

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PLAN

URBANA DUAL LANGUAGE PROGRAM

PLAN DE PARTICIPACIÓN COMUNITARIA

PROGRAMA DE LENGUAJE DUAL
URBANA



Fall 2024 | UP 510 Plan Making

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“We want our Latinx culture to be expressed in school and that it is combined with the culture of the US. We don’t like to be separated from the American students because we feel we can contribute to the culture of the US. We can contribute to nutritional and physical health and the community. Mixtear culturas.”

-Parent attending the workshop

Executive Summary

This community engagement plan aims to address the concerns of families impacted by the relocation and restructuring of the Urbana School District's Dual Language Program. The dual-language programs, which are offered in both Spanish and French, were consolidated to one school, Yankee Ridge Elementary, beginning in the 2024-2025 school year. This was done in conjunction with the district-wide redistricting efforts. While the consolidation to one school had good intentions, the changes and the engagement process that led to the decision generated significant concerns among families regarding communication, transparency, and cultural inclusion.

Our team, which is composed of Master of Urban Planning students from University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, began by researching the history of the dual language program, attending a Urbana School Board meeting, and analyzing the demographic context of the school district. Our team also conducted various participatory activities, such as small group meetings and a larger scale participatory workshop to evaluate the engagement process. Through the participatory activities we were able to identify and categorize the input from parents and students into key themes and form recommendations for how the Urbana School District can refine their engagement process.

To address these issues, the plan proposes actionable strategies, including:

- Establish monthly classroom meetings to foster communication and collaboration.
- Enhance Spanish-language communication through professional translation.
- Offer varied platforms for engagement, including digital and in-person options.
- Expand academic and cultural programming to better align with community values.
- Allocate resources for improved cultural competency training.
- Designate a liaison between the school administration and parent.
- Create and tailor a specific engagement plan for major changes.
- Implement transparent processes for incorporating public feedback into decisions.
- Conduct outreach to ensure the participation of underrepresented groups.

This plan aims to serve as a model for the Urbana School District, or any other organization facing similar issues, to foster meaningful engagement and create an environment that will allow students to reach higher levels of success.

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1. Introduction

The Dual Language Program in Urbana aims to provide students with bilingual proficiency, biliteracy, and multicultural understanding, focusing on English, Spanish and French instruction. This report focuses specifically on the Spanish Dual Language Program. The Dual Language Program has a critical role in fostering educational equity and inclusivity in the city. Recently, it has undergone notable changes, particularly with the relocation of the program from Leal and Dr. Preston L. Williams Jr. Elementary School to Yankee Ridge Elementary School. This transition was part of a broader rezoning initiative intended to address school capacity issues and optimize resources for bilingual education. The decision to move the program aimed to enhance its infrastructure and provide better support for the growing number of students, particularly Hispanic learners, in the program.

However, this change has not been without controversy. The relocation disrupted long standing relationships within the Leal community and raised concerns about accessibility, increased segregation, and limited diversity at Yankee Ridge. Community members, particularly parents of students in the program, expressed dissatisfaction with the engagement process leading up to these decisions. They felt their concerns were overlooked, and many were dissatisfied with the perceived lack of transparency and inclusivity in the planning stages.

This community engagement plan seeks to address these gaps by recommending strategies for a more inclusive and participatory process that amplifies the voices of the Dual Language Program community. By engaging directly with parents, students, and other stakeholders through workshops and discussions, our efforts have assisted in gathering diverse perspectives, understanding community concerns, and incorporating their insights into future planning. The ultimate goal is to ensure that decisions regarding the program reflect the community's aspirations while fostering equity, inclusivity, and mutual understanding across the district.

This plan is a collaborative effort initiated by graduate students in the UP510 Plan Making course under the Department of Urban and Regional Planning at the University of Illinois, facilitated by Professor Magdalena Novoa. Our efforts ultimately culminated in the creation of a participatory workshop for the affected families. We conducted the participatory workshop at the Urbana Independent Media Center to address the dynamics of the Dual Language Program in Urbana and its recent changes. The workshop provided a unique opportunity to directly engage with parents of students enrolled in the Dual Language Program and to interact with the students themselves.

The framework for this community engagement plan draws heavily on Sherry Arnstein's "Ladder of Citizen Participation," a model that categorizes the levels of community involvement in decision-making processes. We use this model to evaluate public engagement initiatives conducted by the school system regarding the recent changes.

