



HISPANIC PARENTS SPEAK OUT

Reflections from a series of focus groups with Hispanic parents in Idaho conducted for Bluum

by the FDR Group | September, 2016





TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword i

Introduction 1

What Do Idaho’s Hispanic Parents Really Want?..... 3

Spanish: The Specifics 9

Charter Public Schools and Choice 13

Trust and Communication 16

Concluding Thoughts: Rising Expectations in a Place Called Home 19

ABOUT BLUUM

Bluum is a nonprofit organization committed to ensuring Idaho’s children reach their fullest potential by cultivating great leaders and innovative schools. Bluum believes that school choice helps families, children and educators achieve more and do better. Bluum works to help Idaho become a national model for how to maximize learning opportunities for children and families.

Bluum seeks to empower and support educators who take risks and put children first by:

- » developing innovative leaders;
- » growing successful school models;
- » sharing research and learning innovations; and
- » providing school support and management help.

For more information, visit bluum.org.

Special thanks to our partners:



FOREWORD

by Terry Ryan and
Angel Gonzalez

IDAHO HISPANIC PARENTS SPEAK OUT

Hispanic students are among Idaho's fastest growing demographic groups, making up 17.7% percent of enrolled public K-12 students today. Even more, enrollment of Hispanic school-age children is projected to grow another 11.7 percent by 2019¹. This demographic shift makes it imperative that Idaho's schools learn to fully engage these students and their families in high quality educational opportunities, especially if we are to ensure that these students are able to contribute to the future of Idaho's social and economic development.

Idaho's Hispanic families offer valuable insights that can benefit the work of schools throughout the state, whether they be private, parochial, or public. This is especially true for Idaho's charter schools, which currently under-enroll Hispanic students².

Bluum, with the support of the J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Family Foundation, is committed to helping create new, high-performing seats in schools that are ready, willing, and able to serve the state's growing and increasingly-diverse student demographic.

WHY WE DO THIS WORK?

With the goal of creating 20,000 new seats in innovative schools of choice by 2024, we believe that sharing the voices of families in Idaho's many communities can help our schools, educators, and policy leaders increase access to great learning opportunities in the communities with the greatest need for better school options.

Over the last three years, we have worked closely with the Albertson Foundation and partners like Building Hope, a national nonprofit dedicated to helping charter schools develop high-quality facilities, to support the expansion of some of the best charter public schools in the state. Through this work, schools like Compass Public Charter School in Meridian, Idaho Arts Charter in Nampa, Idaho Distance Education Academy/GEM Prep Academies in Pocatello and Nampa, North Idaho STEM in Rathdrum, Connor Academy in Pocatello, Upper Carmen Charter School in Salmon and Sage International School in Boise have all been able to expand the number of students they serve.

Our work has also helped launch new start-up schools, such as Alturas International Academy in Idaho Falls, and soon the Nampa School District will open its first public Innovation School, tentatively called the Treasure Valley Leadership Academy. We've also assisted private schools like Grace Lutheran in Pocatello, which is launching a new private high school this year.

¹ http://www.jkaf.org/content/uploads/2015/07/Shifting_Sands_Technical.pdf

² Statewide, the enrollment of the Hispanic population in charter schools is 9.4 percent, while the Hispanic enrollment within district public schools is 18.1 percent (cite SDE). As a point of comparison, students who are Hispanic make-up 30.0 percent of the enrollment in charter schools nationally, while the enrollment in public district schools is 24.6 percent (cite: http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d15/tables/dt15_216.30.asp).

In line with our vision, the new seats these schools create are intended for children of all backgrounds, as will any future new school seats we support. To be successful, we need better strategies for engaging Hispanic families with the growing number of innovative learning opportunities taking place throughout the Gem State.

With all this in mind, Bluum sought to learn more about the experience of some of Idaho's Hispanic families around their education options and opportunities.

HOW THIS STUDY WAS DONE?

To help us reach out to these families, Bluum asked organizations serving the Hispanic community, including the Idaho Leadership Institute and the Idaho Commission of Hispanic Affairs, for help in contacting Hispanic parents throughout the state. In collaboration with these partners, we invited Hispanic parents of school-aged children to participate in focus groups in Nampa/Caldwell, Meridian/Boise, Jerome, and Idaho Falls.

We also worked with Heritage Community Charter School in Caldwell to conduct a focus group with Hispanic parents with children in that school. In addition to these focus groups, Bluum's Director of Research, Angel Gonzalez, interviewed three monolingual Spanish speakers to compare the findings of the focus groups that were facilitated in English. In all, 55 Hispanic parents were interviewed for the purposes of this study.

To help us fully hear the voices of these families, we enlisted the expertise of a nationally renowned group of researchers. The FDR Group, led by expert analysts Steve Farkas and Ann Duffett, facilitated the focus groups and reported out their findings. The FDR Group has over 45 years of collective experience in community-oriented research, and their work has been influential at the national level on many occasions, with two of their works being cited as important references in a landmark decision of the United States Supreme Court.

This work is also personal for the Farkas Group. Lead researcher Steve Farkas immigrated to the U.S. as a young child who didn't speak English.

We asked Farkas and Duffett to pursue three main lines of inquiry:

1. What do Idaho Hispanic families want their school to look like?
2. How aware are Idaho Hispanic parents of school options like charter schools?
3. What are promising ways to communicate school options to Idaho Hispanic parents?

WHAT WE LEARNED

While the 55 parents from the various focus groups do not speak for all Hispanic families in Idaho, they do provide important insights and findings that can offer the state's new school sector better insights on how to effectively engage Hispanic parents. The participating Hispanic parents, for example, prioritized educational goals that are common amongst many families in the United States. They want their children to attend an academically-enriching school with a range of after-school activities. They want schools that reflect their family's values, especially respect for adults, teachers, and peers. Surveyed parents also value schools that prepare their children for college, an educational path that many felt would offer their children economic prosperity and life success. Moreover, many of the parents also wanted their students in an environment that valued cultural and linguistic diversity.

Farkas and Duffett point out that knowledge of school choice options emerged as a great barrier for many of the participating families. The focus groups and interviews made clear that most of the families could not distinguish public charter schools from traditional district schools. Moreover, participants assumed that charter schools were, in fact, private or were in other ways inaccessible to them.

