



Cultivando Mentes Brillantes: Navigating Neurodivergence in Latino Communities

A Program Report by UnidosUS in Partnership with Understood

ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION

UNIDOS US

STRONGER COMMUNITIES. STRONGER AMERICA.



UnidosUS, formerly known as NCLR (National Council of La Raza), is the nation's largest Latino civil rights and advocacy organization. Through its unique combination of expert research, advocacy, programs, and an Affiliate Network of nearly 300 community-based organizations across the United States and Puerto Rico, UnidosUS challenges the social, economic, and political barriers that affect Latinos nationally and locally. To achieve its mission, UnidosUS conducts applied research, policy analysis, and advocacy, providing a Latino perspective in five key areas: assets & investments, civil rights & immigration, education, employment and economic status, and health. In addition, it provides capacity-building support to its Affiliates who work at the state and local level to advance opportunities for individuals and families.

UNIDOSUS EDUCATION

- Advances educational equity by eliminating systemic barriers and expanding opportunities for Latino students from early childhood through postsecondary education and careers
- Provides culturally relevant materials and curricula to UnidosUS Affiliate and Higher Education partners
- Advocates for policy change to support Latino students and families
- Builds capacity of community partners to equip students and families with tools and resources essential for success

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Cultivando Mentas Brillantes (CMB) is a culturally affirming, bilingual family engagement program co-designed by UnidosUS and Understood. Launched in spring 2024, the program empowers Latino families and caregivers by raising awareness of learning and thinking differences (LTDs), addressing mental health stigmas, and equipping families with tools to advocate for their children's educational success.

CMB was delivered across multiple Affiliate sites in at least five states and served 450 participants in total. All three of the program's primary outcome targets were met or exceeded, marking a significant milestone in the effort to bridge systemic gaps in neurodiversity education and family engagement within Latino communities.

THE LANDSCAPE FOR LATINO STUDENTS

Latino students face a number of challenges in the U.S. education system that create significant disparities in outcomes.



LEARNING DISABILITIES

Latino students are more frequently identified with specific learning disabilities (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2017). The graduation gap for Latino students with learning and thinking differences (LTDs) is widening compared to their Asian and white peers.



MENTAL HEALTH TREATMENT

While the number of Black, Asian, and white Americans seeking mental health treatment has risen, the rate for Latino individuals has remained largely unchanged (CDC, 2022).



SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL)

Although schools increasingly integrate SEL into their curricula, language and cultural barriers hinder Latino families from reinforcing these skills at home (Understood, n.d.).



COMMUNITY INPUT

Understood conducted interviews with families of students with LTDs, youth, and predominantly Spanish-speaking school district personnel to gather valuable insights, with UnidosUS supporting recruitment and analysis efforts (Understood, 2023).

Sources: National Center for Learning Disabilities (2017); CDC (2022); Understood (n.d.); Understood (2023)

PHASE I: RESEARCH - LISTENING TO THE COMMUNITY

In 2021, UnidosUS and Understood conducted a Phase I study with educators and parents of children ages 5–18 to understand community perspectives as schools reopened post-pandemic. The findings revealed deep concern across the board.

These findings underscored the urgent need for culturally affirming bilingual family engagement programs that build meaningful bridges between schools and homes. *Cultivando Mentes Brillantes* was created to address these community specific needs.

Educator Concerns

- **90%** concerned about student development
- **73%** worried about academic progress
- **65%** highlighted student anxiety
- **63%** noted social growth concerns
- **62%** expressed emotional well-being worries

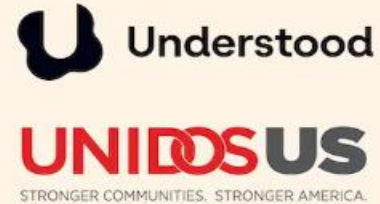
Hispanic/Latino Parent Insights

- **70%** reported children faced learning challenges
- **44%** struggled to find Spanish-language resources
- **54%** felt anxious discussing their children's learning challenges

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Back to School Study 2021

As children around the country return to school in coming months, new research from Understood and UnidosUS with teachers and parents predicts increased academic, mental health, and social and emotional challenges for learning.

