

# One Nation INDIVISIBLE

Stories From the Field

[www.onenationindivisible.org](http://www.onenationindivisible.org)

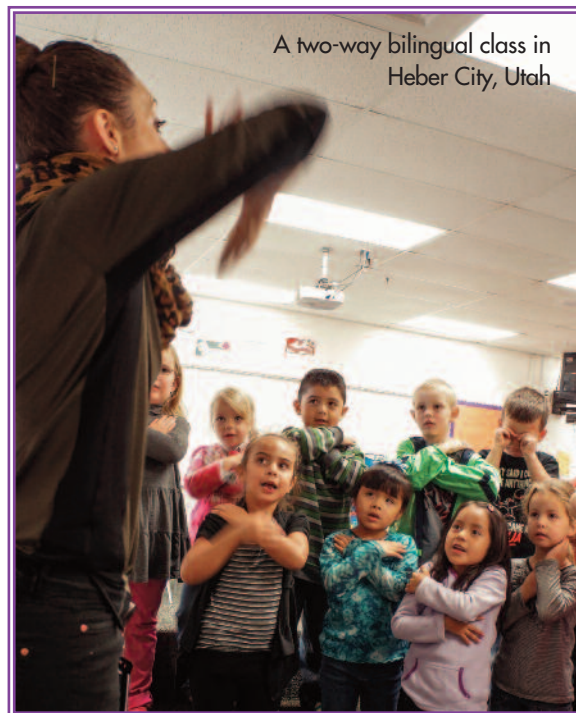
March 2014

## Utah's Bilingual Boon

STORY BY SUSAN EATON

PHOTOS BY GINA CHIRICHIGNO

When all the big changes came to Heber City, Utah, few people experienced them as keenly as Eric Campbell, the principal of a local elementary school, father of four boys and pillar of his local church. Campbell and his wife Melissa had been one of the thousands of new families who'd settled here over the last couple of decades, transforming this picturesque former farming community into a suburb. The population rate had long been creeping up in Heber City. In 1990, just 4,300 people lived here. By 2012, more than 12,000 people called Heber City home. Hosting the 2002 Olympics had triggered a lot of growth in Utah. The international event expanded and improved infrastructure such as highways and drainage systems, and spurred development and tourism. After the Olympics, Park City, just 15 minutes or so from Heber City, became an international tourist destination and outdoor playground for the super rich. Pre-Olympics, Heber City's newer families tended to have a lot in common with the old-timers. Most of them were white, politically conservative and, like Heber City's founders, nearly all were members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, also known as Mormons. But post-Olympics, more and more of the newcomers stood out in the usual Heber City crowd. They spoke Spanish, for one thing. They worshipped in Catholic churches, for another.



A two-way bilingual class in Heber City, Utah

A few years ago, Armando's Mercado opened up on North Main Street. A novelty at first, Armando's now enjoys a brisk business selling tortillas and homemade chorizo sausage to a mostly Mexican American clientele.

Eric and Melissa Campbell enthusiastically welcomed the cultural shift in Heber City, a place founded by English immigrant Mormons in the 1850s and named for the Mormon apostle Heber C. Kimball. Eric had learned Spanish during his Mormon mission in Spain. Melissa had learned it during her mission in the Dominican Republic.

"Education is about expanding yourself," says Campbell, who is now director of elementary education for the Wasatch County School District in Heber City. "Different language, cultures, life experiences and what have you? If you welcome this, if you are open, this will always enrich your life."

Campbell's is certainly a forward-looking notion and a practical one for our globalizing society and his diversifying community. But amid Heber City's transformation, Campbell realized that the adjustments he'd need to make as principal of Heber Valley Elementary School would entail more than open arms and elegant Spanish sentences. Most of the parents of his students had been drawn to Utah by low-wage service and hard labor jobs generated by the Olympics. They fell squarely into the

“working poor” category. Nearby towns like Heber City reaped benefits from Park City’s growing status as a luxury ski resort capital. The vast majority of Heber City’s Latino residents worked for low wages as maids, cashiers, cleaners or cooks in booming Park City or in the hotels and recreational businesses in the region. But few of the workers who kept Park City humming could afford the high rents there. Meanwhile, some of Park City’s tourism riches trickled to entrepreneurs in Heber City, where folks started or expanded their own outdoor recreation businesses, including cross-country skiing, snowmobiling, fly fishing and hunting. These businesses needed workers to maintain trails, clean hotel rooms and wait on tourists in restaurants. Some parents of Eric Campbell’s students had two or even three jobs. Consequently, the poverty rate of Heber Valley Elementary kept going up. At the same time, grand wood-and-glass vacation homes with sweeping views quickly materialized high up in the hills on the way to Park City.