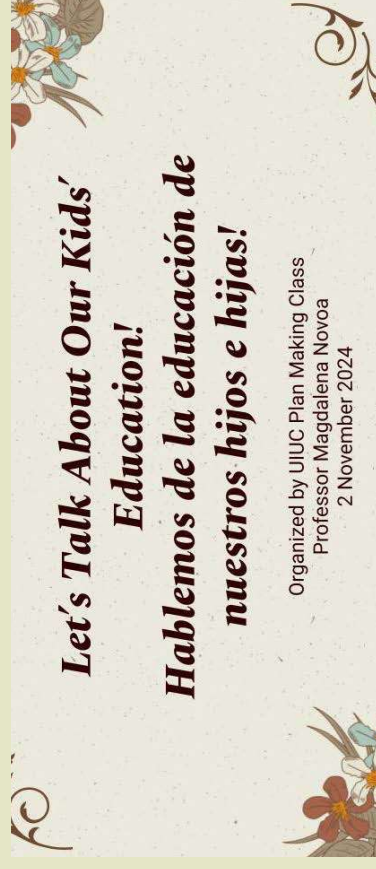


Figure 01 - Presentation slide prepared for the workshop.

In the case of the Dual Language Program, the previous engagement efforts were limited to a few parent meetings, brochures, and word of mouth explaining the decision. Under the lens of the Ladder of Citizen Participation, this process did not move beyond the "informing" stage. Parents were presented with decisions already made, without meaningful opportunities to influence or shape the outcome. While this level of engagement provided basic information, it failed to incorporate the community's concerns, insights, and aspirations into the planning process. Such an approach led to dissatisfaction, distrust, and a sense of exclusion among community members.

Given this context, this plan seeks to rectify these shortcomings by advancing the level of participation toward "involvement" or "collaboration." Our specific goals are: making an assessment of the school districts in Urbana, the recent changes in redistricting that impacted the Dual Language Program and their impacts (O1); **create a safe space for community members, especially parents and students, to share their experiences and concerns with the school system (O2); provide the community and decision makers with recommendations, based on good practices in planning and participation, that (O3); can aid the relationships within different stakeholders involved in the school systems, overall aiming to improve children's education.**

Through the participatory workshops, direct engagement with parents and students, and the creation of actionable strategies, this plan aims to create an environment where the voices of the Dual Language Program community are not just heard but actively integrated into future decisions. By doing so, it strives to rebuild trust, empower community, and align the process with the principles of equity and inclusivity central to meaningful engagement.

2. Methods

In order to assess the process that led to changes in the Dual Language Program, we engaged with different stakeholders most prominently affected by the policy changes to understand the previous engagement efforts. The evaluations and perspectives of the process from parents and students allowed us to provide recommendations for future engagement. Our methods included:

1. **An assessment of the engagement level of the Urbana School District's decision-making process.**
2. **Background research which included gathering of available information online and conducting interviews with key stakeholders.**
3. **Design and conduct a participatory workshop with the affected families to better understand their perspective of the changes and process.**
4. **Analysis of collected data in order to develop recommendations.**

2.1 The Assessment of Engagement Level

Before describing the methodology used to develop this plan, it is important to further explain our chosen framework of analysis used to evaluate the way the changes were conducted. Sherry Arntein's (2007) Ladder of Participation model provides us with a scheme of different levels of community engagement. She argues that there is a substantial difference between going through an empty ritual of participation, and the real transfer of power to decision making, acknowledging that there are several levels between one and the other. Thus, she draws on the ladder visual metaphor, outlining eight levels (or steps) in three categories, ranging from: Manipulation, Therapy (Nonparticipation); Informing, Consultation, Placation (Degree of tokenism); and ultimately to Partnership, Delegated Power, Citizen Control (Degrees of Citizen Power) (Figure 02).

