FAMILY NEEDS ASSESSMENT SPRING 2025

PREPRARED BY

Monique Escobedo, Ph.D
Debora Lugo
Isaac Cox

REPORT BACKGROUND

The Family Needs Assessment (FNA) is an effort that PIQE leads annually to better understand the perspectives of the parents/caregivers we serve through our parent-focused family engagement programming. The aim of the report is to illuminate household and community needs that persist as well as those that shift over time. Since beginning this effort in 2020, the FNA has illuminated that many issues are perpetually top of mind for parents/caregivers and their children. While some issues may resolve, become less pressing and/or vary by region, the FNA serves as an opportunity to regularly hear directly from parents/caregivers on topics such as:

- the economy
- access to employment, services and resources
- political climate
- concerns regarding school and community safety
- communication breakdowns between educators and parents
- children's social-emotional wellbeing
- an overall need for culturally responsive approaches to educating today's youth and engaging their families

The report underscores that systems of support have yet to develop proper capacity and enhanced access to resources that can ultimately help to address and ameliorate individual, familial, and community challenges. Further, in this iteration of the FNA, we chose to incorporate a focus group methodology to complement previous years' survey-only data, capture rich parent testimonials, and inform the design of follow-up survey questions. Insights gleaned from this report will inform the survey design of a future report featuring data from a broader sample of Winter 2024-25 workshop parent/caregiver graduates.

OVERVIEW

This report summarizes key concerns and priorities expressed by 57 parents/caregivers from around California regarding their children's educational experiences and broader community challenges. Many participants voiced profound concerns regarding school and community safety. Testimonies related to drugs, safety issues at school, a lack of culturally responsive instruction and school policies, and confronting bureaucratic challenges that made gaining access to services and resources critical to their children's education extremely difficult were also shared. When asked what they would change, most parents expressed a desire for stronger relationships between educators and families, increased site-leader accountability to ensure student safety and overall campus security measures, more individualized attention for students (i.e. hiring more teachers and support staff, tutoring, and mental health support), more culturally responsive professional development for teachers, rigorous content, and a school climate that affirms students' identities. Parents/caregivers also highlighted serious challenges facing their households and communities, including economic insecurity, housing instability, and increasingly difficult day-to-day circumstances related to politics.

In response to what they would share with a community leader and/or what resources would be most helpful, overwhelmingly parents/caregivers stressed an immediate need for more affordable housing, increased anti-drug programming at school, and more community efforts related prevention for drug use and smoking/vaping. Others emphasized that newcomers to the U.S. need outlets and resources to help them build relationships and integrate into their new communities addressing crime in general, law enforcement shortages, and resolving the crisis related to homelessness was also top of mind for many participants. Many called for more funding to be allocated for low- or no-cost youth programs and expanded athletics opportunities to help keep students engaged in healthy and productive social activities after school and on weekends.

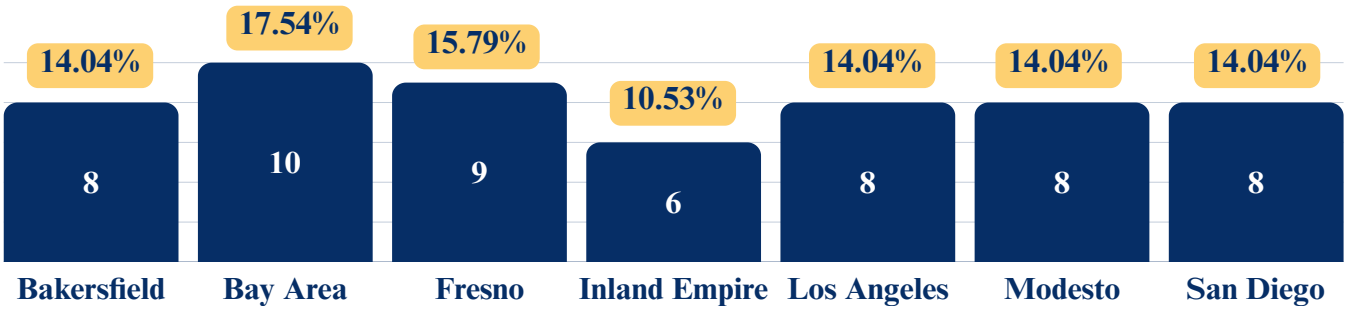
METHODS

A purposive sampling method was used to select families in which at least one parent or caregiver both completed a PIQE workshop and served as a speaker during regional graduation ceremonies held in the Winter 2024–25 academic year (*N* = 169). Recruitment conducted by PIQE's Operations Department took place via telephone and text messages in April 2025. Data collection resulted from several focus groups that were held via recorded Zoom sessions in May 2025, and included combined groups of parent/caregivers who, at a minimum, spoke English and/or Spanish.

A qualitative protocol of semi-structured focus group questions was developed by first meeting with PIQE's regional associate directors and all family engagement program facilitators (i.e. those who lead the programs) to learn more about current issues that are most pressing to PIQE families, and as understood through their first-hand communication with parents/caregivers. The open-ended questions that were included in all focus groups can be found in the Appendix of this report. Qualitative data from each recorded focus group session was reviewed and coded several times to develop high level themes that encapsulate the various needs identified by parents/caregivers in each session. Demographic surveys were also submitted by each parent/caregiver at the start of the focus group sessions.

Findings in this report reflect responses to the questions in the Appendix as well as additional questions and/or spontaneous topics raised by respective parent/caregiver participants. Each participant formally consented to have their survey and verbal responses shared in this report. Pseudonyms have been used to maintain the privacy of all participants. One focus group per region was conducted; as illustrated in Figure 1, participant responses (*n* = 57) represent PIQE's seven regional offices located throughout California.

Figure 1 - PIQE Regional Office



DEMOGRAPHICS

A combined total of 57 parent/caregivers participated in the focus groups. Figures 2-5 provide details regarding race/ethnicity, gender, and primary home language.