By 2013, about 55 percent of students at Heber Valley Elementary would come from families below the poverty line, up from a 33 percent poverty rate in 2005. The climbing poverty rate correlated with declining test scores. So, even as Campbell consistently stressed the “great assets” Latino students brought to the community, he could not ignore the fact that kids were clearly not meeting their potential. Some of the low scores were surely due to the fact that the increasing share of students still learning English had to take the state’s mandated test in English before they’d mastered the language. That aside, Campbell and many of his colleagues felt there must be a better way to reach students who were struggling.

Campbell consulted with Linda Turner, the district’s world language coordinator who’d grown up in the northern Mexican state of Chihuahua and had settled in Heber City after marrying an Utahan. Campbell was intrigued by the research Turner pointed him toward. Study after study demonstrated that English language learners tend to make more academic progress if they master a high level of literacy in their native language

and work to retain that native language while they learn English as a second language. What’s more, other research showed substantial long-term learning benefits for people who grow up speaking two languages. Campbell and Turner went to conferences to learn more. The method that seemed to show the best results for all students, Campbell told school board members and colleagues back in Heber City, brought together English-speaking students with Spanish-speaking students and taught all the kids in two languages. As Campbell and Turner continued deliberating the

merits of what’s called “two-way immersion,” Utah’s lawmakers, fortuitously, were crafting a bill that would give start-up grants to local school leaders to begin foreign language immersion programs. Campbell and Turner jumped at the new opportunity and soon after the bill became law, Heber Valley Elementary School enrolled 96 kindergarteners and first graders in a Spanish-English two-way immersion program. Since then, the program has expanded through fifth grade and enrolls about half of the school’s some 500 students. Far more parents want to get into the program than can be accommodated.

Encouraged by the success at Heber Valley Elementary, educators at two of the three other elementary schools

in the community have adopted two-way bilingual programs and plans are underway to bring a two-way bilingual program to the one elementary school that doesn’t yet have one. There are currently 24 two-way Spanish bilingual programs across Utah, and these are part of a larger language immersion effort in the state, which supports 100 schools overall.

Utah’s inclusive educational response and embrace of bilingualism for all is unprecedented in the nation. The particular “two-way immersion” programs that bring together English speakers and native Spanish speakers were not invented in Utah and have existed in lots of places for decades. But no other state has expressed such unwavering political support and dedicated infrastructure to this form of bilingual education. Educators in search of ways to improve achievement of English language learners, to enhance language learning or to



Local educator Eric Campbell helped bring two-way bilingual programs to his changing community

increase social cohesion in culturally diverse schools have flocked to Utah in recent years with the hope of replicating the state's progress.

"That this is happening in little red Utah really does still surprise some people," says Gregg Roberts, who helped shepherd the existing language programs into being as the world languages and dual language immersion specialist at the Utah State Office of Education. The effusive Roberts has become something of an ambassador these days, speaking around the country to a growing audience of out-of-state educators and enthusiastically welcoming visitors to his home state.

"I love what we are doing here. And I also have to say that I am really excited about our two-way Spanish programs," Roberts says. "I love talking about them. I love showing them off because so much of the talk in the education world about English language learners is all about, 'Oh, they need this. Oh, they are such a challenge' and blah, blah, blah. But two-way turns all that on its head. It says, 'Our Spanish speakers have talents and skills and let's build with that! It says, 'We all need to adapt to the 21st century.' It's not this crazy idea anymore about *them* needing to adapt to *us*."



Like all good kindergarten teachers, Nuria Valero Martinez brings infectious exuberance, warmth and patience to her classroom of five year olds at Heber Valley Elementary School. But Martinez, who came here from Spain, offers additional qualities, like language and culture, which are at a premium in Utah's public schools these days.

"Here, we have the days of the week," she tells her students in Spanish. "Let's say the days of the week..." She and the children move on, reciting the months and then the numbers 1 to 31. "What day is today?" she asks in Spanish. "Jueves!" the children shout, as if it being Thursday were the most exciting thing in the world. Martinez continues, in Spanish: "And what month? What month is it now?" Some of the children bounce up and down, clearly thrilled with themselves: "Septiembre!" they chant. Martinez beams at the children. "Muy bien!" In another classroom nearby, more kindergarteners review the names for shapes. "You guys are so smart!" the teacher says, in English. The two

dozen or so children scurry off to shared tables where they practice writing short words beginning with assigned letters. Things look much the same as they did in Martinez' classroom but they sound very different here. After the two classes share recess, each group of students will trade classrooms, teachers and the language of instruction. Later, Martinez and her English-speaking "partner teacher" will sit down to collaborate on lesson plans, strategies and evaluations.