90%

61%

90% of U.S. teachers and 61% of parents believe there will be increased challenges as children head back to school.

Source: <https://unidosus.org/press-releases/082621-understood-and-unidosus-study-confirms-lost-school-year/>

PHASE II: PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

- UnidosUS and Understood co-designed *Cultivando Mentres Brillantes*, a six-session, evidence-based program created specifically for Latino families and caregivers. The initiative builds awareness of learning and thinking differences (LTDs), their impact on student success, and the importance of early identification and support.
- The program offers culturally affirming mental health education, reduces stigma, and guides families in recognizing LTDs and accessing essential resources. All materials are bilingual, accessible, and reflective of the communities served.
- *Cultivando Mentres Brillantes* has been implemented across schools, community centers, after-school programs, parent groups, and healthcare partner sites, strengthening support systems for Latino and Hispanic families navigating LTDs.



PHASE II: PROGRAM DESIGN

SESSION STRUCTURE

The six sessions are designed to build knowledge and confidence progressively:

- **Session 1:** Overview of learning and thinking differences and their impact on students.
- **Session 2:** The role of family involvement in academic success.
- **Session 3:** Debunking myths about learning differences with evidence-based facts.
- **Session 4:** Tools and resources to help students manage school challenges.
- **Session 5:** How to spot academic struggles and take action.
- **Session 6:** Understanding IEPs and 504 Plans, including family rights and accommodations.



THE UNDERSTOOD/UNIDOSUS DIGITAL HUB

A key complement to the program is the Understood/UnidosUS Digital HUB, a collaborative online platform designed to support families of children with learning and attention differences.

The HUB offers bilingual resources in English and Spanish, including articles, videos, interactive tools, community forums, and webinars.

Families can access expert guidance from specialists in education and mental health, as well as personalized tools to assess their child's needs and find tailored resources.