When it came to obtaining information about schools, the focus group parents reported heavy reliance on their families and friends for information. Some parents also shared that they receive information about schools from their churches, workplace, and even social media. But, even when they were able to learn about their different school options from these sources, participants spoke to the importance of conferring with their families on major decisions around their child's education. Families and friends often came before many of the other sources of information the parents received. For many, these are their most trusted sources of school information.

WHAT WE BELIEVE

All families deserve the opportunity to send their children to great schools that provide their children with an excellent education. This work seeks to give schools of choice in Idaho a better understanding of how they can more effectively communicate with the state's fastest growing, and yet largely underserved, demographic. Bluum is dedicated to continuing to explore new paths forward and to encourage innovative opportunities that can help high performing schools reach a more diverse cross-section of the state's increasingly diverse student population.

We hope you find the voices of these parents compelling and that it helps Idaho begin an important conversation about how best to create school options that lead to educational equity, access, and quality across our great state.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are many people Bluum would like to thank for making this work possible. We would like to thank our partners in this study, the Idaho Commission on Hispanic Affairs and the Idaho Leadership Institute, who provided feedback on this study and connected us with community partners and parents. We would also like to thank Heritage Community Charter School for recruiting parents from their school to participate in our focus groups. Furthermore, we would like to acknowledge all the people who generously reached out to their networks in order to recruit participants and host a location for the focus group— Murrill Escobar, Fernando Valdez, Javier Castaneda, Kristine Leonardo, Laura Gramirez, Manny Velasco and Liliana Vega. We would also like to thank our researchers, Ann Duffet and Steve Farkas, for their work on this project and their deep insight on how to best hear these authentic voices.

We would also like to thank the Albertson Foundation for their continued support of Bluum and our its efforts to bring innovative school opportunities to Idaho.

NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY: HISPANIC AND LATINO

Throughout the study, parents often use the terms Hispanic and Latino. Although our report uses Hispanic, it is important to mention that these terms are not interchangeable. Hispanic is a term that is used to describe people that are descendants from any Spanish-speaking country. Latino is a term that is used to describe people that are descendants from countries in Latin America.



I. INTRODUCTION

In some ways, *Hispanic Parents Speak Out* continues a long line of opinion research studies conducted by the Farkas Duffett Research Group (FDR Group). It centers on attitudes toward education, an area where we have established a substantial body of work; and it relies upon focus groups, a research tool that has served us very well.

But this study is also different in some critically important ways.

For one thing, as inspired by Bluum's mission, the study is unabashed in its purpose: to help school leaders and organizations improve children's access to the growing number of school options in Idaho. Even more concretely, its intent is to provide practical advice on how to engage Hispanic families about these school options. Three specific questions guided our lines of inquiry:

- What do Hispanic families in Idaho want their children's schools to look like?
- How aware are Hispanic parents of school options such as charter schools?
- What are promising ways to communicate with Idaho's Hispanic parents?

This study is atypical in another way. Ordinarily, the FDR Group contracts with professional firms that specialize in recruiting focus group participants. Here, we relied exclusively on partnerships with community-based collaborators to recruit and organize the five focus groups with Hispanic parents that are the basis of this study.

Thankfully, we had first-class Idaho partners who carried out their mission with excellence and aplomb, enabling us to interview 55 Hispanic parents with school-age youngsters¹. Operationally, we limited the geographic spread of the study to Southern and Eastern Idaho, where the bulk of the state's population resides. To understand the views of families who had actually opted for a non-traditional public school, one of the five focus groups was with Hispanic parents whose children currently attend the Heritage Community Charter School in Caldwell. The groups were conducted over the course of the week of June 19, 2016, and professionally transcribed. In each group, our recruiters gathered 9 to 11 participants around a table for two-hour discussions moderated by one of the two FDR Group principals. Participants were promised confidentiality and received a \$75 honorarium for their time. The quotes reported below evoke the themes that consistently emerged in the discussions; some have been lightly edited for clarity.

Our sample of participants is far from random or representative of all Hispanic parents in Idaho; it is most accurately described as a convenience sample. The families do allow us a powerful chance to listen to Hispanic parents as they talk about their priorities for their children and for their schools, and about their hopes and concerns. Focus groups are an excellent research method to employ when trying to understand why people hold certain beliefs and preferences, directly and unfiltered. They allow us to test the assumptions and thinking of experts, the professional educators, and government officials. Most importantly, focus groups provide valuable the time for ordinary people to speak for themselves using their own words.

This leads us to consider some limitations of the current study, including those posed by language. With a few exceptions, the Hispanic parents in the focus groups were comfortable speaking in English – most were bilingual English and Spanish; a handful were much stronger in Spanish than in English. Going into the study, we recognized that we would not capture the experiences and perceptions of Hispanics who spoke only Spanish. We tried to compensate for this by asking the participants for their take on the thinking of Spanish-only speakers. We also asked Bluum's research director, Angel

¹ A big thank you to Fernando Valdez, Transition Coordinator, College of Southern Idaho (Jerome), Liliana Vega, 4-H Educator/Assistant Professor, University of Idaho (Nampa), Rob King (Meridian), Laura Gramirez, Regional Employment and Training Specialist, The Community Council of Idaho (Idaho Falls), and Dr. Javier Castaneda, Principal, Heritage Community Charter School. They deserve great credit for whatever merits this study has, and no blame for any of its flaws.

Gonzalez, to conduct three additional one-on-one interviews in Spanish, and the themes he heard are consistent with those from the focus groups. Nevertheless, we want to acknowledge upfront that this is an exploratory, initial foray into the thinking of Idaho's Hispanic parents – not its definitive rendition.

At an early point in each focus group, we handed out a mini-survey asking parents to rate the attributes that were most and least important to them when thinking about a school for their children. The data are far from scientific but at relevant points we use the results of the “handout questionnaire” to anchor the thematic findings we present. Finally, last year, on behalf of the J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Family Foundation (JKAFF), the FDR Group conducted a wide-ranging study of Idahoans' attitudes toward education through a telephone survey of 1,000 randomly selected Idaho residents. Throughout the report, we share several findings from that study – Idaho Ready for Change – that provide useful context².

