we have to take care of those who are like [my]

children basically, for me because I’m the oldest child. So that can definitely give a lot of stress to me.”

Students describe that some issues that affect their mental health that relates to their family are finances, caretaking for their family members, or divorced parents. Due to poverty and parents working long hours students report that parents “they can just not be there like they’re working all the time.”

“Additionally, Al Éxito students discussed that when peers face trouble at home it can make school work more difficult to complete,

I feel like people who actually have issues it always comes from like family and then they come to school they try to take it off but then all this schoolwork comes, and then they try to do tests and they have to study for this and they have to finish this and that and...

Aside from school work, students face the potential of being labeled a **‘bad student’** due to how they cope with issues they face outside of school, “*you can say that the ‘bad people’ in school don’t do anything but maybe they are hurting at home but don’t wanna show it.*”

BIG RESPONSIBILITY



“

So it's a really big responsibility to like help your family members and then your education also and I mean I understand that teachers are supposed to do their job but I mean a lot of us students, we can't pretty much change anything. We can't pretty much do much, that second thing, that's also our responsibility and we can't just put that to the side.

”

Helping family financially. Students at both the middle school and high school level report working to bring income for their family and being concerned with helping family pay their bills. Students report “financial status like being able to pay rent on time or if you have enough money to pay bills” as a source of stress in their daily lives. In Iowa, the median income of Latino families in 2016 was \$45,993, with an average family size of 3.82 while the median family income for Iowa was \$72,351, with an average family size of 2.99. Many struggle with helping their family financially, taking care of younger siblings or adult dependents, and continuing to work hard in school and be involved in extracurricular activities. Although students want to be successful in school, they struggle to prioritize their education when their family's basic needs are not met.

“ *I try to go work like 2-3 jobs just trying to get money for my mom cause she's a single parent... and then grandparents they can't even work so it's kind of hard.* ”

Additionally, students who struggle at school as a result of family responsibilities feel unsupported by teachers and administrators who believe school should be a students' main priority. However, due to family poverty and cultural norms students feel like “it's really hard just to focus one problem at a time when we have a lot of other priorities” and that **“many of us, like my family.... the way I was raised is that family's first and that's how I've been**

taught all my life.” In one high school focus group, students identified having school be a student's first priority as a **“privilege”** reserved for students who did not have to worry about their family's finances or immigration issues.





BARRIERS TO CARE

Participants identified a number of barriers which prevent youth from accessing mental health care services, reaching out to a school counselor, and talking with adults and peers about their personal problems. Barriers included the cost of such services, as well as a lack of service providers, including a lack of school-based services. Students also cited a lack of trust in mental health service providers and stigma associated with a mental health diagnosis. Parents and family members were also discussed as a barrier for reasons that may be tied to broader cultural views of mental health in Latin American culture.

Family and Parents. Although family was seen by some students as a support system for their mental health, they could also be a barrier to reaching out for care beyond talking to family. For example, students feared being stigmatized by parents if they asked to see a therapist, *I think a barrier would be like a parent you know they're afraid of expressing their feelings or how they feel about their mental health to their parents and I feel like they're scared to feel unaccepted by their parents...*

Youth reported a cultural difference in how they viewed their mental health in comparison to their parents. Students report often feeling unsupported or dismissed when talking about their mental health with their fathers with responses such as *“you're fine, you're fine, no tienes nada” (there's nothing wrong with you), or “at least you're not dying or*

something” as common responses to mental health issues. Latina mothers were seen as more sympathetic to discussing mental health than fathers, even if they struggled to understand their children's mental health problems. Students also spoke about mental health as a new concept for their parents, referring to their parents' beliefs as **“traditional”** or **“Catholic.”** For example, Al Éxito student participant states *“my Dad said that where he lived 'none of us had any of that, I think you're just like making this up' ...'cause, like, I guess I don't know, I feel like they would have had some mental illnesses, but they just wouldn't have recognized it easily as we do. Whereas over here we're more aware of it and the signs of it but I know when I told my Dad that I had a panic attack he was like “a what?” and he started laughing!”* This belief that mental health issues were not common **“back home”** in Latin America was prevalent among students' parents who were introduced to these issues in the United States. One student shared a common sentiment from a parent, *““why are there so many depressed people here in America?”* she said in Mexico nobody had ever heard of suicide or people that were like that hurting themselves.”

These responses to discussing mental health made it harder for youth wanting to discuss their issues with family. Students reported that these cultural views led families to keep issues to themselves, in fear of others in the Latino community judging their family, **“also**



it's kind of about their ego in a way. Like they don't like to be seen as weak so they think that being mentally ill, having a mental illness, is gonna make you weak and they don't want to have someone that's weak in their family I guess. They don't wanna recognize it so that way people don't find out."