Figure 2 - Gender

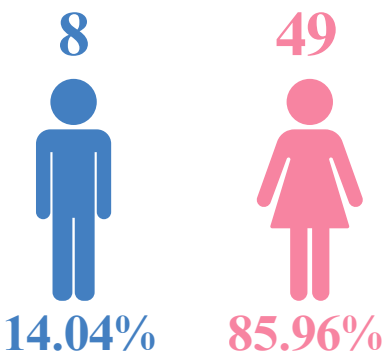


Figure 3 - Race/Ethnicity

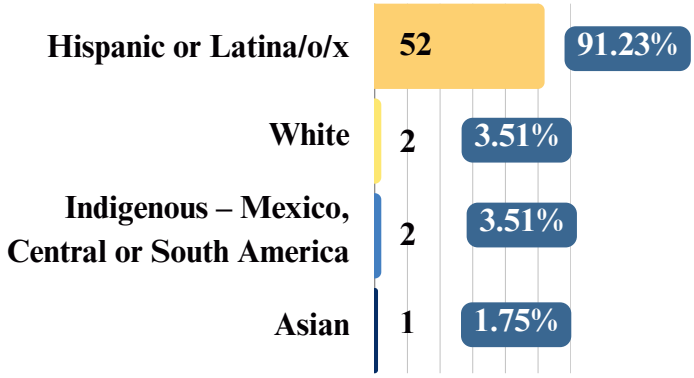


Figure 4 - Primary Home Language

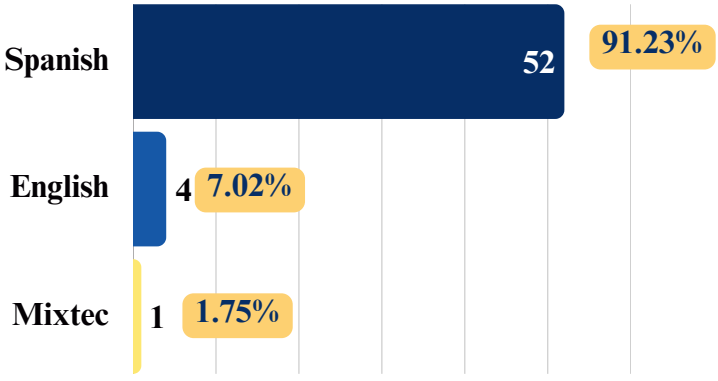
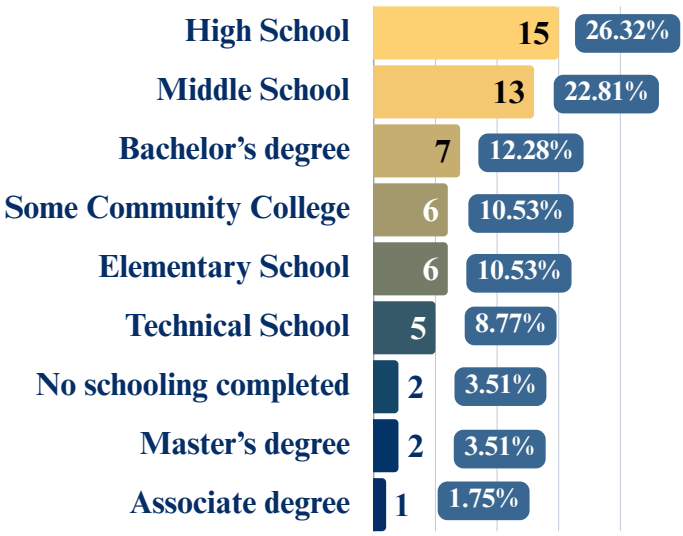
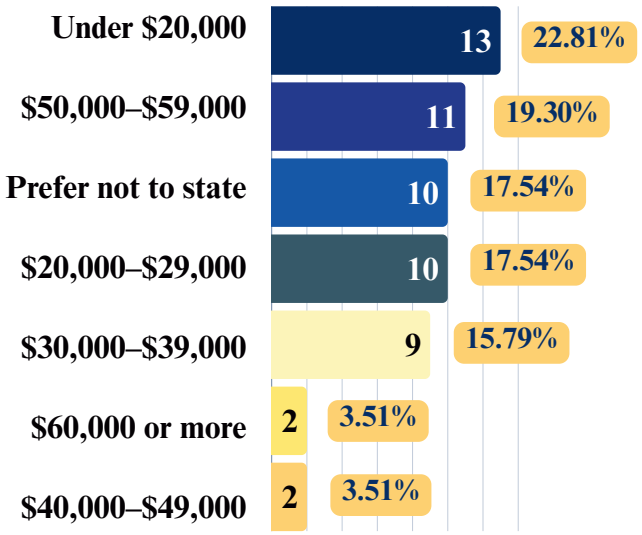


Figure 5 - Parent/Caregiver Education Level



Additionally, approximately 65% of participants have at least one child that is an English language learner, and 35% of participants have at least one child that is under the age of five years old. As illustrated in Figure 5, 60% percent of participants have completed part or all of a K-12 education. Nearly two-thirds of parents/caregivers report an annual household income of less than $60,000 per year, with a total of nearly 23% of all those included earning under $20,000 per year (Figure 6).

Figure 6 - Parent/Caregiver Annual Household Income



A COMBINED TOTAL OF 57 PARENT/CAREGIVERS PARTICIPATED IN THE FOCUS GROUPS.