HOW SCHOOLS CAN APPEAL TO HISPANIC PARENTS – A QUICK SYNOPSIS

If one were to distill the key lessons learned from the Hispanic parents interviewed in this study, what would an outreach strategy to Hispanic parents look like? No school – be it a private, charter or traditional public school – can present itself in a vacuum, without regard to policy or financial constraints, or its own performance. But based on our formative research, a school's outreach strategy should, at a minimum:

- After-school programs – and tout the respectful, disciplined atmosphere suffusing its building.
- Take pride in having good teachers that care about children and in the school's preparation of students for college. Schools might also highlight specialized courses of study (e.g., college prep, the arts), but perhaps might not even mention its test scores.
- Include some students and key staff who were Hispanic. Moreover, Spanish might be routinely heard in the building.
- Rely more upon personal, face-to-face advocacy, and less upon online or electronic media. The school's advocates might be educators or parents who were Hispanic, but even if they weren't, they would engage Hispanic parents and culture in a genuine and respectful fashion.
- Reach out to Hispanic parents where they are likely to be found – e.g., to local churches or workplaces. Advocates would deliver messages that were personal and credible, not complicated or jargon-filled.
- Offer a school application process that is simple and inviting – and where children, grandparents, uncles and aunts are welcomed.

Building parental awareness of school options in Idaho is obviously important. But after that, the keystone of the strategy should be a core, hard-to-fake objective: building trust.

² http://www.jkaf.org/content/uploads/2016/02/JKAF_LandmarkSurvey_FullReport_WEB.pdf

II. WHAT DO IDAHO'S HISPANIC PARENTS REALLY WANT?

In many ways, the answer to what Idaho's Hispanic parents want for their children and from their schools is very simple – it's no different from what any parent would want. When Hispanic parents talk about their hopes that education will pave a better future for their children, when they so quickly connect quality schools with good teachers, they sound like any parent in Idaho, and perhaps, any parent in the U.S. today.

“You want to give them a better chance at life because it's the only way they can change that pattern. We work so hard. My husband is a roofer and he works 12 hours outside. It is hard to translate this to them so they can understand that and focus so they can have responsibility in school and have good grades and see how important school is.” Meridian parent

“To be happy, to be responsible, go to college and get an education.” Idaho Falls parent

“Good teachers. They don't just go to get a paycheck... Some teachers are going just for the money, they don't care about the kids.” Nampa parent



When the survey Idaho Ready for Change asked 1,000 respondents to pick the one factor that would help young people succeed in the world of work, 30 percent of whites picked “getting a good education” from a list that included persistence, having the right connections, and knowing how to deal with people well. Among Hispanics the number was even higher, surging to 48 percent.

But as we will see, there are also some priorities and considerations – for example, those revolving around the Spanish-English language nexus – that are specific to Hispanic parents. What’s more, examining their views separately in a concentrated manner gives them voice in an arena – Idaho’s public school system – that will affect the future of their children, and the future of Idaho itself.

AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAMS ARE A TOP DRAW

The Hispanic parents in our study were perhaps most excited by the prospect of a school that would offer their children after-school programs. At the outset of the focus groups, when the handout questionnaire asked them to pick the one feature out of nine they would most like to see, more parents picked after-school programs than any other school attribute (23 out of 53). What’s more, they made clear in the discussions that followed that they were almost completely interested in programs that would give their students academic help. Virtually no one mentioned the arts or sports.

Several considerations drive Hispanic parents’ intense interest in academically-focused after-school programs. A few parents said they were so busy working that they couldn’t help their kids with schoolwork. Many parents said their ability to help was limited by a weaker command of the English language. Some bilingual families believed that speaking Spanish at home was holding back their children’s acquisition of English and wanted the programs to help them catch up. Finally some Hispanic parents – echoing sentiments often heard from non-Hispanic parents in other studies – could not recognize the new math curriculum of the Common Core era. New math techniques would cause frustration when youngsters wanted help doing the work ‘the way the teacher wants it done.’

“The Hispanics here are coming from Mexico so we are struggling helping our kids with the homework. My wife feels really bad because she can’t help our kids. I speak a little bit more English than my wife, but she is trying to help. But our kids say, ‘No, this is not the way. You don’t know anything because you don’t speak English.’ My wife says math is the same in English and Spanish.” Meridian parent

“I think my kids really struggle with reading. I think they need more help in that aspect...and it’s part of being bilingual. My kids come home, my little one, she just finished Kindergarten. She’s like, ‘Mom, I can’t read. Why can’t I read?’ Help bilingual kids. They need a program after school to help with English, after-school reading.” Idaho Falls parent

“My 6-year-old really struggles with English so that’s why it’s really important – after-school reading. He needs extra help.” Idaho Falls parent

“I think good behavior I can teach, but homework, for me, I couldn’t help him because I’m not that great with math. So I would want the school to help him with math. It’s the homework, the academic help.” Jerome parent

The focus on basic academic skills among Hispanic parents is in line with the focus of other parents in Idaho. In Idaho Ready for Change, parents viewed basic academic skills as a non-negotiable goal: 92 percent of all parents believed it was “absolutely essential” for their community’s public schools to teach “basic reading, writing, and math.” In contrast, only 41 percent said the same for teaching “literature, music, and art,” and only 31% said the same for “sports and physical education.”

TEACH RESPECT AND GOOD BEHAVIOR

The Hispanic parents we interviewed prized a school that emphasized respect and good behavior. These were values they typically emphasized at home, and they wanted the school environment to reflect those priorities. As one Nampa parent said, “I am very pleased with the school my kids go to. They are very structured. They walk in a single file line. There is no room for disruptions. They don’t get to have their phones. Every single grade has a job duty to perform in their class.”

In fact, a school that teaches good behavior and respect ranked second only to after-school programs as the most important attribute based on responses to the handout questionnaire. It was telling that parents were far more likely to complain about discipline than about academic shortcomings in their traditional neighborhood schools.

“I believe in a strong structured and consistent environment... But the students’ behavior, it is displayed also by the performance of their teachers. So if the teachers are displaying or allowing bad behavior or they are behaving badly, the students are going to follow suit.” Nampa parent

“They allow them to use their phones at school, I don’t like that. It distracts them. I don’t think it helps them learn... They can wait until after school to listen to music. They’ve turned too lenient.” Nampa parent

“I do have an expectation that my children will be respectful to everybody and they do spend more time in the school than at home. My oldest was once in English class and he didn’t like the teacher, she was very soft spoken and he was disrespectful toward her and she let me know. And I got on him about it, you’re going to show her some respect and you’re going to apologize. And he did.” Jerome parent

“If I go into a school and there’s kids outside smoking cigarettes or you walk in there’s marker all over the lockers and the trash then obviously that school is trouble...but if you walk in and it’s clean and you see kids having a good time and teachers having a good time teaching their students and stuff. Then it shows you that they respect one another.” Twin Falls parent

Parents typically responded well to school uniforms or a strict dress code because these communicated that a school was serious about student behavior. To some, there was an additional practical benefit – uniforms simplified the challenge of dressing youngsters.

