

# Meet the advocate Baltimore Latino parents seek out to get the best education for their children

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Dinorah Olmos is the co-founder of the Latino Education and Advancement Fund. (Bruce Weller / HANDOUT)

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, back-to-school workshops led by Dinorah Olmos would be joyous and celebratory in-person events at which mariachi bands were invited to play. The events would not only get kids excited about learning, but parents would be able to ask questions and demystify the Baltimore school system.

Now Olmos, founder of the [Latino Education and Advancement Fund](#), or LEAF, has taken the sessions online. Since the last academic year, she has reworked her engagement and outreach strategy to serve 112 parents and 120 students, all online. Olmos “is a huge advocate and really understands how important it is to involve parents in their own education of the school system,” said Lisette Morris, executive director of the Ingenuity Project, one of LEAF’s education partners. “If you are a parent who did not go to school in this country or you did not go to school in Baltimore City, there’s so much to navigate and it can be incredibly overwhelming. And because of that, you could end up missing out on a lot of opportunities.”

Founded in 2016, LEAF is a nonprofit that teaches Latino parents and students how to pursue Baltimore City academic programs and prepare children for higher education. Olmos has worked in education for more than 30 years across the United States, Colombia, and Mexico. She previously worked at the Johns Hopkins University Center for Talented Youth for 14 years as the assistant director of academic services for national and international recruitment. She worked to bring in students from around the nation and the world for gifted programs including the International Mathematical Olympiad and Yale Young Global Scholar.

This school year, LEAF has hosted three parent workshops on special needs education in Baltimore City, and its annual education summit in October drew 200 participants, according to Olmos. Over the past nine months, she’s met monthly with high school juniors to help them understand the college admissions process. Olmos also enrolled over 20 students into city programs like the [MERIT Health Leadership Academy](#) and [Writers in Baltimore Schools](#).

Olmos also has started educational workshops for Spanish-speaking parents, *La Escuela, sus Hijos y Usted* (School, your Children, and You). The six-week workshop series teaches Spanish-speaking parents in Baltimore how to actively engage in the school community and become advocates for their children’s academic success. In 2019,

Olmos was awarded a community fellowship with the Open Society Institute-Baltimore to expand the program. At first, the workshops were piloted through a group called Mis Raices at Patterson Park Charter School and John Ruhrah Elementary School. Now, Olmos partners with four Baltimore schools and is expanding to two more this month. During the current school year, Olmos has hosted the workshops four times with an average of 30 to 35 parents attending.

As students attend school virtually, internet disparity is not the only issue Latino parents faced. Some also lack technology literacy. Some parents needed help creating emails or Olmos coached them on how to use Chrome books and scanners provided by the schools. LEAF also will donate two laptops to parents this spring.

“I feel like I’m going against the current,” Olmos said. “Right when we succeed with something, the pandemic came, and it feels like we’re taking five steps back.”

Also, distance learning has impacted the ability of both students and adults to focus and stay motivated.

“If they have a class live, students are not even showing their face,” Olmos said. “They could even be sleeping and the teacher doesn’t even know.”

“I have to constantly also send WhatsApp messages to the parents: Remember, your child is taking virtual classes. They are tired. You need to encourage them. You need to take them out,” she said.

Follow-up is crucial, Olmos added. She has served as an intermediary, signing consent forms so she can translate for parents during their meetings with counselors and teachers. Recently, she held a workshop for five parents at once to walk them through the application process, testing and paperwork required for their children to attend private school.

“You work with one parent and you work with them at least 20 times,” Olmos said.

Morris, Ingenuity Project’s executive director, has known Olmos since 2014 and became an advisory board member for LEAF last summer. Ingenuity Project is an advanced math and science program for Baltimore middle and high school students that is among the 14 education and community organizations partnering with LEAF.

Morris said Olmos had a direct impact with enrolling Hispanic students in Ingenuity. During the 2016-2017 school year, 3% of the incoming sixth and ninth graders were Hispanic; this school year, it jumped to 7%. This academic year alone, Olmos said, 15 of her students have applied to Ingenuity.

Morris said Olmos is tuned in and relentless in “making sure that parents know how to advocate for their children.”

Olmos said her goal with LEAF is to reduce the social and cultural barriers that exist for Latino families and to build trust between parents and the larger school community. By doing this she hopes to reduce the high school dropout rates among Latino students and help them be successful in college.



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