INTERSECTIONS OF POWER AND MARGINALIZATION

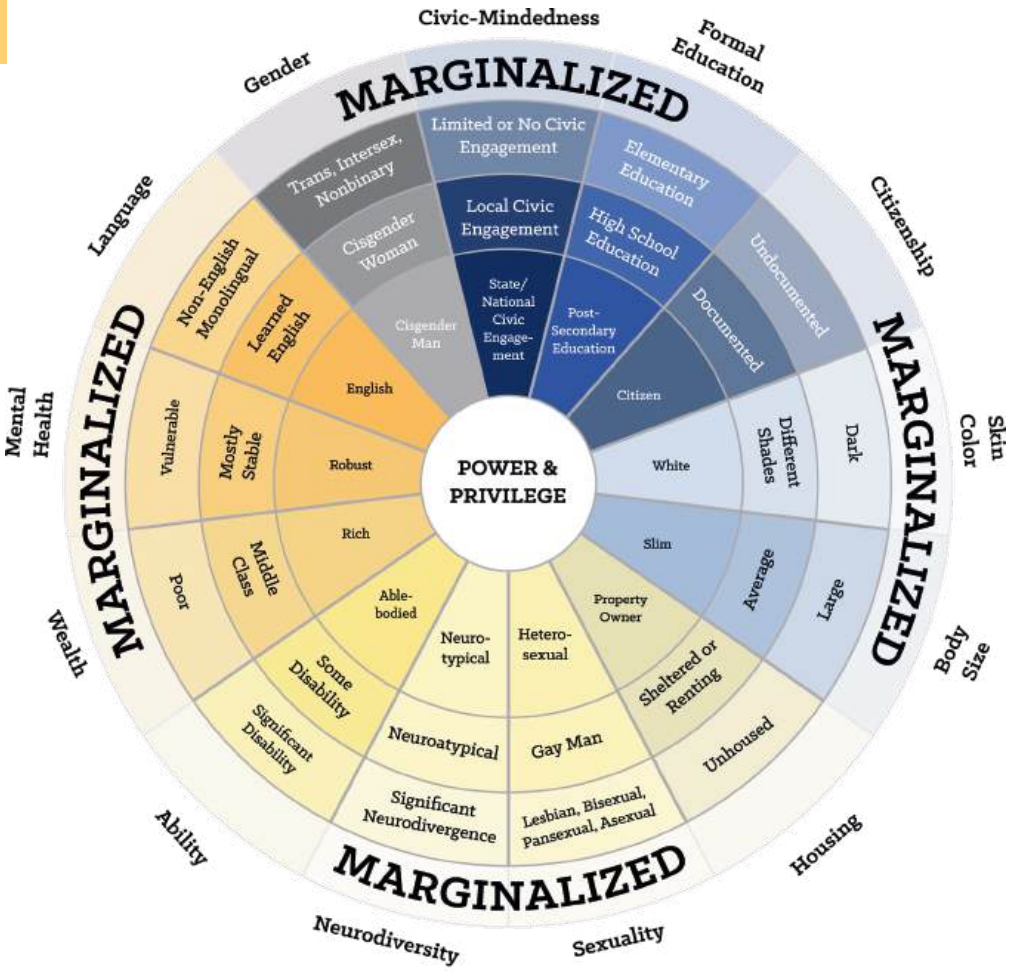
Some of the parent/caregiver-identified needs and experiences were common across the state, while others were called out more frequently in specific regions. The complexities that were gleaned *vis-à-vis* all participant testimonies/*testimonios*[1] ultimately reflected layered and intersecting realities of systemic oppression and inequality that the participants and/or their children experience. Much of what was shared by participants in terms of their household and community needs appears to be shaped by systemic neglect, political targeting, and environmental conditions rooted in inequality that are most acutely felt by individuals of Color, those with lower socioeconomic status, from diverse linguistic backgrounds (e.g. other than English coupled with limited or developing English proficiency), immigrant or mixed status households, no formal education or education capped within the K-12 system, and who are neuroatypical (including combinations therein) to name just a few. As illustrated in the Demographics section above and further detailed in quotes below, the majority of participants and/or their children embody these characteristics.

To best capture the nuanced contributions, findings were initially contextualized through the Wheel of Privilege and Power.[2] The wheel is a tool that has been used in multiple publications and settings, and iterations have been adapted by various scholars to describe privilege and marginalization in the contexts of refugees,[3] anti-oppressive practices in social work,[4] and education[5] to name just a few. The underlying theoretical considerations that are made visible through the wheel are rooted in the seminal work of authors such as Gloria Anzaldúa (Borderlands)[6], Patricia Hill Collins (Black feminist thought),[7] and later described in Kimberlé Crenshaw's[8] work through the application of the term *intersectionality* in the legal field. In essence, the wheel illuminates the relationship between varying facets of identity that are either akin to power and privilege or oppression and marginalization within

current social structures in U.S. society and beyond. Power/privilege, and elements of identity to which these are most accessible, are located at the center of the wheel. By contrast, the more elements of identity that a person has as reflected on the periphery of the wheel, the more marginalization and social oppression they are likely to experience.

Figure 7 has been adapted from other published wheels, and an additional element of Civic Mindedness has been added to underscore the importance of how engagement within one's community can position direct access to power[*] and privilege. More notably, this strand carries with it transformative potential for the individual regardless of other characteristics of identity that may be reflective of marginalized positions as deemed by dominant actors, groups, discourse, systems, and institutions. Furthermore, integrating and mobilizing within one's own community and/or society writ large, particularly by strategically tapping into established legal and policy levers, may be more accessible as a means of further developing and exercising agency and gaining power/privilege in society than through other fixed facets of identity such as race or those that may be extremely difficult to change such as - though not limited to - lower socioeconomic status, undocumented status, and post-secondary education attainment. As other authors who have used and developed the wheel in their own research acknowledge, the wheel adapted for this report is not intended to be exhaustive of all areas of privilege and marginalization.

Figure 7 - Wheel of Power/Privilege and Marginalization



[*] It should be noted that the term 'power' is being carried over from other wheels upon which the one reflected in Figure 7 builds for the purposes of consistency and comparison. However, the larger consideration of adding the strand of Civic Mindedness is to underscore that parents/caregivers can access influence and privilege through self-mobilization and strategically building relationships and coalitions within their communities and beyond. This extends beyond simply moving closer to and amassing 'power' and privilege which can lead to the reproduction of oppression (Freire, 2018).[9] Instead, increased civic mindedness and activism can lead to transformative circumstances that empower marginalized individuals to disrupt oppressive conditions.

THE WHEEL OF POWER AND PRIVILEGE ILLUMINATES HOW OVERLAPPING ELEMENTS OF IDENTITY EITHER GRANT ACCESS TO POWER OR INCREASE EXPOSURE TO MARGINALIZATION WITHIN TODAY'S SOCIAL STRUCTURES.

In short, the wheel is a visual tool that enhances understandings around how power/privilege and marginalization are more or less pronounced depending on biased notions of who should have access to what in society based on intersecting elements of their identity. The following sections are organized by higher level themes developed from the seven focus groups, and examples of how participants experience power/privilege or marginalization are provided, along with the connections to what they need and want most for their children, households, and communities.