Cost. Students cited the cost of mental health services as a major barrier for youth trying to seek care. Lack of family health insurance and inability to pay for services (even with health insurance) led many to not consider professional care. Additionally, Al Éxito student participant reported that some may feel guilty asking their parents to pay for mental health services, when they know their family is struggling financially, *"because they maybe worry that they're gonna have their parents spend a lot of money on them."* The State Data Center of Iowa 2017 report stated that in 2016, 15.1% of the Latino Iowa population had no health insurance coverage. The corresponding rate for all of Iowa is 4.3%.

Fear. When discussing access to care, students identified fear as a barrier for youth and the Latino community at large. Fear of telling a medical provider about their problems, or of students and community members finding out they are seeking care defers use of services. For example, students in rural areas cited the possibility of community members finding out they are seeing a therapist, *"depending how it is because there's some people that have*

the same therapist as you that maybe you'll know... Small town, small world." Students reported that even adults in the Latino community would be afraid of sharing their personal issues with doctors or of using translators to access therapy. One student mentioned that if students are seeking professional help to deal with issues at home, *"they might be afraid of what might happen to them like if they'll have to get separated from their home life if that's what's affecting [them] or move away."*

No one to talk to. Students discussed a variety of ways in which their school environment made it difficult to talk about mental health struggles with peers or adults. In one high school, students criticized the school's lack of sensitivity while responding to a student's death by suicide. Al Éxito student participant expressed that school administrators were dismissing the mental health issues that students face, *"I think they should have them (counselors) at school though, 'cause it's sad that it actually took a death (suicide) for them to actually try to bring this situation to the light. We should have those (counselors) here constantly because it's just sad that a death had to happen for them to even realize 'oh this is a problem.'" This sentiment was echoed by other students who felt schools only addressed mental health issues when it was "too late."*



NO ONE TO TALK TO...

Additionally, students across sites spoke of the lack of support students received from school staff and counselors, stating that counselors hardly interact with students on a day-to-day basis, *“well there’s some counselors, but to be honest I don’t see that much the support from counselors for me.”* This sentiment was echoed across focus groups, with students feeling like counselors were not there to “counsel” them or gave them enough time to discuss personal issues before sending them back to class. Students also reported being embarrassed of being called to the counselor’s office while in class due to fear of rumors or shaming from their peers.

Stigma. Stigma around mental illness was reported as prevalent in school, especially from peers, and among their family and the Latino community. Al Éxito student participant reported a variety of behaviors from students ranging from using words like **“depressed”** to describe sadness, making fun of students by accusing them of having “depression,” to encouraging

peers to commit suicide. *“Someone was encouraged to do it (commit suicide) but some kid saw the bullying and told the teacher and then the kid got help”* reported one middle school student. However, students report that it is still hard for students struggling with their mental health because *“they feel like they’re not gonna get the attention they deserve”* or *“they feel like people are gonna look at them different”* if they are diagnosed with a mental illness. This sentiment holds true for survey respondents, when asked *“What worried you the most about talking to someone?”* (n=156) the most frequent responses for students who were worried were that *“no one would believe me”* and *“people would think I was crazy and be scared of me.”*

Although most students were critical of their parents’ lack of understanding of mental health issues, some also believed that there are less mental health issues in their parents’ home countries

than in the U.S. Two students discuss their trips to Mexico, *“when I go there’s like no one like that (with mental illness). Everyone’s so happy cause there’s so much culture and things to do and everyone’s always outside...And you make friends really easy, you all communicate with each other... I feel like they’re not as stressed out too because they have less [work] hours and I feel like they’re always with family...”* However, she added, *“yeah so I think that if someone was to be going through a hard time they’d be like ‘oh well she’s crazy how could she be going through depression?’”*

This illustrates both the stigma people with mental health conditions face in their home country and serves as evidence that mental illness does exist.



ALCOHOL AS A FORM OF ESCAPE FOR STUDENTS STRUGGLING WITH MENTAL HEALTH OR FAMILY ISSUES

COPING STRATEGIES AND BEHAVIORS

Focus group participants identified different coping strategies used by youth to manage sources of stress and other challenges to mental health. These strategies and behaviors were both positive and negative. Negative behaviors included substance use and self-harm while positive strategies included student-teacher relationships and practical knowledge of immigrant rights.