“Uniforms. If every school has uniforms, it helps in the house, it saves energy, the money.” Nampa parent

“For me I think it’s the good presentation on the student. Because sometimes the kids go with saggy pants and all. I think the school has to be respectful, and the way you dress says everything about you. It doesn’t bother me that other people do it but for my kids I wouldn’t want that. My kids at school don’t have uniforms so that’s the thing that I would like.” Twin Falls parent

The expectation that the public schools are as responsible for building character as well as teaching academic skills is shared by non-Hispanic parents as well. In the statewide survey, fully 80 percent of all Idahoan parents said it was just as important for the public schools “to teach the value of such things as hard work, persistence, and responsibility.” Only 17 percent thought they should mostly focus on teaching students academic subjects.

COLLEGE IS PRIZED

Hispanic parents often talked about college as their top priority for their kids, suggesting they want schools that focus on academic preparation and college readiness. They were eager to see their children do better than they did and saw higher education, broadly defined, as a ticket to a better life and better job opportunities. Whether it was trade school, community college, or a four-year college, many touted the pragmatic benefits of higher education. Some of the parents we spoke with believed the lack of higher education on their resumes had made them economically vulnerable or destined to take ‘the hard jobs,’ in the words of one participant. They wanted their children’s lives to be easier than theirs.

“College is an important part of the picture for me, it’s huge. I’d be very disappointed if he didn’t go. Trade school is perfectly fine, we have a lot of good programs and a lot of people become very successful when they complete those programs. I just want them to be financially stable and not worry about money.” Jerome parent

“Latinos, we do the hard jobs here. I always tell my kids I don’t want you being like me, doing the hard jobs for less money... Last year, my boy turned 14-years and Saturday I took him to work and I say you need to learn where the money came from. You don’t need to do the hard job that me and your mom do every day. You need to stay at the school, do your best, go to college... I need to learn how to get scholarships. My wife heard guys after graduating school they got big money to pay [student loans].” Nampa parent

“For them just to go to college...I had my first child when I was 17 so I couldn’t go to college. I don’t want her to do the same. Because you don’t have a career, you don’t really have a good job. If you go to college, have a good job, a good income, you don’t have to worry about anything.” Idaho Falls parent



“If they go to tech schools, to a beauty school, get an Associate’s degree, or hopefully they get their Master’s. It’s pretty much expected in our family and my Dad’s whole family that we were going to go to college. We wanted to, it was ingrained in us. What do you want to do? Ok, how do you get there?” Jerome parent

To be sure, the desire for college to be a part of their children’s future was often counter-balanced by their view that too much pressure toward college risks an unhappy or resentful child. Hispanic parents – just like non-Hispanic parents – wanted their children to be personally happy and socially well-adjusted.

“I want for my kids to go to college and get the opportunities that I never had. Part of our job as a parent is we have to know what is good for them and what is going to be a good opportunity for their life. But if they don’t choose it we have to just respect that. I don’t want to force my kids to do something they don’t want to do because that’s not how it works.” Idaho Falls parent

“My son tried college, he says I forced him to go, he’s kind of floating around now and he doesn’t know what he wants to do. Every time I talk to him, whether I’m being calm and rational or whether I’m mad, he hears yup, yup, yup, yup... I want them to be happy but I want them to be successful in the sense that they do get a college degree.” Nampa parent

HIGH TEST SCORES ARE LESS CRITICAL

Despite their desire for schools and teachers with high expectations for their children, only a handful of Hispanic parents referred to a school’s test scores or ratings as measures of academic quality. In fact, only three parents said high student test scores would be their most important criteria for a school while 11 parents said it was their least important criteria.

“Each school has different curriculums so each school prepares kids differently....A test score does not really tell me what I need to know.” Nampa parent

“Maybe they get low test scores because they just learn differently. Maybe they get Ds in math and As in English. It’s not that important to me.” Jerome parent

“I don’t look at the reports. I actually have gone to the schools and have requested interviews with the teachers who will teach my child. I prepare questions for these individuals – the expectations for my child and what I expect from them.” Meridian parent

School ratings and test scores are probably going to stay around – they may not be cited often by parents but policy makers and local community ‘influentials’ such as school boards and realtors will continue to rely on them. Still, when trying to directly communicate academic excellence to parents, a school that touts college preparation and good teachers will be more likely to intrigue parents than one that touts its high test scores.

PROXIMITY OF SCHOOL – AN IMPORTANT AND TRICKY CONSIDERATION

The proximity of the school to one's home is a bit tricky – few Hispanic parents initially said it was important to them and few picked it in the handout questionnaire as their most important consideration. But further probing revealed what any experienced school administrator probably knows already – that the travel time between the home and the school building is critically important to parents and could derail a school's effort to attract them. When parents said a school didn't have to be "near" their home to be desirable, it only meant that it didn't have to be across the street. Their comments narrowed the acceptable distance to just about a 30-minute drive or less. When the distance goes past that, the school starts to be seen as beyond reach and less attractive.

"We've never lived too close to the schools, even when I was growing up it wasn't a big deal. Like right across the street or down the road is what I mean. [Moderator: If it was a half hour would that be too far?] Oh yeah. 15 minutes is OK." Jerome parent

"A few blocks walk, not a 20-25 minute drive." Nampa parent

One parent in Idaho Falls initially picked school proximity as the least important factor in considering a school for her child. But when asked to explain her choice she elaborated, "Well, right now the school is right behind my yard so my kids just walk there. So maybe that's why I don't think it's important. But even if a school was much better, but it was a half hour away, I would say no."

III. SPANISH: THE SPECIFICS

YES TO SPANISH IN THE CURRICULUM

There is interest among Hispanic parents for schools with a curriculum taught in both Spanish and English. A dual immersion program would be attractive, but a curriculum with a lighter emphasis on Spanish would also be attractive. Underlying the positive reception is that a focus on Spanish language instruction sends a reassuring signal to Hispanic parents, telling them that their families would be welcome and accepted at a school.

Not surprisingly, the parents whose children attended the dual language Heritage Community Charter School in Caldwell were enthusiastic about dual language instruction.