SAFETY & WELL-BEING

Safety on and off campus for the focus group participants is a daily concern. Many parents/caregivers shared that their children fear going to the bathroom at school due to unsupervised spaces where drug use and bullying are rampant. Others noted that the presence of drugs, both on campus and in the surrounding community, has become normalized to the point that students can identify the smell as they walk past school offices. Elena from the Inland Empire group shared this when asked what her greatest concern is for her daughter who just completed her freshman year of high school:

> *La inseguidad...se maneja mucha droga, digamos, porque mi hija siempre me dice que va al baño. Dice 'Mami tengo que agacharme, porque si ves arriba, parece una nube y salgo con dolor de cabeza.' Y yo digo, ¿cómo puede ser posible que la escuela, los security, no se dan cuenta?*
>
> **Elena from the Inland Empire**

Translation

The lack of safety... there are a lot of drugs, let's say, because my daughter always tells me when she goes to the bathroom. She says, 'Mom, I have to crouch down because if you look up, it looks like a cloud, and I come out with a headache.' And I say, how is it possible that the school, the security, don't notice?

When probed for more details around her daughter's perspectives regarding security at school, she replied that her daughter does go to the office to let staff know, but that no changes have been made and things stay the same in terms of issues in the bathrooms.

Several issues on campus point to wider issues happening in the community which spillover into school spaces. Participant testimonies reflected a clear desire for increased supervision and security measures at school, though some parent/caregivers voiced mistrust toward law enforcement based on past negative experiences. For instance, Roberto from Bakersfield states that hard drugs are also used in the bathrooms where his children attended high school. He further notes that there are instances where students who are using drugs in the bathrooms will not allow other students to use the facilities causing students to avoid using student bathrooms throughout the day. He is a member of a community group that works with local law enforcement and policymakers in his city. He shares data that in his city alone, there are more than 80 unlicensed shops that sell marijuana. He questions why more is not being done to enforce the legalities around the sale of marijuana. Despite his work in the community, he takes a critical stance on law enforcement's lack of action and attitudes toward him when he has pushed them to do more:

> *Incluso yo he preguntado con los policías y la verdad he tenido roces sueltas con los policías... estoy en desacuerdo con los policías porque a veces toman una actitud con la gente incorrecta y yo me quedo pensando '¿por qué no esa actitud agresiva, fuerte, y como los entrenan y todo, por qué no lo hacen con la gente realmente que hace daño a las comunidades?'*

Roberto from Bakersfield

Translation

> *I've even spoken with the police, and honestly, I've had a few tense interactions with them... I disagree with the police because sometimes they take an attitude with the wrong people, and I'm left thinking, 'Why don't they use that aggressive, forceful attitude, how they're trained and all that, with the people who are actually harming our communities?'*

ROBERTO FURTHER NOTES THAT THERE ARE INSTANCES WHERE STUDENTS WHO ARE USING DRUGS IN THE BATHROOMS WILL NOT ALLOW OTHER STUDENTS TO USE THE FACILITIES CAUSING STUDENTS TO AVOID USING STUDENT BATHROOMS THROUGHOUT THE DAY.

Participants also described concerns around their children navigating unsafe neighborhoods, concerns related to walking routes to and from school, and the fear of violence and peer pressure to which their children are and/or could be exposed while trying to get to and from school. Parental concerns have increased as rates of homelessness have increased. Esteban from Los Angeles recounted a time when he was out with his family that an unsheltered woman started throwing things at them:

> *"Una vez una mujer, o sea, se escucha feo decirlo, es homeless, pero no estaba bien e íbamos a ir a comer y comenzó a tirar de cosas a nosotros, ¿verdad? Imagínese que no fuera yo como padre, que fuera solamente el amigo [de mi hijo] o como un estudiante, ¿verdad? No sabemos el peligro que puede haber pasado."*
>
> **Esteban from Los Angeles**

Translation

> *"One time a woman, well, it sounds bad to say it, she was homeless, but she wasn't well, and we were going to eat when she started throwing things at us, right? Imagine if it hadn't been me as a parent, but just my son's friend or a student, right? We don't know what kind of danger could have happened."*

When I later asked the group what one thing they would ask a community leader to prioritize, Esteban returned to this comment to underscore that he feels deeply for the unsheltered community and would like to see more resources and avenues of support for them.

Finally, several parents/caregivers across regions find school nutrition to be subpar for a variety of reasons. Some shared that lunches at their child's school are made up of mostly carbs. Others echoed that school lunches are not well-balanced and often made up of defrosted food that tastes bad. Yolanda in the Bay Area notes that there is also a lack of variety in what is offered at her son's elementary school - typically pizza, jelly sandwiches, and sliders. She would prefer to see more nutritious options that include fresh fruit and vegetables. Karina, also in the Bay Area added this:

> *También estoy de acuerdo con [Yolanda] en la comida. [Quisiera] que la comida de los niños fuera más saludable, no tanto dulce, no tanta harina. Porque es verdad lo que dice la señora [Yolanda], así como la agarran, así la echan a la basura.*
>
> **Karina from the Bay Area**

Translation

> *I also agree with [Yolanda] about the food. [I wish] the children's food were healthier, not so much sugar, not so much flour. Because it's true what [Yolanda] says, as soon as the kids pick up the food, it goes right in the trash.*

EQUITY, INCLUSION, AND BELONGING ON AND OFF CAMPUS

The desire for their children to feel seen, valued, and respected was deeply present in the focus group discussions. Many shared stories of themselves and/or their children facing exclusion based on race, primary language (other than English), immigration status, and ability at school and in the community. Several described the emotional exhaustion of confronting bureaucratic processes while advocating for support and also managing household responsibilities and work obligations. Some noted that their children were capable and motivated but lacked consistent guidance, especially when teachers appeared burnt out or indifferent. They further voiced doubts about the quality of instruction their children receive, particularly when students are struggling and limited or no interventions are offered. Many parents expressed frustration with what they perceive as teachers divested from providing a quality education to students, low academic expectations for their children at school, and watered-down curriculum. Griselda in the Inland Empire group shared this:

> *Como que los maestros son maestros cansados o tal vez maestros que no aprecian la enseñanza porque un maestro debe dedicar su tiempo a enseñar, no nada más a cobrar. O sea, como que nada más quieren su cheque y no se enfocan a enseñar.*
>
> **Griselda in the Inland Empire**

Translation

> *It's like the teachers are tired teachers or maybe teachers who don't value learning, because a teacher should dedicate their time to teaching, not just to getting paid. It's like they just want their paycheck and don't focus on actually teaching.*