Drug and Alcohol Use. One main behavior discussed by students was the use of drugs and alcohol as a form of escape for students struggling with mental health or family issues. One student stated, “for young people because a lot of them, like if they’re depressed maybe they just start smoking, drinking because maybe they just get away from reality and start doing that. I’ve seen people that do that, that are very depressed, and they just go take drugs.” Some students also pointed to their perceived prevalent use of alcohol among adults in the Latino community as a negative way to cope with internal problems.

Self-Harm. Students also reported seeing students at their school cutting and self-harming with some students being bullied due to their (real or assumed) mental illness and cutting behavior. Students held a wide range of attitudes about why their peers engage in self-harm such as concern and empathy but

sometimes also labeling the behavior as “attention-seeking.” For example, one student characterizes the difference between those with **“real depression”** and those who are “faking it,” “most kids who go to teachers they just want attention from people and people who actually have like depression... they probably don’t wanna go to a teacher and tell them how they feel because they probably would worry that the teacher would go and tell someone else immediately.” This distinction between ‘real’ and ‘fake’ symptoms added to a feeling of distrust of peers and fear of rumors. Although there was no consensus on how participants viewed cutting behavior, 15.38% of mental health survey participants reported struggling with cutting and self-injury.

Teachers. Student-teacher relationships were determined an important factor to help students talk about mental health or feel like they were understood by a trusted adult. “Yeah I feel like teachers see the students more than the counselors so there’s a closer bond so there’s not really need for the counselors cause they’re not with the students so there’s teachers that are closer to students.” Students also mentioned the importance of having teachers that had had similar life experiences as them and that they could relate to.



AL EXITO

Al Éxito student participant reported on the importance of teachers noticing their students and looking out for their wellbeing,

plus there's some teachers at my school that they've gone through a lot of these things too so they know how to respond to student and they notice it quickly in the students.

Knowledge of Rights. Students identified the importance of discussing immigration fears and teaching families practical ways to protect their loved ones or have knowledge that will help them feel safer in their home. For example, one student discussed how knowing “that the police can’t come bursting into your house without a warrant without like reason” helps families “feel safer at home in the hands of the law.” This type of practical information to keep families safe, was viewed as helping immigrants feel safer and potentially less stressed.

Students identified the need for Al Éxito to provide education and support to three primary populations; parents, students and facilitators. Students provided the most evidence of the need for support for parents. Specific to mental health, one focus group participant suggested, *“maybe educate them so providing the opportunity for parents to come with their children to learn about mental health and figure out ways to help sustain it.”* Students further discussed that while Al Éxito provides information to families specific to DACA and immigration - topics which are sources of stress - Al Éxito’s ability to join together the community in education and action helps to reduce isolation and stress.

Al Éxito student participant,

“I don’t think it adds as much stress because actually it brings us all together as a community to try and better ourselves and try to use our

voice for a change like we go to the capital and talk to legislators on our own. And that’s what’s so great about it because we don’t have to do it alone...we can go out together and you don’t have to be afraid because there’s gonna be someone with you and that’s what’s so great about Al Éxito because you don’t have to worry about feeling alone.”

Participants also suggest that Al Éxito can help youth counter mental illness by continuing program in which students can be educated, discuss mental illness, and complete activities. Finally, focus group participants suggest that Al Éxito can also provide support to facilitators and suggest talking with and working with their leaders. Furthermore, a facilitator requested resources that could be provided to students, allowing students to be provided support regardless of whether or not they want to discuss their personal issues.



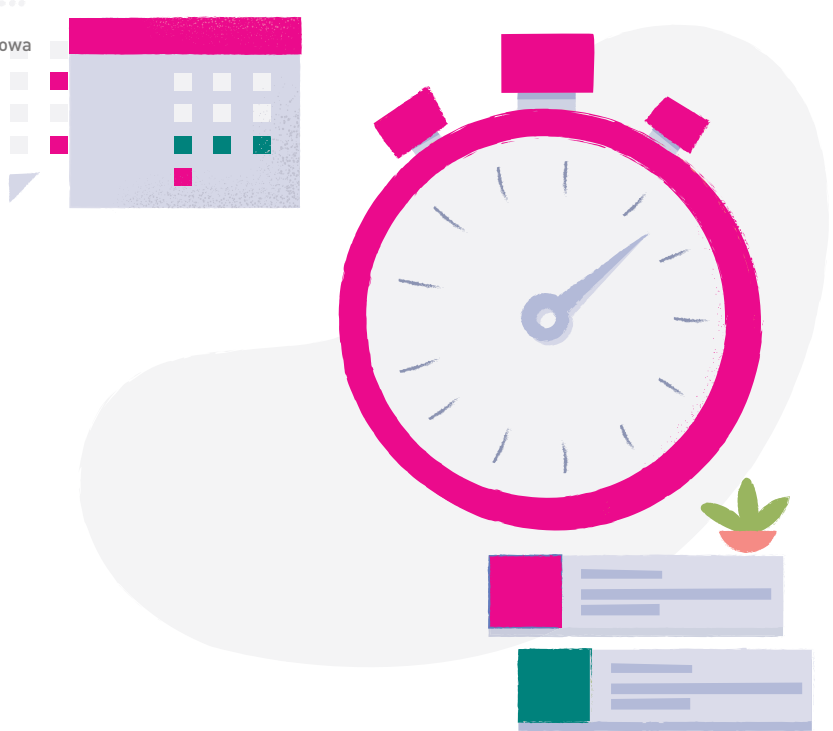
RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of the focus groups and mental health survey indicate that Al Éxito can take steps and leverage partnerships to support the mental health of Latinx youth.