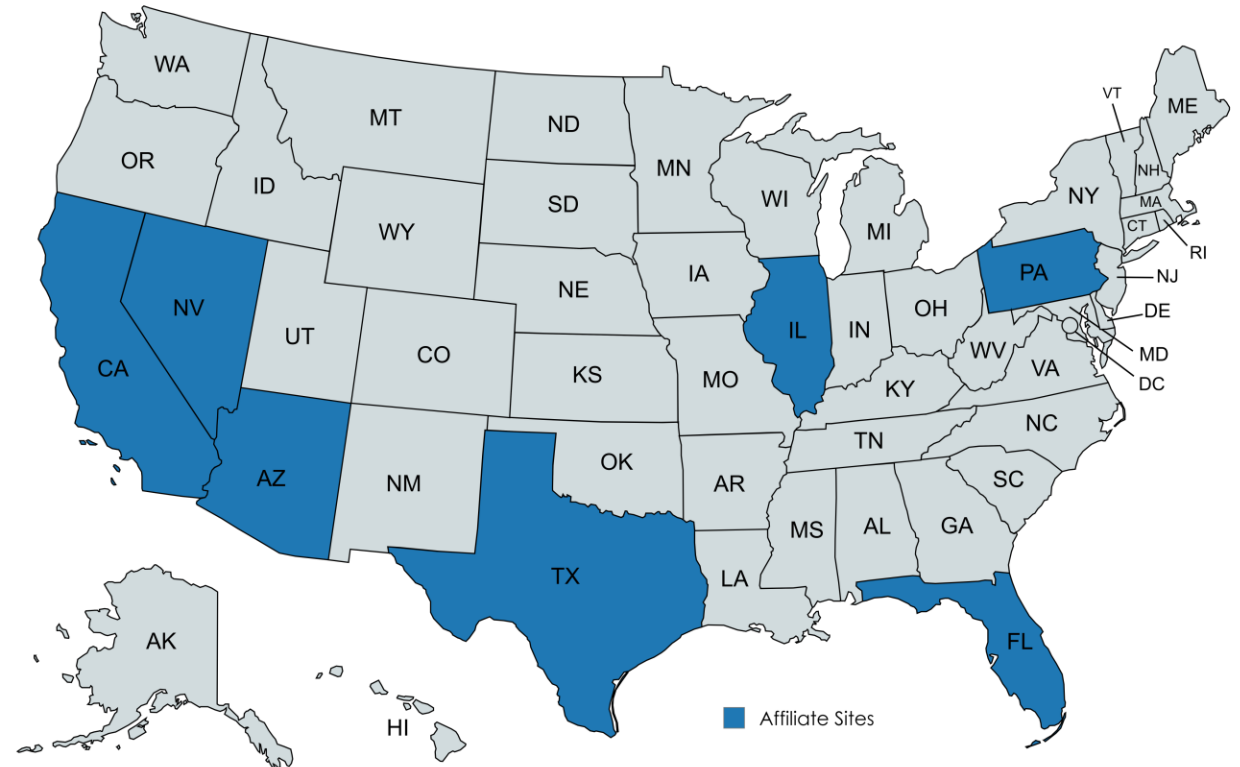


The screenshot shows the Understood website interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with the Understood logo, a dropdown menu for "Explorar recursos", a link for "Acerca de nosotros", a link for "Asóciase con nosotros", a "Donar" button with a heart icon, and icons for social media and search. The main content area has a light orange background and features the heading "Recursos para las familias hispanas". Below the heading, there is a paragraph of text: "Utilice estos recursos gratuitos para ayudar a su hijo que tiene diferencias en la manera de pensar y aprender, como el TDAH y la dislexia. Esta página fue desarrollada en colaboración con UnidosUS, que es la organización de defensa y derechos civiles de los hispanos más grande del país." To the right of this text is the UnidosUS logo with the tagline "STRONGER COMMUNITIES. STRONGER AMERICA." Below the text, there are three circular profile pictures of women and a link that says "Conozca a nuestros expertos en este tema" with a right-pointing arrow. In the bottom right corner of the content area, there is a circular icon with a speech bubble and a plus sign.

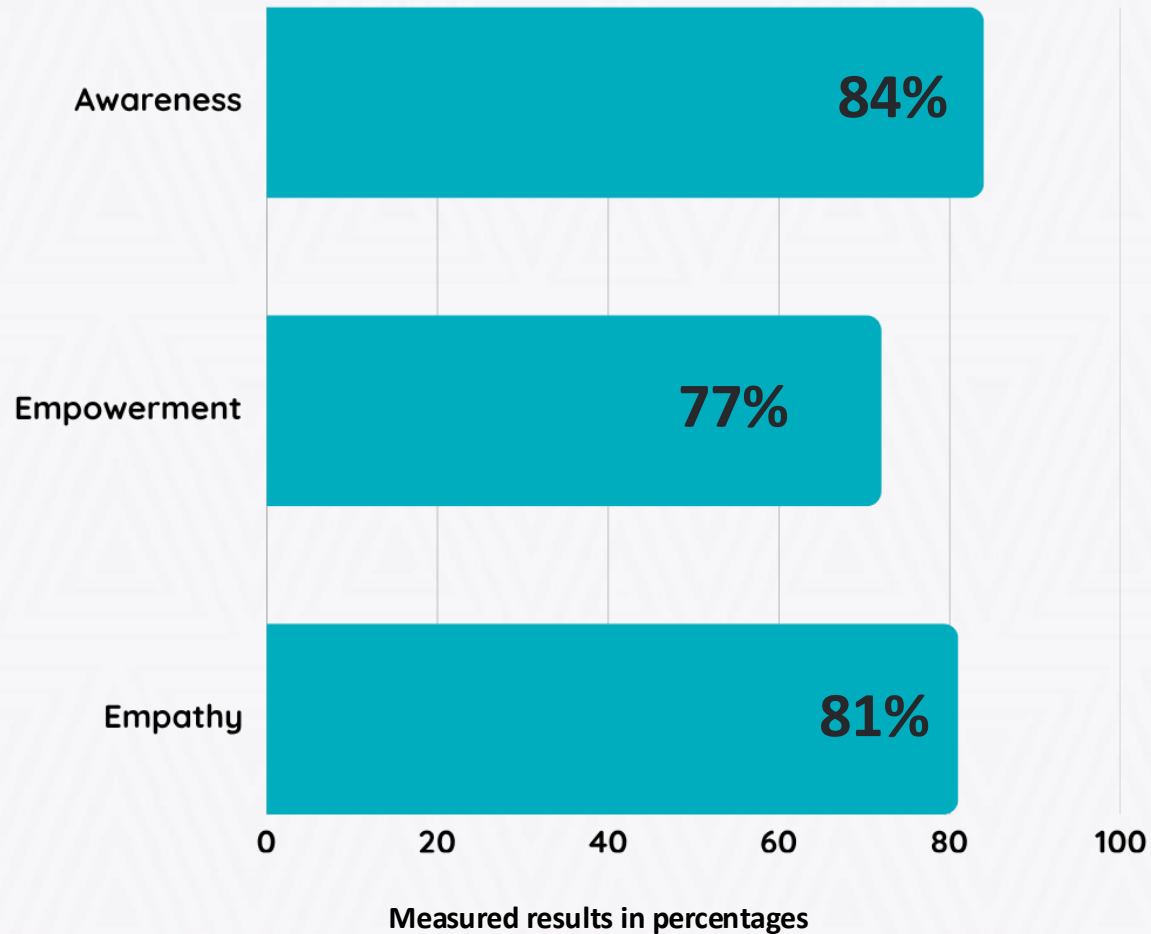
Source: <https://www.understood.org/es-mx/topics/familias-hispanas>