“We like it because our kids [are] attending dual language school. My oldest kids, they didn’t get Spanish classes, but my younger daughter, they got two years of dual language classes. Two days in English, two days in Spanish. I love that because they are learning how to write in English and how to write in Spanish, how to read in English and how to read in Spanish.” Jerome parent



“The celebration of diversity... I wanted that celebration of it. I wanted my kids to know, it is ok to speak Spanish. It is ok to speak English. You are going to learn the history of your culture also, so that was a big part for me.”
Charter school parent

Parents with homes that were English-dominant were sometimes most interested in Spanish instruction, feeling guilty that they were the cause of their kids' weaker grasp of Spanish. Through Spanish instruction, they were hoping the schools would help children hold on to their heritage or help them to communicate with their extended families.

“In our home we speak both languages, but we mostly speak English. And so when my girls speak to my mom it's very bad Spanish. And so I hate that, and even me, I don't use my Spanish very much at work, but when I do I'm like man what was that word again? Or what was the appropriate word to try to communicate with that person professionally? It's not the appropriate Spanish, but that's how we speak it. So I really like learning it appropriately.” Twin Falls parent

“As a child, I was teased a lot because I didn't speak English, and spoke it with a little accent. I said to myself I don't want this to happen to my kids. So I dedicated myself to speak English, English, English, all the time... Now I kind of feel bad because my kids don't speak Spanish... That's why I brought them here.” Charter school parent

Still, while it was generally desirable, Spanish instruction at school did not tap a reservoir of overpowering urgency in the focus group discussions or in the responses to the handout questionnaire. Only six parents cited “many classes are taught in both Spanish and English” as most important to them. The appeal of instruction in Spanish may be mitigated because many Hispanic parents believe that their children absorb the language and heritage at home. Moreover, sound fluency in English may be their key goal so their children can succeed in the U.S.

“Well, they have the Spanish at home so it doesn't matter if they get it at school.” Idaho Falls parent

COMMUNICATING IN SPANISH IS CRUCIAL TO SOME

Hispanic parents divided into two camps over the importance of a school that could communicate in Spanish. It was unimportant to parents who spoke English fluently but it was crucial to parents who struggled with English – and would be crucial for parents who did not speak it at all.

“I really wouldn't mind if the school couldn't communicate with me in Spanish because I can speak English just fine. But I think it's important to other parents.” Jerome parent

When parents had low comfort level with English they often had less confidence engaging with schools and educators. If they relied on their children to be their go-between – as often happened – some critical information could be lost in translation, and not always by accident.

“Well, they have the Spanish at home so it doesn't matter if they get it at school.” Idaho Falls parent

“My problems for not getting involved in my son's school. One, I'm shy. I don't talk much. Second, I don't want to be judged, especially I don't know if there is more Latino parents like me or not. I am afraid they are going to judge me by my accent or things I say, they don't think it is correct or something. That is why personally I don't get involved.” Nampa parent

“You’re like ok, here talk to my daughter and she’s probably little and doesn’t translate correctly. And the mom doesn’t understand what’s going on.” Idaho Falls parent

“When my kid has troubles, and they [the school] call me, sometimes I don’t understand because they speak too fast. Can you explain to me slowly please? You understand me, yes I understand you, but I need more slowly. Or please find someone who can help me speak Spanish. They say oh no we don’t have right now. Can I call later? And then my kid says everything is ok now. He lies to me!” Nampa parent

A parent at Heritage Community Charter School clearly believed that Spanish-speaking staff would be a critical draw to parents who were more comfortable speaking Spanish. “Speaking the language, definitely,” she said. “If they call the school, they need to pick up their child, whatever, that there is an issue with the child, parent-teacher conferences are in Spanish. School is school but the reason I am there is because everyone speaks Spanish.” What’s more she said, “Having a Latino male who speaks Spanish [as the principal] made a big difference.”

SHOULD THERE BE OTHER HISPANICS IN THE BUILDING?

At first blush, Idaho’s Hispanic parents appeared unconcerned about the presence of other Hispanics in choosing their children’s schools. One Meridian parent insisted, “If there are no Latinos at the school – that is fine. It doesn’t matter. The most important is for our kids to have the best education.” Only two parents picked the presence of Hispanic students as the most important consideration in the handout questionnaire; 13 said it was their least important consideration.

But as the conversations progressed, it became apparent that there is more to this issue: many Hispanic parents might ultimately avoid sending their children to a school without other Hispanics. For example, when pressed by the moderator to “imagine an all-white school. Would that make you hesitate?” one parent in Jerome said:

“I might take a step back and question it because I would hate for my kids to feel singled out. If there were a couple of people on staff who were Latino that would make me feel more comfortable.” Jerome parent

A mom recalled her own isolating experience in a school when she was young:

“When I went to school back in the 80s it was only my family in the whole elementary school that were Hispanics and another two girls from Texas. I didn’t have anybody. I would have liked to have somebody who would understand me. It is not just the language. I would like my kids to have Hispanics. A lot of times that’s who they end up speaking to.” Charter school parent

Meanwhile, other parents were very clear that they needed to be vigilant to the consequences of demographic realities when their child is a minority within a school.

“I had to be involved in the school because she is, there are what maybe 10 persons in there that are brown. There will be issues, absolutely. And as a parent you have to be involved. And I have to be involved a few times because of how she was being treated by teachers because of the color of her skin.” Meridian parent

The presence of Hispanic or Spanish-speaking staff may be especially important to parents who are primarily Spanish speakers.

“If they have people who speak Spanish, they will feel more attracted to the school because they will say oh you can call in Spanish. Call for more information or interested in the school. The staff will speak Spanish so they won't be afraid to come. I think that will be a key to attract Hispanic parents.” Meridian parent

“When you see all white teachers, you wonder. Is there a Latino teacher available?” Meridian parent

The moderator asked the participants to explain the mostly muted concerns they initially expressed over the presence of other Hispanics in a school. Several attributed their reactions to changing times – saying, in essence, that to be Hispanic in Idaho today was not the same as it was 20 or 30 years ago. “Right now, we don't think about it as much,” said a Jerome dad. “But before, in my generation growing up, we did think about it, ‘Oh, I'm the only Latino here’. You noticed it right away. I'm not worried about my children having that because now we live in a different time. Because now there's more acceptance, there's more Latinos, you see a lot more.”

