INNERCITY STRUGGLE’S
FAMILIAS UNIDAS PROGRAM:
BUILDING A PARENT
MOVEMENT
IN THE LOS ANGELES
EASTSIDE

Veronica Terriquez
Raquel Armenta
John Rogers
Miguel Carvente

PHOTOGRAPH BY JOHN ROGERS
Familias Unidas is the parent organizing arm of InnerCity Struggle (ICS), a nonprofit organization focused on promoting education justice in the Los Angeles Eastside communities of Boyle Heights, Lincoln Heights, El Sereno, and unincorporated East Los Angeles. In the first decade following its founding in 1994, the organization focused its attention on youth organizing and youth development. Leaders of ICS initiated the Familias Unidas program in 2004 in an effort to formally involve parents in campaigns to open new schools in their communities. Since then, Familias Unidas parent members have been engaged in campaigns to improve the learning and health conditions of Eastside schools.

This research report provides background information on the Familias Unidas program and its members, demonstrating that Familias Unidas fosters high levels of civic participation among the types of parents who typically encounter barriers to parental school engagement. Research findings presented here draw on telephone survey data collected from a generally representative sample of Familias Unidas members as well as a comparison sample of public school parents in Los Angeles County.\(^1\) This research also relies on interview data from survey participants, and is informed by participant observations of the authors. Our findings demonstrate evidence of the significant impact of InnerCity Struggle's programs on the leadership development of Familias Unidas parent members.

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Who Are ICS’s Familias Unidas Members?

Familias Unidas members are almost all Latino immigrants who reside in the Eastside and surrounding neighborhoods. Approximately 92% of Familias Unidas survey respondents are from Mexico, 6% are from Central America, and 2% are U.S. born. Mothers dominate Familias Unidas, comprising 84% of survey participants.

Prior research shows that parents with less formal education tend to possess fewer resources that facilitate civic participation and parental school involvement than do more educated parents (Terriquez 2012; Lareau 2000). For example, college-educated parents can draw upon their own educational experiences, financial security, and other resources to intervene in their children’s schooling process (Lareau 2000). However, because of limited educational opportunities or other reasons, most Familias Unidas parent members did not finish high school (or the equivalent), much less obtain a college education. As shown in Figure 1, Familias Unidas members possess low levels of education when compared to other public school parents in Los Angeles County. As such, Familias Unidas members share characteristics with the types of parents who typically encounter challenges to parental school participation and civic engagement based on their own limited educational attainment.

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\(^1\)Survey data come from a randomly selected sample of parents on the entire Familias Unidas membership list in 2010, and from a list of parents who had participated in the organization’s activities between September 2012- February 2013 (excluding those who had been surveyed in 2010). Familias Unidas members are compared to other public school parents selected for this study through randomly selected dialing of telephone numbers in Los Angeles County in 2010.
Participation in Familias Unidas as Leadership Development

In keeping with its mission to empower Eastside residents, ICS seeks to develop the leadership capacity of Familias Unidas parent members so that both individually and collectively they can promote the well-being of their communities and families. ICS’s leadership development approach includes three key elements:

1. **MEMBERSHIP MEETINGS** ICS hosts monthly meetings for its Familias Unidas membership which average 40-50 parents, and have involved over 200 parents annually. At these meetings, staff and members co-facilitate trainings as well as discussions around campaign issues. In addition, members also receive information on academic topics to support their children in school. Parents are also linked to available community resources.

2. **LEADERSHIP ACADEMIES** Familias Unidas members participate in annual leadership academies featuring intensive workshops examining problems impacting the community. They are also trained in grassroots organizing skills and strategies so that they can research community problems, mobilize other parents, lobby policymakers, and work with other community stakeholders.

3. **COORDINATING COMMITTEE** Modeled after the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), an organization vital to the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, the Familias Unidas Coordinating Committee is a small group of 15-20 parent leaders who meet separately with youth members and staff to help develop strategies for ICS campaigns. These core leaders also receive additional training on topics such as speaking with the media, meeting facilitation, and campaign strategy.

This leadership development contributes to the skills and information that Familias Unidas members can draw upon to promote their children’s academic success and actively participate in community-based grassroots campaigns to change school policies and programs. For instance, parents learn how to be more vocal and confident when speaking with teachers, administrators, and school officials. Over time, they strengthen their capacity to analyze the challenges facing their children’s schools and advocate for concrete solutions.
Civic Engagement

ICS’s leadership development approach builds the capacity of Familias Unidas members to become civically engaged in their children’s schools. Survey results shown in Figure 2 demonstrate that Familias Unidas members are more likely than other Los Angeles County parents to participate in activities that support existing school programs, such as volunteer activities and general meetings. They are also more than twice as likely as all other parents to participate in the types of activities that allow them to voice their opinions and express their concerns, specifically decision-making meetings and collective efforts to improve their children’s schools. This school-based civic engagement of Familias Unidas members likely contributes to more inclusive and responsive decision-making in Eastside schools.

Promoting Social Change in the Eastside

Because of the training they receive through InnerCity Struggle, Familias Unidas members have contributed to progressive social changes in the Eastside. Importantly, as part of broader community efforts, parents have launched and successfully won grassroots campaigns for new schools in their communities, the expansion of health services in schools, increased college preparatory course offerings, and less punitive and more fair school disciplinary policies. Through their active involvement in these efforts, Familias Unidas members model active civic participation for their children and for other Eastside residents.

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