PROGRAM REACH

- 451 Participants
- 10 Affiliate Partners
- 7 States



PROGRAM IMPACT & OUTCOMES



The program met and exceeded all three of its primary outcome targets, demonstrating measurable growth across awareness, empowerment, and empathy.

- **Awareness:** Parents, caregivers, and educators report increased awareness of SEL, mental health, and learning differences.
- **Empowerment:** Families with LTD students report feeling more empowered and informed about available supports.
- **Empathy:** Parents and caregivers report greater empathy towards students with LTDs.

OBJECTIVE 1: INCREASED AWARENESS OF SOCIOEMOTIONAL LEARNING AND MENTAL HEALTH



Target: 70% | Result: 84%

By the end of the program, 84% of parents, caregivers, and educators reported heightened awareness of socioemotional learning, mental health, and learning differences. This awareness was demonstrated not just in surveys, but in the nature and depth of participant engagement: the quality of questions asked, the connections made between course content and lived experience, and the growing willingness to discuss topics that had previously felt taboo in the Latino community. Participants learned to identify how mental health conditions can present as overlapping symptoms with LTDs, which is critical for accurate diagnosis and effective support. Many described the program as an “eye-opener” that gave them language to name what they had observed in their children and sometimes, in themselves.

“Wow here and these days there is a lot of information and resources. In my time there was not much information about the different ways of thinking and learning. Even today in my country there is not much information about the topic or resources to help our children. Thank you!”

“I was recommended to evaluate my son. He is now going to 6th grade. After all these years now, he is going to be evaluated as teachers believe he might have ADD. After this information I now can see the signs! I now feel more confident and in peace.”

AWARENESS & UNDERSTANDING

- “I learned to see my child differently. Not as a problem, but as someone with unique strengths... Before, we didn’t know how to help. Now we understand learning differences and can support our kids emotionally.” — El Sol Science and Arts Academy of Santa Ana
- “I finally understand my child’s learning style. Now I can help instead of feeling helpless.” — The Health Collaborative
- “I used to think learning differences were something to hide. Now I see they’re part of what makes my child amazing.” — Hispanic Unity of Florida, Inc.