IV. CHARTER PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND CHOICE

MISPERCEPTIONS OF CHARTERS

Across the focus groups there was little familiarity with charter public schools – and many misperceptions of them to boot. Sometimes the misperceptions persisted even when parents had direct, firsthand experiences with charters. The misunderstandings were on a conceptual level – for example, some thought charters were private schools or that they charge tuition. There was also a lack of familiarity with charter schools on a practical level, for example, when it came to knowing the actual charter schools in their area and whether their children were even eligible to attend them.

“I know that there’s tuition that you have to pay. My brother tried to get his kids into one. And they also have a lottery kind of thing where they’ll choose a couple of kids.” Idaho Falls parent

“I’ve heard it’s 1-6. To me, it’s elementary school.” Idaho Falls parent

“My son did go to charter school. They are private schools.” Nampa parent

“I don’t think it’s just the Hispanic community. I think a lot of people don’t even know what charter schools do. They don’t know.” Meridian parent

“What I understand is that their education system is closer to the private school. That’s my understanding. I don’t know. If you want to enroll them you have to start doing your research with the kids, and they need to write an essay to see if they can be accepted there. I think it’s kind of complicated.” Meridian parent

When parents in Nampa were asked about their school options, the local charter school was the last possibility mentioned – almost an afterthought.



“There’s choices but those are private schools. If it’s public then you have to go where the district tells you. There are only two schools, if you live on this side of town you go to one school, if you live in that part of town you go to the other one. The other choice is the private school. Oh yeah and there’s a charter school, it’s on the other side of town from where we live, it’s not that far.” Nampa parent

The accessibility and availability questions – whether their children were eligible to attend charter schools and even whether the schools were in fact public schools – were critical. Parents do not appear to typically make a systematic, thorough accounting and comparison of their school options. In this connection, the charter schools’ lottery selection method leads to confusion and apprehension. Without any countervailing information, most parents may simply send their children to the neighborhood school the district tells them. Unless something special happens that compels an assessment of options – for example, if their child appears to be faltering in a school that seems like a bad fit – their decision will be to attend the default option.

“Well, they sent a letter. They said where you live, the area that they covered. This is the district. All the kids that live in this area are going to this school.” Idaho Falls parent

“For my elementary kids, they have to go to that school. For the Junior High, I guess I could choose, but they are going to the school where they’re supposed to go. But with my High School one, she’s going to a different school. She had some problems at the other school so I just didn’t want her to continue having problems.” Idaho Falls parent

“The district told me to go there. Well, they assign schools. So depending on where you live it is automatically [decided] where your kids are going to High School.” Meridian parent

Hispanic parents’ lack of familiarity with charter public schools echoes that of other parents in Idaho. In the statewide survey only 40 percent of parents said they knew “a great deal” or “quite a bit” about charter schools.

CHARTER PUBLIC SCHOOLS SHOULD EMPHASIZE WHAT THEY STAND FOR

As one might expect, a charter school’s approach to teaching and what it emphasizes in the curriculum is much more compelling and memorable to parents than information about its governance structure. Parents who had firsthand experience or knowledge of a charter school were more likely to talk about the school’s reputation for a specific course of study – such as the arts or college prep – or that a school has a strict discipline or dress code policy.

“They wear uniforms, which if you just mention it to your kids they say, ‘no I would never go there, please don’t make me go there.’ Amongst their little selves they talk about how bad the charter schools are because of the uniforms, because of what their little friends have told them.” Jerome parent

“They all have their own different themes, so North Valley has the patriotic theme, Xavier has more the fine arts theater piece, so that’s their flavor.” Jerome parent

“I know they are small schools. Depends on what charter school, some of them are art, some are different, depending on what they have.” Nampa parent

“I have a charter school near to my home, like 3 or 4 blocks. They don’t have transportation in charter schools. The other thing is the kids work in the small groups. They have more attention, but they feel too frustrated because they are focusing on you are behind, and you try to get to the same level as the other kids.” Meridian parent

The interviews with Hispanic parents at Heritage Community Charter School buttressed the sense that the school’s appeal is driven by what it stands for and its educational approach, rather than its governance structure.

“I just wanted that smaller community feeling and smaller classes. When people would ask me, ‘So how’s that school, it’s run by a bunch of moms’ – I think it’s amazing. There are eyes everywhere. My son doesn’t get away with anything any more. And I like that. I liked that there is the same mindset whether it be the staff, the front desk or the teachers, this is what I expect for my son.” Charter school parent

This suggests that the more effective path for a charter public school to penetrate the Hispanic community’s consciousness is to focus communicating its academic niche or its unique approach to teaching and learning. Word about the school is more likely to spread, and the segment that finds it appealing or believes it would be a good fit for their children will be more likely to pursue it. “I guess the first thing that you need to think about is, What can I offer Hispanic parents that they’re not already getting,” was the advice of an Idaho Falls parent. “I guess it just depends on what kind of school it is.”

Hispanic parents first need to know when they have the option of sending their children to charter schools that they are free public schools open to all. After that, they need to know what the school stands for. In the survey Idaho Ready for Change, the greatest appeal of charter schools to parents (64 percent) was that they can “specialize in teaching students who have specific interests and talents.” Few said it was that they had more control over their budget (20 percent) or hire and fire staff more easily (14 percent).

CATHOLIC/RELIGIOUS SCHOOLS AS A CHOICE

A number of the Hispanic parents we interviewed said they would have opted to send their children to Catholic school – often because of the religious values and the traditional atmosphere it afforded. Several had fond memories and good results, as they themselves had attended Catholic school in Mexico. The most obvious obstacle to doing so was the cost – prohibitively expensive, especially when there was more than one child in the family.

“I would like to send my kids to Catholic school but we can’t because it’s expensive. My whole family, my brothers and sisters, we attended the elementary Catholic school in Mexico... Our school was always first place on reading, math. It was the best.” Meridian parent

“They’re expensive. I think from a couple of years ago it was \$6-7K per student, per year. I guess if I really wanted to we could. You can always figure it out, maybe if you have one or two kids...we have five.” Idaho Falls parent

“I did want a Catholic school but it was the price, and it was the Boise one that I wanted. The one in Caldwell, it was a good distance.” Meridian parent

“I would like to have my kids in a Catholic school because of the values that they teach, the faith...but it’s too expensive. It’s not affordable to everyone.” Meridian parent

A few of the parents said they would not have been interested in Catholic school because they were “Christian.” A quick discussion revealed that they had moved from Catholicism to LDS (Church of Latter Day Saints), suggesting that LDS had made some inroads among Idaho’s Hispanic population. In Jerome, when the parents were giving advice on how to communicate with Hispanics about charter schools, one parent said, “It’s not just Catholic churches. There are also Mormons and Jehovah’s Witness and Christian and a lot of those churches are accommodating them and they’re having mass, prayer, and services in Spanish.”