It's right here in these classrooms where Heber City's new demographic reality is most visible. Heber Valley Elementary School's current principal, Jacki Burnham, estimates that about half of the children in her two-way immersion kindergarten classes are either immigrants themselves or children of immigrants, most of them with roots in Mexico. Overall, about 35 percent of Heber Valley Elementary's more than 500 students are Latino, well more than half of whom are categorized as "English language learners." But it also is difficult to overlook the disproportionately high number of blonde children here in Heber City, where many members of this still mainly Mormon community claim Swiss or German ancestry. Every summer, the neighboring town of Midway hosts a "Swiss Days" festival. Last year's celebration featured "Swiss Tacos" in addition to the traditional "Kraut Dinner." As a whole, Utah has historically been known as one of the nation's "whitest" states. But this is no longer true. Rapid immigration increased the share of Latino residents from 9 percent in 2000 to 13 percent in 2012. The share of African Americans here, though, remains miniscule, at 1.3 percent.

Colorful signs and posters fill the hallway outside Heber Valley Elementary's two-way immersion classrooms. "Enter to grow in wisdom," reads one sign, with its Spanish translation below: La puerta para crecer en sabiduria. (Roughly: The door that will enable you to grow in wisdom.) Another, in Spanish: Vengan a conocer mi lengua y mi cultura. (Translated to English, roughly: Come and get to know my language and my culture.)

"For my kids, it's been an incredible experience from an academic standpoint," says Joe Mellon who has two daughters and a son enrolled in two-way immersion at Heber Valley Elementary. "But there's so much to say as well about the other benefits. We have all these birthday parties going on all the time with kids from different

cultures speaking in two languages with each other. That's the future right there, these kids working together and creating good things."

■ ■ ■

Under Utah law, passed in 2008, schools like Heber Valley Elementary receive about \$10,000 to start voluntary programs where students spend half the day learning in English and the other half in one of five languages: Spanish, Chinese, German, French or Portuguese. In grades 7 through 9, students in immersion programs take one class each year in their so-termed "target" languages, be it Spanish or German, Chinese, French or Portuguese. They then take the Advanced Placement Language & Culture exam in 9th grade. (Usually students sit for such an exam in 11th or 12th grade.) In grades 10 through 12, students are offered upper division university-level coursework through seven institutions across Utah. Immersion programs began in 2009, with 1,400 students in 25 schools. By the fall of 2013, about 20,000 students were enrolled in dual language programs in 100 schools across the state. Immersion programs are never mandatory; in other words, a traditional monolingual educational program is always available for families. The Spanish "two-way immersion" programs found in Heber City are qualitatively different from the Chinese, German, French and Portuguese programs precisely because of the growing presence and contributions of Spanish-speaking students.

"The immigration to our state is such a lucky gift," says Utah's Spanish dual immersion director Ofelia Wade, who, as a Cuban immigrant, attended two-way immersion public schools in Miami. "This adds a richness and depth in the classroom that cannot be matched."

Utah's education officials at first worried whether \$10,000 would be enough to inspire often already overwhelmed local principals to start new programs from scratch. As it turned out, local school boards lined up for the money. Each program uses two teachers, one who teaches in English and the other a native speaker of the "target" language. The state has hired teachers from France, Spain, Mexico, Argentina and mainland China and brought them here on guest visas. The Spanish two-way immersion programs are spread throughout the state, including in the more affluent Park City, throughout Salt Lake City (where the concentration of Latino

students is heaviest), in growing bedroom communities like Heber City and in rural communities. Overall, the state grants about \$2 million each year for running the language programs. This equals about \$100 for each student enrolled and pays for increased teacher training, costs associated with bringing over teachers from China, Mexico, Spain and other nations and curriculum development. State officials estimate that once the curriculum is written and paid for, the annual per-student cost will decline to \$33. In New York City's private Avenues School, with a foreign language immersion curriculum similar to Utah's, tuition is \$40,000 a year.