1. Partner with school districts to ensure Latinx youth are provided with a safe learning environment. Focus group participants report that the mental health of Latinx youth is compromised by multiple aspects of their school environment. Teachers' public sharing of political views creates a hostile learning environment, damages teacher-student relationships and permits the harassment and bullying of Latinx students by their peers. Furthermore, these behaviors violate Iowa Code 280.28, Iowa's anti-bullying and anti-harassment policy, which establishes the necessity of a safe and civil school environment and requires Iowa school districts to adopt and enforce anti-bullying and anti-harassment policies. To ensure a safe learning environment for Latinx students, Al Éxito can partner with school districts to review anti-bullying policies and support the creation of procedures to appropriately address incidents of bullying and harassment.
2. Develop and distribute sample school policies which support Latinx students and families. School district policies related to attendance and school counseling are sources of stress for Latinx students. Al Éxito can capitalize on existing partnerships with school districts to recommend appropriate attendance policies that will support student success and graduation. The creation of a sample attendance policy would exemplify a means for districts to address extended periods of school absence without detrimental effects to student mental health or academic progress. Additionally, students report that schools operate with a limited number of school counselors. The organization can also encourage the implementation of policies which encourage hiring diverse candidates in alignment with the American School Counselor Association established counselor to student ratios.
3. Create and implement programming to address gender stereotypes and norms. Students discussed at great length the impact of gendered social norms and stereotypes on mental health, specifically the way in which girls and boys are able to openly share their feelings. Especially concerning is the way in which young men experience teasing and shame associated with sharing their feelings. Al Éxito is in the unique position to develop and implement programming to address and counter these stereotypes and norms. Such curriculum should address cultural norms around masculinity, bullying based on gender identity and sexual orientation, and identify strategies to support mental health among young men.
4. Support school district professional development experiences specific to teacher expectations of Latinx youth. Results of this study indicate that students

Access To Infor Mation

MORE INFO



experience stress related to low teacher expectations. Such expectations determine the academic "track" on which students are placed and systemically denied academic opportunities both in high school and beyond. This experience is not limited to Latinx students in Iowa but is part of a larger phenomenon experienced by students of color across the United States. Building upon existing partnerships with school districts, Al Éxito can support professional development offerings which address low teacher expectations and underlying issues of bias and discrimination. Amplifying student voices related to these experiences may be particularly effective in changing teacher behaviors.

5. Support Latinx families' knowledge of and access to information and supports related to immigration and mental health care. Focus group participants report that Al Éxito has established itself as an organization which supports not only youth, but also their families. The organization has historically provided families information regarding education and college preparation. Given the results of this study,

the organization is positioned to expand their role specific to information sharing and provide parents much needed information related to mental health care, systems of mental health care, immigration and human rights. Provision of this information to families may reduce student stress, stigma associated with mental health issues, and fear of family separation while increasing student and family accesses to community services.