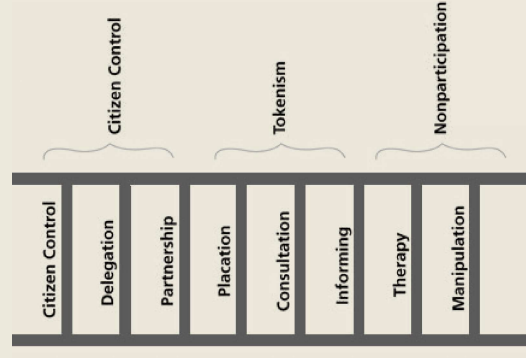


Figure 02: Eight rungs on a ladder of citizen participation

It is important to note that the highest level of participation is not always the best or desired goal for all participation processes and initiatives. Assessing the effectiveness of participation efforts and their potential to transfer control requires careful consideration of whether this approach is the most suitable and desired for the specific scenario, which is our goal for this plan.

2.2 Initial Participation and Community Involvement

Our efforts as a team to come up with this Community Engagement Plan for Urbana's School District were channeled through the implementation of a mixed-methods approach. Our first activity in the earlier weeks of work concentrated on gathering information available online to build our first understanding of what had happened. Our team conducted a basic analysis in R and ArcGIS to better understand the demographic context of the neighborhoods within the Urbana School District. By putting together maps (Appendix B) showing the distribution of racial populations, educational attainment and socioeconomic status, our team was able to put together a clearer picture of the diverse family types which are attending Urbana schools.

We continued our research by contacting several key individuals, who represented different stakeholders, to have conversations with our team. We prepared a list of questions to conduct interviews, and left space for spontaneous conversation to happen. On September 4th, 2024, the group interviewed a Latinx parent, activist and one of the co-chairs of BPAC (Bilingual Parent Advisory Committee: DLP parents self-organized in October of 2022 and elected an interim governing board of 5 members). They provided us with valuable information about how the changes in the Program have been conducted, and the way part of the Latinx community felt about their involvement, or lack thereof. On September 11th, 2024, we talked with Paul Poulosky, current president of the Urbana School Board. He talked about how the process took place from the board's perspective, acknowledging the pitfalls of the community engagement efforts and highlighting the final decision to concentrate the program at Yankee Ridge as the most appropriate one.

In order to understand how conversations between the Board and Urbana's parental community currently happen, we conducted participant observation through attendance of a Board Meeting on September 17, 2024. The meeting lasted approximately two and a half hours, however only a few parents showed up for public comment - there seemed to be a misunderstanding about the topics to be discussed. The meeting proceeded as usual, despite the small attendance. Although the meeting did not specifically discuss the redistricting, some very telling conversations came up about Leal Elementary and Yankee Ridge Elementary. In summary, we believed that this meeting fell on the low 'Degrees of tokenism' based on Arntein's Ladder of Participation model. Most of the time, audience members are simply informed of decisions and cannot participate in discussions and decision-making.

2.3 Participatory Workshop Design

2.3.1 Goals and Themes

After conducting our first round of analysis and interviews, we went on to design a participatory workshop to involve both parents and students in the discussion. This workshop focused on talking about parents' and children's experiences and feelings regarding the Dual Language Program changes, which was to be our main engagement effort and practical contribution.

The goals of the workshop focuses on both "The Past": reflection of Dual Language Program decision-making and engagement process in the past 2 years, and "The Future": envisioning a future for better engagement of Latinx families in the Dual Language Program and ongoing school-parent communications. We decided on the title of the workshop as "Urbana Parents! Let's Talk About Our Kids' Education / Padres Y Madres de Urbana! Conversemos Sobre la Educación de Nuestros Hijos" (Figure 03).

2.3.2 Participants & Recruitment Process

We hoped to mainly recruit Latinx families involved in the Urbana Dual Language Program. Our main methods of recruitment included placing flyers in Latino grocery stores and establishments, distributing flyers at a PTA meeting on October 30th, and asking personal contacts to share with fellow parents through Whatsapp. The recruitment period lasted one week from October 21st to November 1st. We were also able to provide an incentive by giving the first 18 families who signed up for the workshop through the google forms an Amazon giftcard of \$30, given they also participated in the activity. We ended up having a turn up of 14 parents, and about 10 students, all of whom are currently at Yankee Ridge. Most of the parents and students came from Leal, and one person's children were previously enrolled at Dr. Preston L. Williams.

2.3.3 Time and location

This participatory workshop took place at the Urbana-Champaign Independent Media Center, located at 202 S Broadway Ave, Urbana, on November 2, 2024.