Tax dollar supported two-way bilingual education might seem a radical solution for a place like Heber City, where 72 percent of voters are registered Republicans. Some Heber City residents did have trouble taking to the idea of two-way bilingual education at first.

"There was a For Sale sign on my lawn and I didn't put it there," Eric Campbell jokes, recounting tense community meetings where people objected to the use of Spanish for instruction and expressed fear that monolingual teachers might be displaced, which never happened in Heber City or in other communities with immersion programs. Others expressed a more generalized anxiety.

"You know, you had some people saying, 'We are going to fight against this because you are destroying our community,'" Campbell recalls. "But we just do not hear that anymore. I think we not only got past that, but we've all made incredible progress as a community. It's not going to happen overnight, but this program is exactly the type of effort we need to build those bridges between community members."

■ ■ ■

As Campbell pointed out to his fellow Heber City residents during those tense meetings, the academic research in support of the two-way bilingual method has grown steadily over a few decades. The method demonstrates promising results both for students whose native language is Spanish and for native English speakers. Researchers Virginia Collier and Wayne Thomas have studied two-way immersion programs for more than twenty years. In 2002, they published the most comprehensive analysis to date of the programs, examining data over 18 years in 23 schools districts across 18 states for the US Department of Education. Collier and Thomas

concluded then that participation in two-way immersion programs was strongly associated with the narrowing of the achievement gap between English speakers and students still learning English. More recently, Collier and Thomas, under contract with the North Carolina Department of Education, evaluated two-way immersion programs in that state. After comparing two-way immersion schools to traditional schools with similar demographic makeups, they found that white students, Latino students, African American students, native English speakers and native Spanish speakers all tended to make far more progress in two-way immersion schools (as measured by test scores), earn better attendance records and receive far fewer referrals for behavior problems.

At the same time, the benefits of bilingualism have become increasingly clear. Cognitive neuroscientist Ellen Bialystock at Toronto's York University has conducted some of the most convincing research in this area. Her work finds that children exposed to stories in two languages tend to have advantages as they learn to read. More recently, Bialystock's studies suggest that bilingual adults are far less prone to cognitive decline than monolinguals, mostly likely because using two languages exercises the prefrontal cortex of the brain.

As the favorable research piles up, two-way bilingual advocates are quick to point out that two-way immersion's benefits likely extend far beyond teaching language and narrowing achievement gaps. Educators in Utah and elsewhere see two-way bilingual programs as particularly promising routes toward integration and community cohesion following a period of rapid demographic change. The state's Spanish dual immersion director, Ofelia Wade, suggests this is because two-way immersion deliberately confers equal status and high value to the Spanish language and its speakers, unlike "English only" models that aim to teach students English quickly with no regard for preserving a child's

native tongue. Two-way immersion, in contrast, views a student's home language and culture as "assets to build upon, preserve and share," Wade says.

"Learning a new language is not just the ability to speak a language and communicate. It is the ability to see everything more deeply, to see more, to hear different sounds that you have never heard before, to notice sights that you have never seen before and to hear voices that you have never heard before and to have perspectives that you would never have known existed," Wade says. "Learning a language is a strategy for breaking down barriers of all kinds. It is potentially transformative."

It is of course difficult to measure things like personal transformation. But educators in Heber City and in other communities agree that two-way immersion has helped spur more friendships between Latino and Anglo students, broadened educators' and staff members'

cultural sensitivities and created an avenue for white and Latino parents to get to know each other through their children. Jacki Burnham, principal of Heber Valley Elementary, notes that more Latino parents are volunteering in classrooms and "parents just seem to be more open and talkative" ever since the two-way program gained in popularity and Burnham hired a Spanish-speaking office secretary. Teachers at Heber Valley offer basic Spanish lessons to parents. Students from a local high school group, Latinos in Action, receive training and act as translators at Heber Valley's parent-teacher conferences and help out teachers in the classrooms.

"You know, occasionally, you used to hear a student say things that were, well, unkind and reflected a kind of prejudice either about Spanish speakers or other people who are not in the majority," Burnham recalls. "And we would sit down and have a conversation with that child. But ever since we've committed to our immersion program in this very open way, and we were able to have



those community conversations about its value, you just don't hear it....I think the children pick up on that fact that we value our Spanish speakers, that we see this cultural change as a positive.”