Participants also discussed their relentless efforts to advocate for assessments and services, particularly in cases where children needed special education support. Despite their persistence, many encountered school systems that seemed unresponsive or ill-equipped to serve students who were further removed from the identities closest to the center of the Wheel of Power/Privilege and Marginalization (Figure 7). Their testimonies revealed how socioeconomic status, language skills, and citizenship often determine the type and quality of education a child receives. The treatment they receive both in the community and at school is often directly tied to their identity as well. Though there were many quotes to include on this topic from across the state, Daniela in Modesto's testimony related to

multiple forms of discrimination that she has experienced firmly underscore and illuminate intersectional forms of oppression stemming simply from an identity comprised of characteristics that have been deemed undesirable by longstanding dominant narratives in U.S. society. The first issue occurred when she went to apply for MediCal. According to Daniela, the two staff members whom she encountered at the office spoke Spanish and were Latina. They asked Daniela where she was from and when she stated she was from Guatemala, she recalls the follow-up questions she was asked in a shrill and judgmental tone to reflect how she was spoken to by the MediCal representatives:

> ***¿Qué hay de malo en Guatemala? ¿Por qué estás aquí ?***
>
> ***Translation***
>
> ***What's wrong with Guatemala? Why are you here?"***
>
> ***MediCal Representatives as recounted by Daniela from Modesto***

Although Daniela said she would have liked to answer that what she is doing in the U.S. is her own business, she just smiled. At this point the MediCal employee followed up by telling Daniela to go back to Guatemala:

> ***Me dijo, 'Ay, mejor vete para tu país, allá puedes conseguir ayuda también.' Se rieron y se hablaron en inglés.***
>
> ***Translation***
>
> ***"She told me, 'Oh, you'd be better off going back to your country, you can get help there too.' They laughed and then spoke in English."***
>
> ***Daniela from Modesto***

Another incident involved Daniela's older son when he was in TK. Daniela states that her son has a speech delay, was mostly non-verbal at the time, and the little he did speak then was only in Spanish. One day after school Daniela's son did not make it home on the school bus. In a panic, of course, Daniela called the school who assured her that her son had gotten on the bus. Daniela's next thought was to call the police but she was dissuaded from doing so by the school secretary. Meanwhile, Daniela's son was found by a neighbor (unknown to her or her family) who took the boy to the local fire department since he was unable to speak when the neighbor tried to ascertain his name and address. It turned out that the boy had gotten off at the wrong stop a few blocks from home. The fire department notified law enforcement and the police got involved right away; the responding officer was able to locate his school's information in his backpack. Upon being returned to school by law enforcement, the secretary called Daniela to come pick him up. Daniela also recounts that the police had instructed the secretary and school principal on the necessary actions to get the child the support he needed related to his speech delay. Daniela says that only part of what he said was conveyed back to her; the

school personnel did not share with her the process outlined by the responding officer. She was able to confirm this with a video of the events (how she obtained this video was not disclosed) and conversation that transpired upon picking up her son. It was from this video of a conversation held in English between the school secretary, principal, and the responding officer that Daniela came to understand the assistance available to her son upon having the video translated for her into Spanish at a later time. Even after following the steps and submitting proper documentation, Daniela says her son – now nine years old – only recently received the support he needs. In short, it took her nearly four years to accomplish this.

> ***Me enteré [por el video] de ayudas que podía recibir el niño y pedí a la pediatra que hiciera una carta o algo y no. Entonces tuve que llamar al distrito de aquí de Modesto para ver qué era lo que podían hacer. Me dieron una hoja y la llevé a la escuela y se tardaron mucho, mucho tiempo. Mi niño ahorita tiene nueve; yo empecé ese proceso cuando tenía cinco, entonces se llevaron mucho tiempo. Hasta este año es que ya le prestaron atención. Pero fue porque al niño lo vieron en sus notas, que el niño no ha avanzado. Tenía la educación de un niño de kínder y, pues, obvio no ha avanzado, entonces ya por eso empezaron como a buscarle soluciones.***
>
> ***Daniela from Modesto***

Translation

> ***I found out [through the video] about support my child could receive, and I asked the pediatrician to write a letter or something, and she didn't. So I had to call the district here in Modesto to see what they could do. They gave me a form, and I took it to the school, and they took a very, very long time. My child is now nine; I started this process when he was five, so it took them a long time. Only this year did they finally start paying attention. But it was because they saw in his grades that he hadn't made progress. He had the education level of a kindergartener, and obviously he hadn't advanced, so that's when they finally started looking for solutions.***

As illustrated through Daniela's testimony, for families with roots outside the United States, the transition into communities and schools that are often culturally disconnected from their identities creates an emotional and social toll and can even result in acute discrimination. Many other parents described the challenges their children face when their accents are mocked or when educators fail to understand or affirm their cultural values and funds of knowledge.[10] These experiences, while personal, point to broader systemic failures to foster genuine inclusion. Even well-intentioned policies and programs often fall short when they do not address the lived realities of students who navigate multiple characteristics of identities that are marginalized by dominant groups. Participants reiterated common experiences of school staff indifference, insensitivity, and inaction. As a result, many parents/caregivers highlighted the urgency of culturally responsive practices as foundational to their children's sense of belonging, their right to be educated, and to have their dignity affirmed.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS AND POLITICAL INFLUENCE

Throughout the focus groups, the impact of economic hardship was an ever-present undercurrent. Long commutes caused by unaffordable housing near schools have resulted in chronic tardiness or absences. Other parents/caregivers spoke of the emotional and logistical juggling required to meet basic needs while still trying to advocate for their children's education. They described choosing between paying rent or internet bills needed for school assignments, or foregoing appointments due to inaccessible transportation. Participants further described how housing instability, unemployment, and rising living costs disrupt their daily lives and their children's education and mental health. Betsy from the Bay Area shared this:

> *Ahorita las rentas están muy altas, bueno sí, nos las están subiendo seguido y está muy [caro] aquí. La comida está también súper alto y, hasta este momento, ahorita hay trabajo, pero no hay lo suficiente. Pues los niños dicen, le preguntan a su papá, '¿Papi, no tienes trabajo?' y también los niños se empiezan a preocupar aunque son niños. Pero se dan cuenta ellos.*
>
> ***Translation***
>
> *Right now, rent is really high. Yes, they keep raising it on us, and it's very expensive here. Food is also extremely expensive, and even though there's work at the moment, it's not enough. The kids ask their dad, 'Daddy, don't you have a job?' and even the kids start to worry even though they're just children. They notice what's going on.*
>
> **Betsy from the Bay Area**

Sustaining adequate employment was perhaps most urgent for the groups across the Central Valley that largely depend on income earned from the agricultural sector. This industry is currently facing a variety of complexities that have had negative impacts for fieldworkers. Estela from Fresno shares that experienced laborers have slowly been replaced with contractors who are hired as part of formal agreements between the field owners and contract companies who bring in support from Mexico.[**]

[**] This is data provided by Estela and has not been confirmed in outside sources. Nonetheless, it is a finding that many others in the group confirmed and which provided context for additional challenges faced by participants who work in the fields. Estela shared that she has a relative who is employed by one of the contracting companies.