2.3.4 Workshop Activities

To respond to the demand of childcare for Latinx parents attending our participatory workshop, and also to ensure the students were able to share their experiences, we prepared separate activities for the students and parents (Figures 04 & 05). As families entered the workshop they were guided through the optional media release form and informed of the anonymous ballot box which was available throughout the session. Parents and their students were then split into different sides of the workshop area. Our



Figure 03: Spanish and English Flyers of the Workshop

team, who primarily worked with the parents, welcomed them with an introductory presentation which consisted of our team introductions, a timeline of the changes to the Dual Language Program, and an overview of the workshop goals and objectives. The presentation ended with instructions for the workshop's discussion activities.

Our activities were designed to have discussions with the parents and students separately. For parents, we designed two main activities: Large Sticky Note and Round Table Discussion. We hoped to guide parents to think about their past experiences and feelings in the redistricting process of the Dual Language Program and to describe their expectations for future engagement. The Large Sticky Note serves for the entire group with 3 proposed questions (see Table 1 for questions), and took about 15



Figure 04: Parents workshop.



Figure 05: Students activities.



Figure 06: Activities for parents.

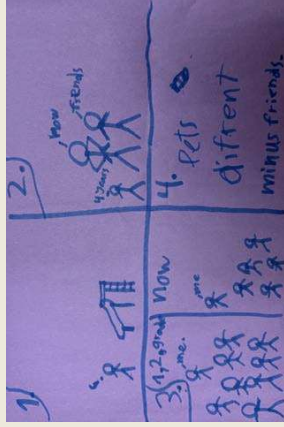


Figure 07: Activities for students.

minutes in total (Figure 06 left). For the Round Table Discussion, we had several materials available, including large sheets of paper, and various drawing and writing tools. Parents were divided into small groups and were given the discussion questions to work through. Parents were able to write and draw their responses on large sheets of paper, and were also encouraged to engage in discussion with their groups.

Each question took approximately 20 minutes and each group had at least one student facilitator at their table (Figure 06 right). In the end, we had parents come together and share what they discussed. All discussion questions were available in both Spanish and English (Table 1). We were also lucky to have a student volunteer, who was a native Spanish speaker, to serve as the on-site translator during the whole process of the parent discussions (Figure 04 right).

Student activities were split into two hours. The first hour, students engaged in two activities: Drawing and Discussion (Figure 07 top) and Build A City (Figure 07 bottom). For the second hour, students could participate in a physical movement activity, provided by UIUC dance professor, Jennifer Monson. The Drawing and Discussion activity was the main method of soliciting student input on the changes. For the Drawing and Discussion activity, students were encouraged to divide their paper into four sections and write/draw their responses to the discussion questions (Table 1). Once students finished their responses, they were then free to choose to participate in the Build A City activity, the physical movement activity, or to remain playing with the various art supplies provided. As students engaged in the various activities, students who did not participate in the Drawing and Discussion activity due to tardiness were asked the same questions as part of general conversation.

Table 1: List of guiding questions in activities.

Session	Activity	Time	Guiding Questions
Parents workshop	Part 1. Past Large sticky note with entire group	15 Min	<i>How did you hear about the changes in the dual language program?</i> <i>¿Cómo escuchó los cambios del programa del lenguaje dual?</i> <i>Are you satisfied with how you were included? Why?</i> <i>¿Está satisfecho/a como usted fue incluido en los cambios? ¿Por qué?</i> <i>How many times do you think you were included?</i> <i>¿Cuántas veces fue incluido/a en el proceso de decisión?</i>
	Part 2. Future Round Table Discussion	40 Min	<i>What are your thoughts about the way families were involved in the Dual Language transformation process? (Feel free to provide examples of activities or methods through which your opinions were gathered)</i> <i>¿Qué piensas sobre la forma en que las familias fueron involucradas en el proceso de cambio del programa del lenguaje dual? (Sientase libre de proporcionar ejemplos de actividades o métodos que usaron para solicitar su opinión)</i> <i>What would the ideal relationship between you and the school look like?</i> <i>(Communication happens how often and in what medium?)</i> <i>¿Cómo sería la relación ideal entre usted y la escuela?</i> <i>¿Con qué frecuencia sería la comunicación? ¿Cuál sería su medio de comunicación preferido?)</i> <i>How did the change impact you and your child's daily routine/ life?(Suitable for conversations)</i> <i>El cambio de escuela impactó su rutina diaria de qué manera?</i> <i>How have you been involved in the changes to the dual language program?</i> <i>¿Cómo ha sido involucradola en los cambios del programa de lenguaje dual?</i> <i>How involved would you like to be?</i> <i>¿Qué tan involucrado/a le gustaría estar?</i>
	Part 3. Share	20 Min	<i>How do you feel about your old school?</i> <i>¿Cómo te sientes con respecto a tu antigua escuela?</i> <i>How do you feel about the new school?</i> <i>¿Cómo te sientes sobre tu nueva escuela?</i> <i>Are you still with your old friends and classmates?</i> <i>¿Todavía estás con tus amigos y compañeros de clase en tu nueva escuela?</i> <i>What's different about going to your new school?</i> <i>¿Qué tiene de diferente ir a tu nueva escuela?</i>
Students workshop	Part 1. Drawing/ Collaging	30 Min	
	Part 2. Build a City	30 Min	
	Part 3. Movement	1 Hour	