V. TRUST AND COMMUNICATION

FAMILY AND FRIENDS ARE MOST TRUSTED

We asked the focus group participants for advice – how can charter schools reach parents and let them know that they are an option? They told us that one of the keys to effectively communicating with Hispanic parents would be to rely on their networks of trusted personal relationships – the family, friends, and neighbors. To learn and conduct research about their school options, parents talked to family members and neighbors who had more experience than they had.

“Recently I was thinking about moving, what were the schools like, what can the kids do and what kind of activities are available. I talked to the people I know already like a teacher that I know, the neighbors, my dad and my sister and how they felt about it.” Jerome parent

“When I moved here from California our neighbors were who we knew in town. Their kids were going to Longfellow elementary, so we knew from our neighbors.” Idaho Falls parent

A Nampa parent who was involved with an outreach program to other Hispanic parents learned that, “What worked for us was parents getting to know us so they can trust us. We would go out to the parents’ houses, home visit, one-on-one visits.”

ORGANIZATIONS, THE WORKPLACE AND THE CHURCH

In terms of where to reach Hispanic parents, many focus group participants pointed to go-between institutions such as the church, state agencies and community centers, and even businesses and the workplace. The more crucial question, however, was who was doing the communicating and the level of trust they enjoyed. Personal presentations in the churches or workplaces where Hispanics are concentrated were deemed to be an especially good approach. But relying solely on formal communication, such as flyers, without a personal, credible, and sincere speaker may be ineffective.

“For me, one that works better is our church. We are more comfortable with our pastor – we trust him. So if he talks about charter schools, we could be more comfortable when he’s talking about it. Flyers are everywhere about everything. But when some person or some people talk about some school, like people that you really trust, that probably works better.” Meridian parent

“I believe that if you are going to reach the Latino community that only speaks Spanish is to do outreach especially for them. And not only take it home on a flyer and then do they read it or if it is poorly translated then they get upset – it’s like they don’t even really care about me... but showing them that you are compassionate about their culture. Show compassion about their culture.” Nampa parent

“So I didn’t know anything about charter schools, and it has been recent that I’ve learned more about it, so I think if they want to get more involvement from the Hispanic community, they have to have a Hispanic advocate that will go out and talk to them.” Meridian parent

“Work environment too. A big one where they work is the dairy, if you know, there’s a concentration of Latino workers. Or a calf ranch, where my husband works. There’s a lot of these ranches in Idaho and there are a lot of Latinos who work there. They share so much information, they talk every day, during lunch with their co-workers.” Jerome parent

MEDIA AND INTERNET

Some participants recommended that charter schools rely on Spanish-language radio stations and DJs, as well as social media, such as Facebook, to generate awareness and interest in their school offerings. Several talked about going to the dedicated websites of the schools they were considering to understand their mission and approach to education; others were more likely to read reviews and commentary. Interestingly, virtually no one cited state-wide websites that systematically compared schools as useful for information gathering purposes.

“The Internet and social media, we have so much available now. You can even go to your phone and click and there’s so much there. We went to the school’s website to see their programs what their system was all about, they do have their own philosophy up there. So it was very informative and good for us to know and decide. We looked at the comments of parents who had left the school to see, OK, why did they leave? What they didn’t like about it? Facebook is a big thing. You can read other people’s comments and reviews. But I always resort back to my family.” Jerome parent

“Spanish radio and television, it would have to be in Spanish. It worked on me with the charter school. I had to hear it many times first, after the fourth time it penetrated.” Jerome parent

An active charter school parent at Heritage Community Charter School had intensely researched and learned about charter schools, relying on Google searches and Internet readings. Still, at the end, she finished her analytic work by talking with her family.

“I knew there was alternative ways of education because I had done quite a bit of my own Google research of finding out what the rest of the country was doing for educating and finding out where we are with different stuff... And I was excited to see them come in. I do a lot of Google from verifiable sources... I will also look at different opinions on the Internet and then I’ll share them with my family and then we’ll talk about how that’s a good idea.” Charter school parent

KEEP IT SIMPLE

We asked the Hispanic parents in the focus groups to give us advice on how to reach people who were not in the room, new immigrants or those who could not participate because of a language barrier. Some reflected on their own parents; others remembered themselves when they first came to Idaho. The core of their advice was to keep it simple, to remember that complicated messages and complicated processes will miss the people who were working hard and struggling to take care of the basics. If you are unseasoned in the ways of education and the U.S., you can easily get lost or intimidated as you try to maneuver through procedures, technology, and a language that middle class parents take for granted.

“Make the process simple, when you read on how they choose the children you get scared as a parent. As a parent, they are not welcoming you because of the process. You might think oh I don’t have enough time to do all of this.

I went to the open house when my son was about to go into high school. They show you all the options for high school. It was new to me because I grew up in Mexico. So for me, it was too much. I said, no, we’ll stay in the school where you belong.” Meridian parent

“First, from what I know, it would have to be done after hours, not during regular hours because the majority of them are out in the field working and they don’t have time, and they can’t go to the schools, they’re already tired. The only means of communication they have with the school is their kids.” Jerome parent

“Let’s be honest. Like for me, I didn’t even finish high school. So for me the beginning it was really hard. I remember when emails came out, teachers would say everything’s going to be in email. And I panicked, ‘What? I don’t even know how to open an email. How am I going to do that?’” Nampa parent

In the context of unfamiliar terrain, appearances matter a lot and can have unintended consequences. A simple but telling example: A Meridian dad working on the roof of a charter school saw firsthand that it was a beautiful building and that the students were all dressed in crisp uniforms. His conclusion: this was an expensive private school beyond his means. Another parent remembered seeing a flyer that had been badly translated into Spanish – its carelessness signaled a lack of care and concern, the opposite of what was presumably intended. And finally, conducting the focus groups in and of themselves required mindfulness from the moderators: allowing the pace of the discussion to slow down when a participant was struggling to find their voice, making eye contact with quieter parents and encouraging them to speak, and vigilantly avoiding assumptions and jargon that professional educators sometimes slip into.