When asked whether or not this is legal, she states that, yes, there are legal supports in place for this and she compares the process to the Bracero Program that was in effect from the 1940s-60s in the United States.[11] At the end of the season, she states that the workers are returned to Mexico. Aside from creating limited opportunities for employment for those who reside in the area, she asserts that the contracted workers exploited through lower wages, do not know their labor rights, and work longer hours. She further noted this:

> *A ellos no, no los dejan hablar con trabajadores que están cerca y que no sean de los contratados, o sea, que viven aquí y les dan trabajo. Como por ejemplo, haga de cuenta el campo se divide, de aquel lado es fresa y de este lado tomate. Pues a lo mejor los que están en el tomate son puros contratados y los que están en la fresa no, y están pegados los campos, pero dicen 'No, no puedes hablar con ellos, no puedes hablar con nadie.' Para mí, disculpen la palabra, pero para mí es un secuestro.*
>
> ***Estela from Fresno***

Translation

They're not allowed to talk to workers nearby who aren't part of the contracted group, meaning those who live here and are given work. For example, imagine the field is divided — on one side there are strawberries, and on the other side, tomatoes. Maybe the ones working with tomatoes are all contracted, and the ones with strawberries are not. Even though the fields are right next to each other, they say, 'No, you can't talk to them, you can't talk to anyone.' For me — excuse my language — but to me, that feels like being captive.

Elena in Modesto describes similar circumstances in her area related to less work available in the agricultural sector, as well as in other skilled labor areas. Her husband is a carpenter and while he used to have work daily, opportunities have significantly decreased. When asked about the work shortages, she reflects that politics have a lot to do with it. She mentions the effects of proposed changes to tariffs and how this is negatively impacting work productivity and consumer need for services in the area.

CONTRACTED WORKERS EXPLOITED THROUGH LOWER WAGES DO NOT KNOW THEIR LABOR RIGHTS AND WORK LONGER HOURS.

Adriana describes considerations that impact her family as a result of the current administration's stance on immigration:

Pues a nosotros nos perjudicó. Sí bajó muchísimo el trabajo de cuando él llegó. No digo que precisamente por los aranceles, que también todo eso, porque en esos tiempos que hubo eso se bajó muchísimo el trabajo, a no haber — no había material. No es exactamente porque sea inmigrante, ¿verdad?, pero sí te causa algo como de miedo. Como yo, en mi caso, mi esposo sí tiene el permiso, pero mi hijo no. Mi hijo está en el trámite y, de hecho, pues ya a veces en su mismo trabajo les han hablado que se retire porque inmigración anda ahí y agarra parejo por ser latino. En el caso de nosotros, pues tenemos dos años aquí. De inglés no sabemos nada y eso te tiene a ti como preocuparte de la familia, es algo que, pues, sí te preocupa. Pero sí, igual el trabajo bajó muchísimo y como a veces de una semana trabajan un día, y pues si ya trabajan otra semana completa, completar para la renta con eso.

Adriana from Modesto

Translation

Well, it hurt us. The work dropped a lot from when he took office. I'm not saying it was precisely because of the tariffs or all that, but during those times the work dropped a lot because there wasn't material. It's not exactly because of being an immigrant, but it does cause a kind of fear. In my case, my husband does have documentation, but my son doesn't. My son's paperwork is in process, and actually, sometimes at his job they've told him to leave because immigration is around and is cracking down hard on Latinos. For us, we've been here two years. We don't know any English, and that makes you worry about your family — it's something that really worries you. But yes, the work dropped off a lot, and sometimes in one week they work just one day, and if they work a full week the next, that's barely enough to cover rent.

Mateo is a self-employed handyman in Modesto with an established business, including several employees. He confirms that consumers are hesitant to do home improvements unless for something essential such as a broken water heater. He lists several sectors that have been hit hardest by the threat of tariffs and new immigration policies under the Trump administration: restaurants, flooring installers, and construction. He underscores that these are industries that are heavily relied upon by Latinos for income. He further notes that these are also industries that employ individuals of lower socioeconomic status. He draws a clear connection between intersectional marginalization based on race/ethnicity, access to post-secondary education, and social class in the following remarks:

Desgraciadamente nosotros, la clase baja, nos perjudica bastante. Y a la otra gente que trabaja en trabajos como computadoras, pues ellos tienen su modo de ganar su trabajo. Pero uno como mexicano, pues es bien difícil la situación ahorita.

Mateo from Modesto

Translation

Unfortunately for us, the working class, it hurts us a lot. And for other people who work in jobs like computers, well, they have their way of earning a living. But for someone like me, a Mexican, the situation right now is really difficult.

ACCOUNTABILITY AND OVERSIGHT AT HOME AND AT SCHOOL

Many parents/caregivers described persistent efforts to be heard and valued as equal partners in their children's education. In all regions participants underscored their self-perception of being their child's first teacher. In other words, they see themselves as responsible for providing foundational knowledge and skills at home that their children need in order to be successful at school. Several participants across regions noted that the breakdown in the collaborative experience they would like to have stemmed from a lack of teacher outreach and/or irregular updates to parent portals. Mateo in Modesto mentioned that the student/parent portals are not regularly updated. He states he wants to support his children at home, but given the lag in when teachers update due dates and grades, a lot of time passes which creates missed opportunities for to him hold his children accountable at home and to also help them stay on track with schoolwork. Despite asking for more regular updates, he has found the teachers unresponsive.