OBJECTIVE 2: EMPOWERMENT OF FAMILIES WITH STUDENTS IDENTIFIED WITH LTDS



Target: 60% | Result: 77%

By the end of the program, 77% of families with self-identified students with LTDs reported feeling empowered, surpassing the 60% expected goal. Families reported increased confidence in communicating with teachers and school administrators, navigating the evaluation process, and securing accommodations such as 504 plans and IEPs.

A key driver of empowerment was the peer learning approach. Participants found strength in one another's stories, validated each other's experiences, and built a supportive network that extended beyond the sessions. Parents and caregivers who had previously felt isolated discovered they were not alone on their journeys.

"I knew my son had Down Syndrome. But now that he is 4 years old, I started seeing other signs. He has been evaluated by his doctor and has a diagnosis of autism. Understanding that he learns and thinks differently gives me a lot of hope."

EMPOWERMENT & VOICE



- “Now I can talk to teachers with confidence and ask the right questions.” — Hispanic Unity of Florida
- “This program gave me the words to describe what my child needs and the courage to ask for it.” — Acero Schools of Chicago
- “Parents shared that they no longer feel alone navigating their child’s learning challenges.”
— The Health Collaborative
- Through *Cultivando Mentas Brillantes*, our school built stronger bridges with families. Teachers learned from parents too.” — Amistades, Inc.

NARRATIVES

Two parent stories illustrate the program's transformative impact on family empowerment:

- A participant's son was diagnosed with autism at age five. Through the program, she learned how early diagnosis and sustained school partnerships enable children like her son to thrive. She became a proactive advocate working closely with educators, supporting her son at home, and sharing her story to inspire other parents to seek evaluations and build school relationships.
- Another participant joined the program shortly after her two-year-old son was diagnosed with autism. The sessions equipped her with knowledge of where to receive resources for therapy and developmental strategies for her son. It provided her the confidence to start a strong educational foundation for her son's future.



OBJECTIVE 3: INCREASED EMPATHY TOWARD STUDENTS WITH LTDS



Target: 70% | Result: 81%

For parents and caregivers already familiar with LTDs through their children's diagnoses, the program deepened existing empathy by extending compassion to other families and children in the community. For parents and caregivers newly introduced to the topic, the program prompted a transformative journey as they learned factual information and dispelled myths held. Many recognized that their previous beliefs had been rooted in misconception and cultural taboo.

The program created space for vulnerability, humor, and healing. Participants recalled memories of their own childhoods recalling being labeled "lazy" or "distracted" and began to understand, sometimes for the first time, that they themselves may have had undiagnosed learning differences. This intergenerational awareness is what helps break cycles of stigma and shame.

"I think I have some of that ADHD! I now think that when I went to school, that is why I could not stay focused."

"I now can see myself and understand my child."



A MOVEMENT OF UNDERSTANDING, EMPATHY, AND EMPOWERMENT

- Families are gaining new tools, confidence, and compassion.
- Parents and caregivers are not only recognizing learning differences, but they are also embracing them as part of their children's strengths.
- Educators and Affiliate partners have built a culture of inclusion, where mental health and SEL are viewed as essential pillars of academic and emotional success
- The program's bilingual and culturally affirming approach is key to its success in bridging language, trust, and equity.

EMOTIONAL RESILIENCY & FAMILY STRENGTH

- “This program changed how we think as a family. We are more patient, more loving, and more hopeful.” — Community Services of Nevada
- “Every session gave us hope. We learned that love and patience can open doors that fear once closed.” — Community Services of Nevada
- “Our family talks more openly about feelings. My children feel heard, and I do too.” — Amistades, Inc.
- “We became a stronger family — more understanding, more confident, and more united.” — El Sol Science and Arts Academy of Santa Ana



FACILITATOR TESTIMONIALS

KNOWLEDGE GAIN & AWARENESS

- “By the end of the program, parents, caregivers, and teachers understood learning differences better and supported each other.” — El Sol Science and Arts Academy of Santa Ana
- “Most parents had very little knowledge before but now understand signs and resources to help their children. The program built a safe space for shared learning and emotional growth” — Hispanic Services Council