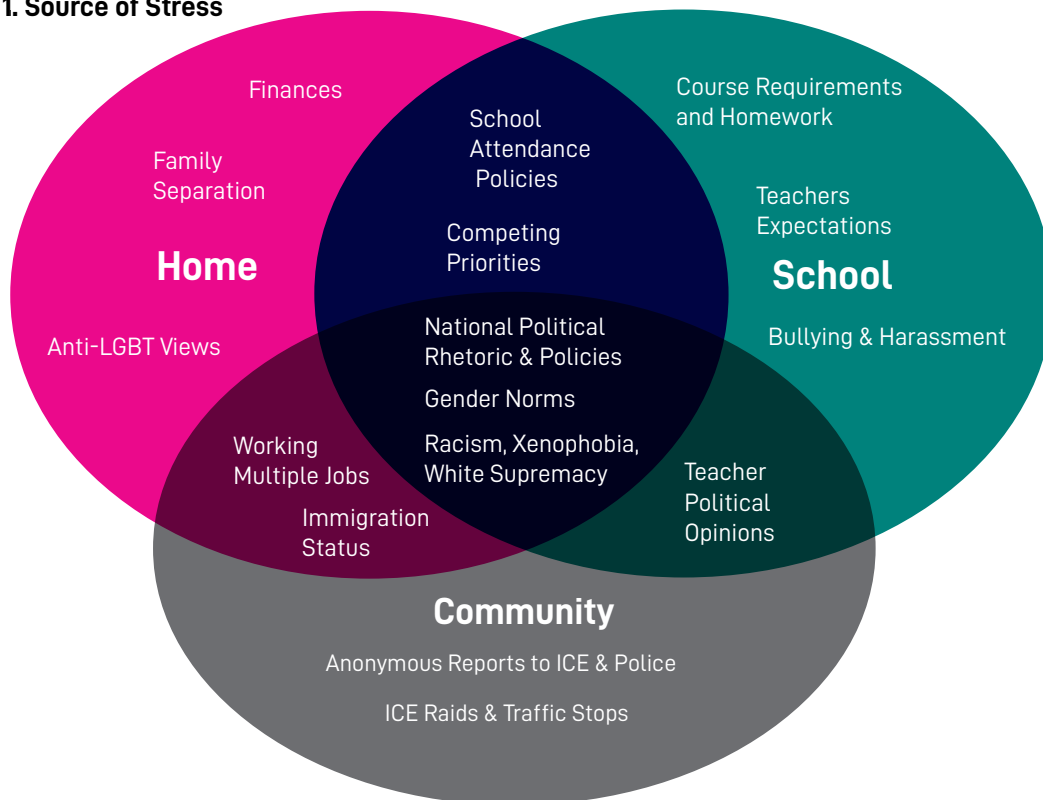
6. Further study solutions. The purpose of this study was to better understand youth perceptions of mental health and identify sources of stress. While the results of this study identify many of the challenges experienced by youth participating in the program, future studies should seek youth input on the best solutions and supports for their mental health care. Program participants can provide not only perspective in the above listed recommendations, but also in additional solutions to the mental health challenges faced by Latinx youth in Iowa schools and communities.

CONCLUSION

Teachers were identified as both a source of stress, when endorsing political opinions that harass, harm or further marginalize Latinx youth, and a source of support, especially when the teacher had firsthand experience of the problem(s) a student was facing. These emergent themes are also not place specific, but rather run across multiple contexts of a student’s life, including home, school and the community.

Focus group participants provided valuable information specific to the experiences and perspectives of Latinx youth related to mental health. While emergent themes identified sources of stress, barriers to care, and coping strategies (both positive and negative), it is important to recognize the intersection of these themes. Fear was identified as both a source of stress (e.g., the fear of ICE, deportation, family separation) and a barrier to care (fear of stigma, lack of trust in mental health professionals). Figure 1 illustrates how sources of stress are present across these multiple ecologies, as well as the spaces in between:


Figure 1. Source of Stress





The results of this study have implications for school and community leaders regarding the experiences of Latinx youth. School leaders must consider how policies specific to attendance negatively impact Latino students. They must also consider how low expectations and expression of political opinions by teachers impacts Latino students, both directly and indirectly. Further attention must also be given to the role of school counselors, and how teachers are identified by students as a source of support and guidance during difficult situations. School and community leaders must be aware of the impact of the current political context on students and families. Efforts must be made by community agencies and organizations to support Latinx youth and connect them with much needed, but often unavailable resources, especially in regard to mental health. Finally, the effects of trauma are well documented and long lasting. School and community members must fully understand how both the threat and reality of family separation impacts Latino students and take proactive steps to integrate trauma informed care in education and community services. Further studies may explore with students how to most effectively reduce stress, remove barriers to care, or promote positive coping strategies.

Overall, the results of this study just begin to identify the challenges experienced by Latinx youth related to mental health. Al Éxito can use the results of this study to inform programming, practices and partnerships. However, further work must be done to continue to engage students, families, and stakeholders in the identification and implementation of solutions. Such actions will help to ensure that Latinx students have what they need to achieve their full potential as leaders, and ultimately create a better community.



What make
you unique?

SOURCES

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9. Iowa's ratio is 423:1 while the ASCA recommended maximum is 250:1. Lane, E., Beck, M., & Gallo, L. (2017, February). *Iowa School Counselors and College and Career Readiness* [PDF]. Iowa School Counselor Association.

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