Carmen in Los Angeles has used the delayed updates as an opportunity to teach her 9th grade daughter to advocate for herself. She shared this:

> *Mi hija en sí es medio tímida; a veces cuando yo le digo: 'Tienes que chequear con tu maestra. Estás en esta calificación, pero quiero que te impulses y la subas. Checa, ve con tu maestra y dile, pregúntale qué puedes hacer.' Ya sea crédito extra, actividades u otras cosas que tal vez no ha hecho para impulsar su calificación.*
>
> **Carmen from Los Angeles**

Translation

> *My daughter is kind of shy; sometimes when I tell her, 'You have to check in with your teacher. You're at this grade, but I want you to push yourself and raise it. Check, go see your teacher and tell her, ask what you can do.' Whether it's extra credit, activities, or other things she might not have done yet to boost her grade.*

Many want to be involved but are held back by work schedules, language barriers, or a lack of familiarity with the U.S. school system. The lack of physical, accessible information can be alienating to parents/caregivers, particularly those who have a home language other than English or limited access to digital platforms. In many participant reflections, it became clear

that the gap between schools and families is not about parental disinterest as can sometimes be assumed. Brenda from Los Angeles has a son in 11th grade and reflected this:

> *A veces me pongo a pensar yo que si los maestros realmente están poniendo atención. Acá [en Estados Unidos], es difícil, yo sé, porque son muchísimos estudiantes, pero ¿será que en verdad los maestros ponen el mismo esfuerzo que nosotros ponemos aquí en la casa? Al menos en mi caso como madre, pues a veces uno se siente muy limitada en el aspecto de que el método escolar es diferente al que nosotros recibimos. Ya los hijos, pues, ellos están empezando a querer un poco de independencia, entonces como que ya no nos comparten mucho y nosotros no tenemos tanto acceso a los maestros, más que por emails, tal vez. En mi caso, solo hay un maestro que nos manda un correo cada semana diciéndonos la asistencia del estudiante y cómo va, algún problemita, alguna tardanza, que ha fallado entre dar alguna tarea. Es solamente un maestro. Entonces, pienso que la falta de comunicación entre padre y maestro ya en la high school es bastante marcada.*

Translation

> *Sometimes I wonder if the teachers are really paying attention. Here [in the U.S.], I know it's difficult because there are so many students, but do teachers really put in the same effort that we do at home? At least in my case as a mother, sometimes I feel very limited because the school system is different from what we experienced. The kids are starting to want some independence, so they don't share much with us anymore, and we don't have much access to teachers except maybe through emails. In my case, there's only one teacher who sends us an email every week telling us about the student attendance, how they're doing, any problems, or tardiness or missed assignments — just one teacher. So, I think the lack of communication between parents and teachers in high school is pretty clear.*

Brenda from Los Angeles

The overwhelming sentiment shared in all regions is that parents/caregivers are ready and willing to partner with schools, but that they need schools to meet them where they are in terms of their own experience and knowledge. Several parents described a desire for genuine relationship-building where their expertise as caregivers is recognized, valued, and additive in the formation of their child's experience at school. When families are consistently excluded or engaged only minimally, the message sent is that educators do not see them as essential to their children's education.

MANY PARENTS WANT TO BE INVOLVED BUT ARE HELD BACK BY WORK SCHEDULES, LANGUAGE BARRIERS, OR A LACK OF FAMILIARITY WITH THE U.S. SCHOOL SYSTEM.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To create more equitable and just school environments, it is essential to design and implement approaches that intentionally address the intersecting identities and power dynamics that shape students' experiences, as well as those experienced by their households as a whole. One critical step is adopting and continually developing culturally responsive teaching practices. This means moving beyond superficial representations of culture and instead embedding students' lived experiences, histories, and ways of knowing into the curriculum. Educators must recognize and actively respond to how racial, socioeconomic, linguistic, gendered, and ability-based identities (amongst others) intersect to impact a student's sense of safety and engagement. In particular, students from historically marginalized backgrounds - including those from mixed immigrant status households - often report feeling unsafe or unwelcome in schools.[12] Professional development that equips educators to understand and disrupt implicit bias, disciplinary disparities, and uphold curricular rigor through differentiated methods that will benefit all students and maintain their opportunities to learn should be prioritized by site and district decisionmakers, including through local control funding formulas.

Further, site and district leaders must prioritize maintaining safe and substance-free campuses. Particular attention should be paid to the spaces and situations where students feel most vulnerable. In the case of these focus groups, school bathrooms were reported to be frequent sites of harassment, bullying, drug use, and other harmful behaviors. Ensuring that all students feel safe on school campuses requires a combination of strategies, including clear, well-publicized anti-harassment policies, adult supervision without surveillance and profiling, and a well-documented and enforced accountability plan for students who break the rules. Implementing clear policies, consistent enforcement, and educational programs can help reduce substance use and related risks on school grounds. Collaborative efforts involving staff, students, families, and community partners are essential to foster a culture of respect and safety. Decision makers should also coordinate with law enforcement agencies to widen the safety net beyond the bounds of school campuses, thereby maximizing safety and oversight. By addressing these issues proactively, schools and communities can reduce violence and health hazards, ultimately promoting a more positive climate overall wherein all students feel protected and empowered to succeed. Schools and the students they serve

could benefit from proactive approaches such as restorative justice programs,[13] enhanced mentorship,[14] culturally grounded substance abuse education,[15] and mental health support.[16] Safety should be built through trust, prevention, and relationships. When students know they are protected, respected, and listened to, they are more likely to feel connected to their school community.

Next, schools must provide enhanced services that integrate academic, behavioral, mental health, and community-based supports, particularly in under-resourced neighborhoods. Equity in access to counselors, social workers, ancillary academic support, and after-school programs is not just about meeting needs; rather, it addresses the deeper structural inequalities that influence overall well-being and short- and long-term student success. School nutrition should also be prioritized, particularly considering that many families facing economic hardship rely on these meals to sustain their children. These enhanced supports help to bridge gaps caused by socioeconomic disparities and create more inclusive learning environments where every student has the opportunity to thrive.

