



FAMILY ENGAGEMENT WORKSHOP

Partnering with Indigenous Families from Latin America

“[Partnering with Indigenous Families from Latin America](#)” is a family outreach video series featuring Henry Sales (Mam), an Indigenous educator from Guatemala who came to the U.S. as a teenager. The videos are available in English, Spanish, and Mam and can be used in family engagement events with Indigenous families from Latin America.

Note: While this series highlights the Mam language and culture, the videos can be used with Latin American Indigenous communities who speak other languages as well. Interpreters who speak families’ languages can interpret the videos, or some families may be comfortable watching the videos in English or Spanish. Knowing your families’ language preferences will allow you to plan accordingly.

Indigenous Students from Latin America

In recent years, U.S. schools have seen an increase in the number of Indigenous students from Latin America. These are students who come from Indigenous communities and cultures in Latin America that pre-date colonization. They speak Indigenous languages such as Mam, Ixil, and languages in the Mixtec and Quechua language families. Some students and their families may also speak Spanish fluently; others may speak little Spanish or none at all. Since these students come from Latin America, however, they are often assumed to be Spanish speakers, even though Spanish may be their second or third language.

In addition, many Indigenous families may not feel comfortable disclosing their Indigenous identity since their communities have often faced discrimination and oppression in their home countries.

This was the case at Wolfe Street Academy, a school that realized it had a [“hidden” language](#) when it discovered that it had a significant population of families who spoke a Mixtecan language whom the school originally believed were native Spanish speakers.

At Wolfe Street, the school was slowly able to create a culture not only of acceptance but celebration around the families’ culture and language. It took time and patience to build that trust, however. School leaders say that, even now, new families often don’t acknowledge that they speak a first language other than Spanish until they realize there is a supportive culture in the school. This is a helpful example to keep in mind as you consider your own outreach with Indigenous families.



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Laying the Groundwork

Before you plan an outreach event with your Indigenous families, we recommend that you do some preparation first. Here are some ways to get started:

Learn more about the Indigenous communities that are in your school and district.

Start by talking with family liaisons or ESL teachers at your school. You can start by finding out:

- Which countries families come from
- Families' preferred languages
- Some background information about families' history
- Which organizations serve these communities in your region

You can also learn more from students and families, but it's important not to ask too many direct questions at the outset. As noted above, many families may be [hesitant to acknowledge their Indigenous language or culture](#), and they may also be navigating the immigration system. Provide low-key opportunities for students to share more about themselves on a regular basis, and even if families don't share anything about their Indigenous identity at the beginning, be patient. They may share more once they feel comfortable doing so.

Build your background knowledge.

You can start by reading the following articles and look for examples of resources or ideas on how other schools have welcomed Indigenous families within their community.

- [Interview with Henry Sales](#)
- [Supporting Indigenous Latinx Students' Success in U.S. Schools](#)
- [A Hidden Language: Supporting Students Who Speak Mixtec](#)
- [Rigoberta Menchú: Books for Children and Teens](#)

Connect with contacts in the Indigenous community.

Look for contacts who speak your families' languages and can help support school-family partnerships. These may be family liaisons or contacts in organizations that serve the community. If you aren't sure where to start, check to see whether other colleagues in your district or in local higher education institutions have any contacts.



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4 Finally, proceed with sensitivity and look for ways to build trust.

Creating partnerships will likely take time. We hope the video series will serve as a bridge and a chance to create opportunities for joy and celebration. However, it is important to proceed slowly and with sensitivity. Talking about culture and language may be emotional and difficult for some, especially if they have experienced discrimination or oppression due to their Indigenous identity. Families may be hesitant to participate in school events or openly discuss their culture or language. Following these steps will go a long way in creating partnerships, and engaging even a few families will eventually pave the way for additional families to join the collaboration.

Planning an event

When you are ready to plan an event, here are some first steps. Be sure to include families in the process!

- Ensure that multilingual volunteers who speak families' languages can interpret at the event.
- Find out from families what locations and times will most likely work for them. Some families may work for the same employers and have similar schedules. (**Note:** Families may be doing shift work, so it's important to check in with them about their schedules.)
- Find out if there are any barriers to participation, such as transportation, communication, or child care. Think creatively about how to address these barriers to maximize participation. For example, some families may prefer to connect to a video event remotely from home, while others may not have access to devices or Internet connections.
- Find out if there are school or district channels, local media outlets, or social media networks within the community where you can promote the event.

Using the videos

These activities can be done in person or online. You can show all of the videos in one session, or make each video the focus of a series of sessions. And you may wish to share each video in Mam, Spanish, and English if your families have different language preferences.

If families who speak multiple languages are attending, consider creating groups for each language so an interpreter can work with each group and families can talk comfortably about their own culture. This could be done in person or breakout rooms online if families are familiar with online platforms.

Finally, ideas for discussion topics are listed below. In order to “break the ice,” we have included a warm-up topic. Feel free to add questions or activities of your own! If families are in small groups, ask a member of each group to share some of their ideas with the bigger group after each discussion.



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VIDEO #1

Hold on to Your Mam Culture

Ask families:

- Which cultural items they notice in the video
- What they can share from their culture with their children (Examples might include clothing, food, cooking, dance, weaving, arts, music etc.)
- Why passing on culture is important
- If they had an experience when their culture was welcomed here in the U.S. and how it made them feel



VIDEO #2

Hold on to Your Mam Language

Ask families:

- If they have seen a video in Mam (or their language) before
- How they felt when they heard Henry speaking Mam
- How they can use their language at home (Examples might include talking with their children, telling stories, singing songs, etc.)
- Why it's difficult to teach their children their language and what might help



VIDEO #3

Sharing My Mam Culture with Others

Ask families:

- If they have met anyone at their child's school or in the community who is bilingual
- How that person helped their family
- What the benefits of being bilingual might be (Examples might include staying connected to family, jobs, and travel)

You can also talk about the benefits of learning different languages for the brain. For more ideas, see this [related tip sheet](#) from Head Start (produced with Colorín Colorado).



VIDEO #4

Indigenous Families' Rights to Translated Information

Ask families:

- If they have received information from their child's school in Mam (or their language)
- If they know how to contact someone who speaks their language at their child's school
- How to contact their child's teacher
- What questions they have for their child's teacher

Let families know how to access information in their home language. If families are not getting information in their language, let school administrators know and help families connect with a community organization who can provide guidance on next steps.



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VIDEO #5

Sing to Your Baby!

Ask families:

- If they know the song that Henry mentioned in the video
- What other songs, rhymes, or games are sung with children in Mam (or their language)
- If anyone would like to volunteer to sing one of these songs

At the end

- Ask families what they have learned from the session and which ideas they might try.
- Let them know that there are many ways they can support their child's education.
- Encourage them to keep their language and culture strong at home and ask the school for support where needed!
- If possible, note the things that worked and didn't work; these are important lessons for your school community on how to work effectively with your Indigenous families.
- Think about what you might do differently next time and share your lessons learned!



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