2.4 Data Analysis

After engaging with different stakeholders, especially families enrolled in the Dual Language Program, through interviews, participant observation and the implementation of the workshop, we started the analysis of the data collected in all of these instances. For that, we divided into two smaller groups and went through all of the notes taken by the project team, our assessment of the case study, and the materials produced by parents and students during the workshop. Each team identified common themes emerging in conversations and speeches, and finally we came together to compare findings and collectively decide which would be the most relevant topics of analysis for the plan (see Section 3.3).

2.5 Limitations

Several limitations were faced during the development of the workshop and as we conducted background research.

First, the Urbana Dual Language Program serves a diverse group of mostly immigrant families whose first languages primarily include Spanish and French speakers. There are also several families who are part of the Spanish-language program who have a non-Spanish first language such as Garifuna or Xinka. Due to time constraints our team decided to focus on participants in the Spanish Dual Language Program. Our materials were written in both Spanish and English, meaning Latinx parents who do not speak either language were not able to participate.

Second, the negotiation process of the redistricting of Urbana School Districts lasted around 2 years. In contrast, our overall time for studying background information, engaging with different stakeholders, and holding the participatory workshop is approximately three and a half months (one academic semester). Our team acknowledges this to be a relatively limited amount of time to be able to fully address the decision making process and its subsequent impacts on families.

Finally, despite being a urban planning class with a group of students dedicating their time to the project, and a Professor closely related to the topic, we faced additional time, budget and resource constraints, leading us to carefully choose our methods to do the best assessment possible within limitations.

To address these limitations and build on the progress made, future efforts should focus on:

- Expanding language inclusivity by creating materials and activities in additional languages spoken by minority groups in the community, such as Garifuna and Xinka.
- Fostering ongoing and closer partnerships with stakeholders, including the school district and community members, to ensure the continuity and sustainability of this work.
- Allocating adequate funding to address budget and time constraints to enable more comprehensive research.
- Collaborating with experts, such as child psychologists, to provide additional insights into the emotional impacts of these changes and ensure a more holistic approach to meeting community needs.

3. Findings

3.1 Background Research

We came into this project knowing fairly little about the Urbana School District, its functions, and what had occurred over the past two years to result in the consolidation of the Dual Language Programs to Yankee Ridge. We set out to research both the organizational framework of the District and understand the current issues by talking with parents, students, and leaders within the District. As we learned and refined our ideas for the workshop, we continued to seek input from the community to ensure the workshop would allow for the participants to be heard.

The Urbana School District documents its community engagement criterion within the district policy manual. The District states in section 8:10 that their intent with community engagement is to “actively involve diverse citizens in dialogue, deliberation, and collaborative thinking around common interests for the District’s schools”. This materializes in the semesterly parent-teacher conferences, bi-monthly board of education meetings, and occasional cultural and academic events outside of regular school hours. The District’s Board of Education is composed of seven elected members whose responsibilities are to establish district-wide goals, policies, the planning and evaluation of programs, and financial recommendations. The board holds public meetings on the first and third Tuesdays of each month at 6pm with few exceptions for breaks. During these meetings, time is allotted for public comment and five minutes are given for each individual.