Though still preliminary, the test results that so worried Eric Campbell years ago seem to be turning around. As one might expect from Spanish-speaking students required to take a proficiency exam in English before they've mastered the language, there's still a considerable difference in scores between English speakers and English language learners at Heber Valley. (For example, about 60 percent of English language learners were proficient in language arts in 2012 versus about 83 percent of English speakers.) But this gap has been shrinking over time. On math and language arts proficiency tests in 2012, about 20 percent more English language learners who'd been enrolled in two-way immersion for three years at Heber Valley achieved proficient scores when compared with English language learners statewide not enrolled in two-way immersion. English-speaking students in two-way immersion programs tended to do better as a group on average than their counterparts in the school district and in the state overall. Encouraged by similar trends in other districts, Utah's State Department of Education recently applied for a federal grant to rigorously assess academic progress in all its language immersion programs, to assess students' proficiency in their second languages, and to explore parent and educator perceptions about whether two-way immersion programs have helped foster social cohesion, parent involvement, empathy and cross-cultural relationships within schools.



Utah is often characterized as one of the nation's most conservative, “reddest” states. In reality, though, the state is a multi-dimensional place where pragmatism, a tendency toward kindness and economic competitiveness blend to produce some curious policy outcomes. The 2008 law that created these programs is just one example. The influence of the Mormon Church in politics and in the state more generally cannot be underestimated. About 62 percent of Utah's residents identified as Mormon in a 2012 survey and the Church's international headquarters is in Salt Lake City. In a 2010 statement related to immigration policy, the state's church officials noted that “the Savior taught that the meaning of ‘neighbor’ includes all of God's children, in

all places at all times.” Of the some 15 million Mormons worldwide, a little more than half live outside the United States. Beginning in their late teen years or early twenties, devout church members in the United States routinely take part in 2-year proselytizing missions that often take them outside the United States. Educators here observe that missionaries typically return to Utah with a broadened worldview and well-developed empathy for people from different cultures. Recent surveys showed that about 70 percent of students at Brigham Young University, which is owned and operated by the Mormon Church, are bilingual.

Former Governor Jon Huntsman, who strongly supported and signed the 2008 dual immersion law, is a Mormon. So is Republican State Senator Howard Stephenson, the principal architect and chief sponsor of the legislation. Stephenson, from suburban Salt Lake City, is quick to mention his A+ rating from the National Rifle Association. And he is just as proud of being principal sponsor of the state's 2002 law that provides in-state college tuition rates for foreign-born students who are undocumented.

Restrictive immigration policies of the sort enacted in Arizona in 2010 have fallen out of favor in most states ever since Latino voters helped propel President Barack Obama to a second term in 2012. But well before this shift, Utah's lawmakers had parted ways with other red states when it came to immigration policy. Less than a decade after passing the in-state tuition law, Utah, in 2010, became one of just a few other states at that time to allow undocumented immigrants to get driver's licenses. (Since then, lawmakers in several other states, including California, Maryland and Illinois, have passed similar measures.) Around the time that Arizona's lawmakers passed its notoriously restrictive immigration law, a group in Utah that included police officers, state officials, elected leaders, business leaders and religious leaders crafted the “Utah Compact.” Based on what signatories call “Utah values,” the Compact outlines principles to guide discourse and policymaking about immigration in the state. Heralding a “free-market philosophy” and expressing opposition for policies that “separate families,” the Compact states: “Immigrants are integrated into communities across Utah. We must adopt a humane approach to this reality, reflecting our unique culture, history and spirit of inclusion. The way we treat immigrants will say more about us as a free society and less about our immigrant neighbors. Utah

should always be a place that welcomes people of goodwill.”

Integration has not always been a hallmark of the Mormon Church. From 1852 until 1978, the Church barred its black members from becoming priests, from getting married in the temple and from other church rituals. Though publicly rejected by scores of younger and more progressive Mormons, church leaders for generations advanced theories about black inferiority to justify the Church’s discrimination. In December 2013, the Mormon Church, acknowledging intentions to further expand across the globe, released an official statement disavowing “theories advanced in the past.” The statement stressed that church leaders now “unequivocally condemn all racism, past and present, in any form.”

Many of Utah’s political observers acknowledge that while prevailing Mormon morality is always a variable in political outcomes, dual immersion was sold to lawmakers and to the public mainly as an economic development measure. It is true that Howard Stephenson, the dual language immersion law’s chief sponsor and cheerleader, tends to speak, first and foremost, in economic terms. Stephenson says he was originally inspired to craft the law after meeting bilingual schoolchildren in China and worrying that our batch of mainly monolingual American kids would never measure up in a “global marketplace.” A bilingual workforce, Stephenson says, will attract business and revenue to Utah. It will “equip our schoolchildren to compete in an international economy.” But even after ticking off this series of sensible-sounding bullet points about “prosperity” and “competitive advantage,” Stephenson just keeps on talking about the “gift” and “the opportunity for personal transformation” provided by the “presence of our Latino brothers and sisters.” He even tears up a little.