TO CREATE MORE EQUITABLE AND JUST SCHOOL ENVIRONMENTS, IT IS ESSENTIAL TO DESIGN APPROACHES THAT INTENTIONALLY ADDRESS THE INTERSECTING IDENTITIES AND POWER DYNAMICS THAT SHAPE STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES

Equity also requires opportunities for authentic family and community engagement. Too often, multicultural, immigrant, low-income, and/or families of Color encounter rigid institutional norms to which they are expected to conform,[17] deficit-based assumptions and treatment,[18] and (for those who speak primary languages other than English) linguistic erasure[19] – all signaling dominant perspectives that their presence is less valuable or welcome in school spaces compared to other students from backgrounds more aligned to the inner ring on the Wheel of Power/Privilege and Marginalization (Figure 7). Schools must examine how power and oppression show up in these dynamics and actively create inclusive structures for partnership with parents/caregivers that also serve to develop and encourage civic mindedness. This includes hiring culturally and linguistically diverse staff, offering flexible meeting formats, and involving families in shaping curricula, policies, and action research. When parents/caregivers are seen as co-educators, co-advocates, and co-decision makers in the larger sense, schools deepen their capacity to serve all students. This is also a critical area where parents and students who have less access to privilege can leverage increased involvement to become changemakers, sources of influence, and activists thereby potentially leading to transformation in their communities and beyond.

Meaningful change must also be supported by redistributing resources and restructuring systems that currently negatively impact (though not solely limited to) the aspects of identity reflected on the Wheel in Figure 7. Schools serving historically marginalized and under-resourced communities cannot be expected to produce equitable outcomes while operating with fewer funds, fewer experienced teachers, and fewer enrichment opportunities. Policymakers and district leaders must critically examine how funding, staffing, and program access are tied to elements of identity such as race, social class, linguistic background, and citizenship privilege. Only by directly confronting the structural roots of inequality, and the role they play in perpetuating or disrupting it, can schools become spaces where all students belong, thrive, and experience full academic and civic opportunity.

REFERENCES

[1]Pérez Huber, L. (2009). Disrupting apartheid of knowledge: Testimonio as methodology in Latina/O critical race research in education. International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 22(6), 639–654. https://doi.org/10.1080/09518390903333863

[2] University of Wisconsin-Madison. (2022, June 29). Wheel of Privilege and Power. Instructional Resources: Center for Teaching, Learning & Mentoring KnowledgeBase. https://kb.wisc.edu/instructional-resources/page.php?id=119380

[3] Canadian Council for Refugees. (2025). Power Wheel Update | Canadian Council for Refugees. https://ccrweb.ca/en/power-wheel-update

[4] Vanderwoerd, J. (2016). The promise and perils of Anti-Oppressive practice for Christians in Social Work education. Social Work & Christianity, 43(2), 153–188.

[5] Duckworth, S. [@sylviaduckworth]. (2020, August 19). Wheel of Power/Privilege [Instagram post]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CEFiUShhpUT/?hl=en

[6]Anzaldúa, G. (1987). Borderlands: La Frontera - The new mestiza (1st ed.). Spinsters/Aunt Lute.

[7] Collins, P. H. (1989). The social construction of Black feminist thought. Signs, 14(4), 745–773. https://doi.org/10.1086/494543

[8] Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. Stanford Law Review, 43(6), 1241-1299.

[9] Freire, P. (2018). Pedagogy of the oppressed (M. B. Ramos, Trans.; 50th anniversary ed.). Bloomsbury Academic. (Original work published 1970)

[10] Moll, L. C., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & Gonzalez, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. Theory Into Practice, 31(2), 132-141.

[11] Library of Congress. (2025, July 7). 1942: Bracero Program. In A Latinx resource guide: Civil rights cases and events in the United States. Library of Congress. https://guides.loc.gov/latinx-civil-rights/bracero-program

[12] DeNicolo, C. P., Yu, M., Crowley, C. B., & Gabel, S. L. (2017). Reimagining critical care and problematizing sense of school belonging as a response to inequality for immigrants and children of immigrants. Review of Research in Education, 41(1), 500–530. https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X17690498 (journals.sagepub.com)

[13] Marcucci, O. (2021). Why restorative justice works in schools: An investigation into the interactional dynamics of restorative circles. Learning, Culture and Social Interaction, 31, 100561. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lcsi.2021.100561

[14] Moore, R. (2021, September 9). Setting up a mentoring program to encourage students: When adults from the community serve as mentors who reinforce high expectations, students gain another vital source of support. Edutopia. https://www.edutopia.org/article/setting-mentoring-program-encourage-students

[15] Okamoto, S. K., Helm, S., Pel, S., McClain, L. L., Hill, A. P., & Hayashida, J. K. (2014). Developing empirically based, culturally grounded drug prevention interventions for indigenous youth populations. Journal of Behavioral Health Services & Research, 41(1), 8–19. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11414-012-9304-0

[16] Wiedermann, C. J., Barbieri, V., Plagg, B., Marino, P., Piccoliori, G., & Engl, A. (2023). Fortifying the foundations: A comprehensive approach to enhancing mental health support in educational policies amidst crises. Healthcare, 11(10), 1423. https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare11101423

[17] Olivos, E. M., Jiménez-Castellanos, O., & Ochoa, A. M. (Eds.). (2011). Bicultural parent engagement: Operationalizing advocacy and empowerment. Teachers College Press.

[18] Ochoa, G. L. (2013). Academic profiling: Latinos, Asian Americans, and the achievement gap. University of Minnesota Press.

[19] Menken, K. (2013). Restrictive language education policies and emergent bilingual youth: A perfect storm with imperfect outcomes. Theory Into Practice, 52(3), 160–168. https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2013.804307

APPENDIX

Focus Group Questions

1. What are your biggest concerns regarding your child's academic experiences?/ ¿Cuáles son sus mayores preocupaciones sobre la experiencia escolar de su hijo/a?
2. If you could change just one thing at your child's school, what would it be?/Si pudiera cambiar una sola cosa en la escuela de su hijo/a, ¿qué sería?
3. What are the largest challenges that your family or your community currently faces?/ ¿Cuáles son los mayores desafíos que enfrenta su familia o su comunidad en este momento?
4. If you could tell a community leader just one thing, what would it be?/Si pudieran decirle una cosa a un líder de la comunidad, ¿qué le dirían?
5. What resources or services are lacking in your community?/What support would make the most difference?/¿Qué recursos o servicios faltan en su comunidad?/¿Qué apoyo marcaría la diferencia?
6. What brings you and your children hope or joy, including during challenging times?/ ¿Qué les da esperanza o alegría a Ud. y a sus hijos, incluso cuando las cosas están difíciles?
7. Is there anything else you would like to share/¿Hay algo más que le gustaría compartir?