COMMUNITY SUPPORT

- “Parents shared that they no longer feel alone navigating their child’s learning challenges.” — The Health Collaborative
- “The resources were a great gift for many families; they felt seen and supported.” — The Health Collaborative

EMPATHY & AWARENESS

- “Parents reported having a better understanding and empathy for students with learning differences. They learned that differences do not mean limitations” — Community Services of Nevada
- “Throughout the sessions, parents had the opportunity to learn, reflect, and build empathy toward children with learning differences.” — The Health Collaborative



“Throughout the program, parents told stories about their students being treated differently in school by both their peers and teachers because of their learning differences. By the end of the program, parents spoke about how the class reassured their feelings of the importance of advocating for their students not just in school but at home. Ensuring that they were receiving the resources to further their education but also to help their mental health.”

Amistades, Inc.



“Parents felt very empowered to advocate for their student’s needs as evidenced by requesting SSTP, 504 Plans, and IEP addendums. Parents learned about people they could connect to on our campus to further inquire about their student’s needs. Parents also attended parent-teacher conferences in higher numbers than before. Parents became familiar with all the resources that are available to them. They sought them out via online resources or hard copies that were provided to them.”

Camino Nuevo



“Throughout the sessions, parents had the opportunity to share personal stories and gained a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by parents and the unique strengths of students. Many expressed greater appreciation for these experiences and emphasized the importance of creating inclusive environments both at home and in the community.”

El Sol Academy

EMERGING THEMES AND OBSERVATIONS



”
Through Cultivando Mentas Brillantes, families developed awareness, empathy, and confidence to support students with learning differences. The program’s safe, inclusive approach inspired collective growth among parents, educators, and children fostering a deeper sense of community understanding and advocacy.
“

PROGRAM IMPACT

Participants and caregivers reported growth in awareness, empathy, and advocacy. Participants also reported gaining new understanding of mental health and learning and thinking differences.

NORMALIZATION

Conversations about socioemotional learning and mental health became normalized in culturally rooted family spaces.

TRANSFORMATION

Participants and caregivers reported a shift from uncertainty to empowerment. They felt more equipped to ask for the help their students need.

COLLABORATION

The participation on the program created stronger partnership between schools and families, a shared understanding, and collective support for students.