“I mean, for John to be sitting next to Pablo and be learning in Spanish, it’s just such a great experience for kids and it really bonds communities together. It builds

bridges,” Stephenson says. “We are just so lucky. And so the English-speaking families see the Spanish-speaking students as a benefit, as community members with just as much value and rights and wonderful attributes, rather than just looking at them and thinking something like, ‘Oh, those are illegals.’ ”

To the rare critics of dual language or of immigrant integration measures in general, Stephenson responds: “Look, our state has changed. The little rural communities, little towns are all changing. If you celebrate that, if you give our young people a place to blossom and grow and to really integrate, if you create the opportunity for all of us to integrate and to each come over to the other’s perspective a little bit, how can that not be good for everyone?”



Near rural Kamas, Utah

It was around 2002 when teachers in the rural town of Kamas (population 1,270), about a 20-minute drive east of Park City, began to realize they had better get certified to teach English language learners. Louise Willoughby, the spirited homegrown principal at South Summit Elementary School, encouraged her staff to do just that. Then last year, Willoughby and

Barry Walker, the district’s superintendent, decided to take what Walker termed “an even bigger and better step further.” They applied for one of the state’s dual immersion grants so they could start a two-way bilingual program, which is now in its second year. So many Spanish-speaking English-speaking parents wanted to sign their children up that Willoughby had to turn several families away.

“I think it was just good that we chose to do this. I think it communicates to the Hispanic members of our community, ‘We are happy that you are here.’ Kamas was traditionally a [Mormon] community. Everyone was Mormon. Growing up, I think I knew one family who was not Mormon,” Walker says. “The Hispanic people who came in are Catholic. And so, there wasn’t that

mixing of cultures because the central social experience here is through the [Mormon Church]. And so, this, I think this program, is a start of bringing folks together.”

Kamas started to become more diverse in much the same way Heber City did. Just before the 2002 Olympics, developers had constructed a new highway that cut the drive from Kamas to Park City from an hour to just 20 minutes. Suddenly, this isolated rural village began to evolve as an affordable bedroom community for people who worked in Park City and even in Salt Lake City, about a 40-minute drive west.

First grade two-way immersion teacher Letecia Heredia came to Kamas from the city of Cuernavaca, in central Mexico.

“I was not sure what to expect but I really love it here,” she says. “You know that children and families have left Mexico and come to the United States and so to come here and see that people want that culture, that they want to learn and that I can help the Spanish-speaking

students keep their language and I can share with American students is really great for me.”



A two-way bilingual classroom in Kamas, Utah. Teacher Letecia Heredia came to Utah from Cuernavaca, Mexico

In Heredia’s classroom, which features a cozy reading corner decorated with Mexican blankets and flags, the children gather their coats and line up to head home for the day. In Spanish, Ofelia Wade, who is visiting for the afternoon, asks several of the students: “What languages do you speak?” Every child, Latino or Anglo, responds in Spanish. Their answers: “I speak English and I am learning Spanish,” or “I speak Spanish and I am learning English,” or simply, “English and Spanish.”

One of the students tells us that he and his family are from Jalisco, Mexico. He

asks me if I speak Spanish. In my mediocre Spanish, I tell him that I can’t speak Spanish perfectly, but that I want to speak Spanish better. He laughs, squints at me and grins widely. He touches my forearm lightly.

“You need help,” he tells me, in Spanish. “A lot of people want to learn Spanish. It is one of my languages. If you want, I can teach you.”

**Susan Eaton** and **Gina Chirichigno** are co-directors of the documentation and mobilization project, One Nation Indivisible [www.onenationindivisible.org](http://www.onenationindivisible.org). Susan is also Research Director at the Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race and Justice at Harvard Law School. Gina is also Outreach Coordinator for the National Coalition on School Diversity [www.school-diversity.org](http://www.school-diversity.org).

“Stories from the Field” is an occasional publication of One Nation Indivisible. To share a story from the field about efforts to create, sustain or improve racially, culturally or linguistically integrated schools, communities or social institutions, please visit our website and click on “Share Your Story.”

Thanks to Kelly Garvin at the Houston Institute and Gina Chirichigno for their editorial assistance on this story.