Perhaps the best summative piece of advice about communicating with Hispanic parents came from a leading educator we interviewed before conducting the focus groups: “I would get out to the neighborhoods. Make yourself accessible. If you don’t know it, learn some of the language. And if you are using a translator, talk to the person and look at them, look into their eyes – not the translator’s. The community has to develop a sense of trust in you, to believe that you care about them.”

VI. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: RISING EXPECTATIONS IN A PLACE CALLED HOME

By now it is hardly news that about 12 percent of Idaho’s population is Hispanic and that the vast majority of them (70 percent) are U.S.-born. Their profile – very likely to be born here, to speak English fluently, to graduate high school³ – points to a simple insight: Idaho is their home and they are here to stay. To be sure, as a group Hispanics have yet to achieve socio-economic parity with the state’s non-Hispanic whites. Still, one can assume that today’s “typical” Hispanic parent has achieved a certain comfort-level in navigating life’s markers – work, home, family, and school.

The Hispanic parents in this study sometimes paused to reflect on the overall condition of Hispanics in Idaho. What are their insights about the status of Hispanics in Idaho? Many – but certainly not all – believed that things had gotten better for Hispanics, and that the Idaho of their parents is not the Idaho of today. They also said that their own expectations and priorities had evolved. What might have been good enough for their parents’ generation is just a starting point for them. They know more about what matters, and they expect more for themselves and for their children.



³The Hispanic Profile Data Book for Idaho, Idaho Commission on Hispanic Affairs, 2016. Also, Hispanics: An Overview, University of Idaho, McClure Center for Public Policy Research, Idaho at a Glance, January 2016, Vol. 7, No. 2.

“We grew up in a different era. For my parents, school was just something to get through. My parents weren’t focused on education the same way, they were like, ‘let me see your report card’ and that was it. We expect our children to graduate high school and go to college, but my parents, they were just happy we were going to school, they didn’t expect to have to do all of these things.” Jerome parent

A mom at the Heritage Community Charter School recalled that when her family moved from California to Idaho she was mistakenly placed in an ESL classroom, her teachers automatically assuming she belonged there because she was Hispanic. But she believed that Idaho had evolved from those days.

“I think it’s getting a lot better. We have the Hispanic Youth Symposium that celebrates the Latino community and encourages them to go on to college. We have Go On and the P16 programs in the community that do kind of focus in on economics but it is made up of majority the Latino community. So I feel that it is being looked into and we are trying as a community to make a change for the better.” Charter school parent

A mom who was relatively new to both Idaho and the U.S. had positive comparisons to make:

“I moved 5 years ago from Las Vegas. The first time I came from Mexico was to Las Vegas. I lived there a few years so I see a big difference. Now that my kids are in school... The schools help. I see a lot of help, a lot of programs that they have in church, in schools, in hospitals.” Meridian parent

Not everyone was as sanguine. Another mom, originally from California, had a very different take, sensing discrimination:

“I don’t know. I don’t think they’re very nice here, unfortunately. I think it’s a very nice place for your children – absolutely. It’s a safe environment... But I think it’s oppressing. There aren’t very many of us out here. The cost of living is very expensive for those that make minimum wage. Our politicians are...I volunteer through many different organizations, and I see what they do. It’s mainly just for Caucasian individuals, so that’s why I say that.” Meridian parent

Finally, another mom displayed a striking mix of views: gratefulness for the personal goodness of Idahoans – she calls them “angels” – coupled with a very sober assessment that the economic and demographic vitality of Hispanics makes them a force that is hard to ignore. To her, caring about Hispanics was in accord with Idaho’s values and its self-interest.

“People – there are nice people here. I call them angels. Yeah because white people, they don’t know me. But they help me a lot. But now, Idaho is growing. Boise especially because the Latinos came – many Latinos. And they know where Latinos are, money is there. Because the Latinos, we are hard workers, and we need to spend money for our kids.” Meridian parent

METHODOLOGY

These findings are based on five focus groups with mostly bilingual Hispanic parents of school-age children. The focus groups took place in June 2016, one each in Meridian (covering the greater West Ada area), Jerome (covering Jerome and Twin Falls), Nampa (covering Nampa and Caldwell), and Idaho Falls, as well as one with parents from the Heritage Community Charter School in Caldwell. In addition, three in-depth interviews were conducted in Spanish for those parents who wanted to participate in the focus groups but were uncomfortable communicating in English in a group setting.

To recruit Hispanic parents to participate in the focus groups, BLUUM first reached out to contacts they had who they believed would be trusted sources in the Hispanic community. These local contacts then reached out directly to recruit

people who met the following requirements: were of Hispanic heritage; had school-age children; and had lived in Idaho for at least a few years. Most of the focus group participants were bilingual Spanish and English, but in a few instances where a participant felt more comfortable speaking in Spanish, the other focus groups participants helped to translate into English for the moderators, who were not fluent in Spanish.

For the focus group that was conducted with Heritage Community Charter School parents, Principal Javier Castaneda reached out directly to Hispanic parents at the school to invite them to take part in this research.

Participants included both mothers and fathers, but they were mostly mothers; they had children from grades K-12, although mostly elementary school level; and were from a variety of cultures but overwhelmingly Mexican. A total of 55 parents participated in the research: 52 in the focus groups plus three individual interviews.

The groups were two hours in length. Refreshments were provided, and each participant was given a \$75 cash honorarium at the conclusion of the group to thank them for their participation and time. The focus groups were moderated by the two principals of FDR Group; the discussions were recorded and transcribed; direct quotes from the transcripts are used throughout this report⁴. All participants were assured of confidentiality, and thus quotes are not attributed to named individuals.

Focus groups allow for an in-depth, qualitative exploration of the dynamics underlying people's attitudes towards complex issues. The purpose of these discussions was to gain an understanding of the issues facing Idaho's Hispanic parents as they decide where to send their children to school.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The Farkas Duffett Research Group (FDR Group) is an opinion research company with expertise in conducting focus groups, surveys, and program evaluations. FDR Group projects are nonpartisan, in-depth examinations of how people think about policy issues: the fears, values, and hopes that drive their views; their policy preferences; and the areas where their attitudes are still evolving.

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⁴The in-depth interviews were conducted either in person or over the telephone and were not recorded.



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