BRIDGING GAPS BREAKING BARRIERS

CHALLENGES

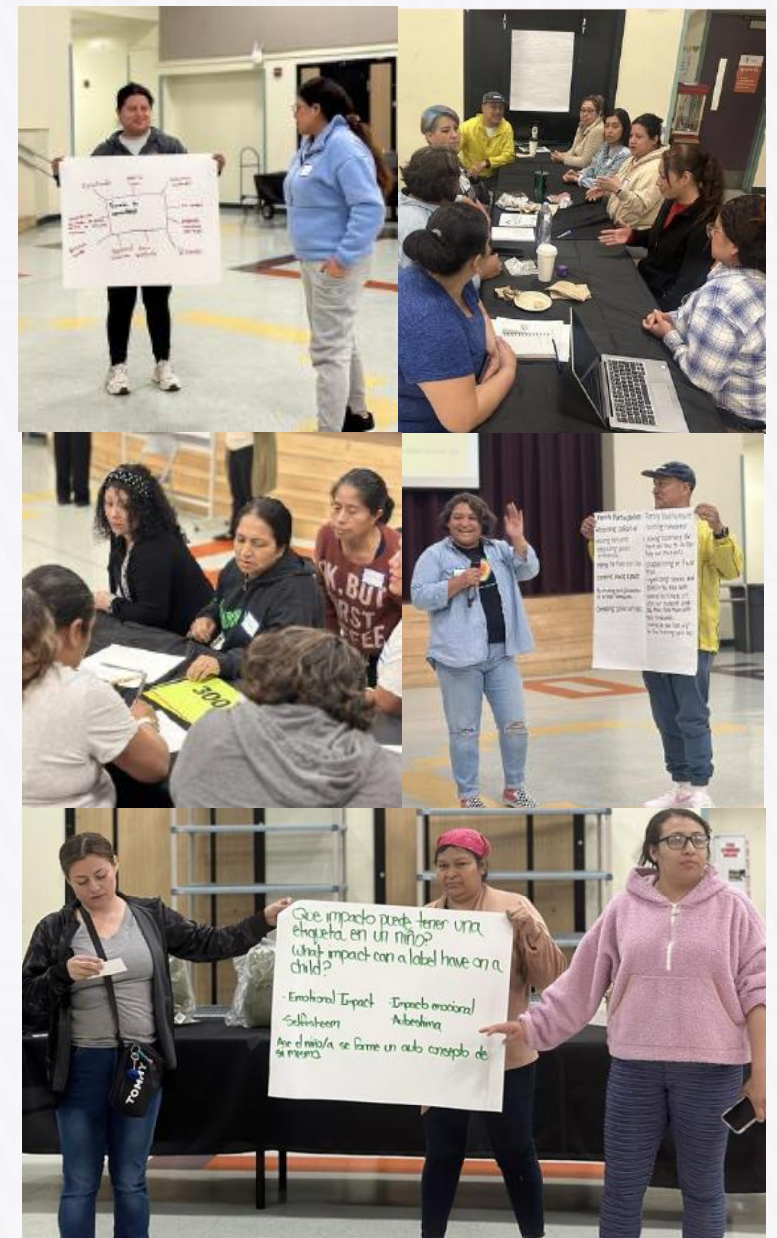
- Stigma around learning and thinking differences
- Isolation from community and support systems
- Limited access to resources

SYSTEMIC GAPS

- Inadequate access to bilingual evaluations
- Lack of culturally affirming mental health support
- Need for educator training on learning and thinking in Latino communities

BREAKTHROUGHS

- Empowerment through knowledge
- Advocacy for children and families
- Deepened connections with schools and communities



TRANSFORMING SYSTEMS EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES

Program graduates moved from participants to advocates. At multiple sites, families took concrete action to transform their local educational environments.

Hispanic Unity of Florida:

Parents created bilingual communication templates now used by teachers during parent-teacher conferences.

The Health Collaborative

Families requested and helped pilot monthly bilingual Family & Teacher Cafés to discuss SEL and learning supports.

El Sol Academy:

Two graduates joined the School Leadership Team to advocate for inclusive classroom strategies; parents also began requesting developmental screenings earlier and collaboration with counselors to identify learning patterns.



TRANSFORMING SYSTEMS EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES

Community Services of Nevada:

Families co-hosted educator workshops on how cultural and language differences affect learning behaviors; graduates helped train incoming families on recognizing early signs of LTDs.

California, Nevada, and Florida sites:

Parents joined school site councils, contributing to decisions on budgets, SEL priorities, and special education support.

Hispanic Unity of Florida:

Hispanic Unity of Florida alumni launched a monthly *Círculo de Padres*, a safe space for reflection and mutual support among families.



CONCLUSION

The outcomes of *Cultivando Mentres Brillantes* point toward a replicable national model for culturally affirming family engagement in neurodiversity education. The program demonstrates that when families gain knowledge, confidence, and community, they begin transforming the systems around them, from the home to the classroom and to their local school governance.

Families walked away not only with information, but with tools, confidence, and renewed compassion for their children and themselves. Educators gained partners in supporting students' social, emotional, and academic well-being. And communities gained advocates who are now reshaping the systems that serve them.

Every child's brilliance deserves to be seen, understood, and celebrated. *Cultivando Mentres Brillantes* helps make that vision a reality, one family, one community, one brilliant mind at a time.



“For all of us in general, Cultivando Mentres Brillantes is a window of hope for the ones living with a different mind and overcoming the obstacles of every day. This lets us know there is always a way, and we all have opportunities to be who we are — a brilliant mind!”
— Hispanic Services Council