With the redistricting and consolidation of the Dual Language Program happening at the same time, the District also used its Board of Education meetings to inform the community of the potential changes and gather opinions. Most of the meetings highlighted parents’ concerns in opposition to the changes. The disruption of daily lives due to relocations of the students was a concern, as well as the loss of communities as students and families would no longer live in the same community as their school. Those in favor saw the strategic benefits of a consolidated program where efforts could be focused rather than split across two or three schools with different needs or resources. The District is fairly standard in its procedures and structure, but when we talked to those involved with the Dual Language Program it became clear why the changes of the past few years had been so contentious.

On October 14th, we met with parents and their children in the Dual Language Program. Throughout our discussion parents expressed that they felt communication and participation were not prioritized by the school district. They felt that the administration saw hosting cultural community events as a form

of participation. Parents also felt there was an over-reliance on digital communication, which not all parents are able to easily access. At each level there appeared to be a disconnect, between parents and teachers, parents and the principal, and parents and the school district. For the parents we met, the lack of communication and participation is at the core of the problem; parents either did not know enough or have a say in the ultimate decision to move their students to a different school. We also met with Paul Poulosky, current President of the Board of Education, who expressed that the changes over the last two years were contested internally, many votes coming down to a 4-3 or 3-4 split.

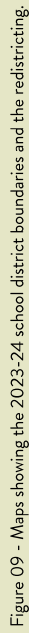
As part of our conversation with the parents, we also asked for feedback on the creation of our participatory workshop. Parents wanted to see dedicated time for the students to be mobile and also divided among activities. Keeping the students occupied and giving them an outlet for their energy was key. As for the students themselves, they spoke about their desire to be creative and socialize. Painting, building the box city, and playing with friends were what they found most exciting. Their feedback was incorporated into the final participatory workshop design.



Figure 08 - Timeline of Events.

3.2.1 Comparing 2023-24 and 2024-25 Boundary Map

A comparison of the 2023-24 boundary map with the proposed 2024-25 map (Figure 09) reveals two major changes: a reduction in the number of schools and the consolidation of boundaries. Yankee Ridge Elementary was proposed to host the Dual Language Program, replacing Leal Elementary and Dr. Preston L. Williams Jr. Elementary. Additionally, the number of exclaves and non-continuous boundaries decreased as Thomas Paine's boundaries merged into those of other schools.



The relationship between demographics and school attendance boundaries in Urbana reveals an intricate connection between socioeconomic status, race, and school zoning. Racial inequality is prevalent across the elementary schools, with better resourced schools having higher percentages of White students and overutilized schools having higher percentages of Black students. For example, the previous attendance boundaries caused overutilization at Dr. Preston Williams Elementary School, which has the second highest percentage of African American students in the district (Table 2). With the new district boundaries, capacity is now on par with the rest of the schools (Table 3). However, the other school with the highest percentage of African American students, King Elementary School, is on track to be near overcapacity beyond 2029.

Current School	Projections										Max Capacity Utilization %	
	Capacity		2024/25		2025/26		2026/27		2027/28		2028/29	
	Now	Target	Now	Target	Now	Target	Now	Target	Now	Target	Now	Target
1. Briggs	463	463	463	463	463	463	463	463	463	463	463	463
2. Leah	463	463	464	467	464	467	464	467	464	467	464	467
3. Dr. Preston Williams	654	654	655	657	657	659	657	659	657	659	657	659
4. Dr. Preston Williams	654	654	655	657	657	659	657	659	657	659	657	659
5. Thomas Park	644	643	646	648	649	651	648	650	649	651	648	650
6. Vanessa Ridge	729	727	730	731	731	733	730	732	731	733	730	732
Total	6,741	6,706	6,740	6,761	6,769	6,789	6,781	6,803	6,794	6,816	6,797	6,818

Source: RFP & Associates, LLC, November 2024

1. Projections have been adjusted to reflect the current language placement. All nonwhite program students go to Dring.

2. Projections have been adjusted to reflect in many students having option to attend a different school than where they reside.

Concept 1 School Projections		Capacity		Projections					Max Capacity Utilization %				
		Max	Target	2024/25	2025/26	2026/27	2027/28	2028/29	2029/30	2030/31	2031/32	2032/33	2033/34
2 King	4-5	443	340	344	350	349	356	367	75.5%	77.3%	77.6%	78.6%	81.0%
3 Lee	4-5	340	340	340	340	340	340	340	88.8%	88.8%	88.8%	88.8%	90.2%
4 Dr. Preston Williams	4-5	447	370	360	366	336	338	338	82.5%	83.7%	80.8%	74.2%	70.7%
5 Thomas Paine	4-5	443	344	349	350	359	359	359	82.9%	84.1%	84.8%	85.7%	87.4%
6 Vonder Borge	6-8	457	410	427	441	439	421	421	87.5%	78.6%	73.0%	71.0%	69.7%
7 Vonder Borge	6-8	457	410	427	441	439	421	421	87.5%	78.6%	73.0%	71.0%	69.7%
8 Vonder Borge	6-8	457	410	427	441	439	421	421	87.5%	78.6%	73.0%	71.0%	69.7%
Total	2,793	2,096	2,038	2,059	2,069	2,033	2,027	2,033	78.0%	78.7%	76.1%	72.8%	72.6%

Source: RGP & Associates, LLC January 2024

During the Urbana School District Meeting on September 17th, we were informed about the rate of kindergarten readiness across the elementary schools in the district. Across the district, 49% of kindergartners screened scored below standards. There were higher rates of unreadiness in schools with higher rates of African American students (King Elementary, Thomas Paine Elementary, and Dr. Williams Elementary), while Leal Elementary had the lowest rate of kindergarten unreadiness. These areas with high rates of unreadiness also have lower percentages of residents over 25 with a bachelor's degree (Appendix B, Figure 14) and lower income levels (Appendix B, Figure 15), potentially limiting parents' ability to prepare students for school due to longer work hours and time constraints. These demographics, paired with the higher capacity rates at schools with more POC, could contribute to the educational disparities seen through the kindergarten readiness program.

The boundary revisions attempt to relieve capacity stress, but do not substantially redistribute low-income students across all schools. King Elementary's new boundaries now include a higher-income, predominantly White area in the north, which could slightly balance socioeconomic disparity but raises concerns about accessibility due to low population density in the north (Appendix A, Figure 13) and distance of the north neighborhoods from King Elementary.

The designation of Yankee Ridge Elementary as a dual-language school has redistributed its population to schools like Leal Elementary, King Elementary, and Paine Elementary. While this may foster diversity in some areas, it also consolidates certain racial groups in specific schools, perpetuating segregation rather than reducing it by isolating them from the broader student population, reinforcing ethnic divides within the district.

Student heat maps (Appendix A, Figure 13 (bottom right map)) show that Dr. Williams Elementary, Yankee Ridge Elementary, and Thomas Paine Elementary continue to serve the highest concentrations of low-income families (Appendix B, Figure 15) and non-White neighborhoods (Appendix B, Figure 16). While redistricting does address issues of capacity and proximity, they do not appear to effectively mitigate social and racial inequalities. Instead, they may perpetuate or even exacerbate the segregation of income and race within the school system.

3.3 Thematic Analysis

After engaging in background research, conversations with stakeholders, and our final participatory workshop, our team analysed the findings and identified common themes. **Communication Issues** was a very prominent concern as many said they weren't given clear information about the changes to the program. Many also mentioned how they felt a **Sense of Otherness** while interacting with the school board, and many parents feel that there is a lack of cultural depth and relevance. The theme

of **Participation in Decision Making** focused on the desire for more meaningful opportunities for parents to contribute to their children's education decisions. **Emotional Impacts** refer to the stress and confusion students feel about the changes in the program, which is also a concern for their parents. Lastly, throughout our discussions with parents often brought up their overall **Frustration with Structural Disparities** seen between schools in the school district.

3.3.1 Communication Issues

Throughout our many conversations with parents, consistent and clear communication from the school was a recurring concern raised. Many said they didn't understand the changes to the Dual Language Program because the information they received was unclear or incomplete. Information was informal, heard via conversations with friends, text messages, or even with chalk on the sidewalk outside of the school. Without concrete understanding, it was hard to form an opinion, ask appropriate questions, or make an informed decision. There was also frustration surrounding the methods of communication. Surveys were sent out to parents via text message asking their opinions on moving schools. However, many didn't respond due to their lack of understanding of the process. Digital messaging, although convenient, does not allow for in-person conversations and feedback that parents desire. Parents didn't feel they were given enough chances to share their opinions or influence changes without formal meetings and platforms. Improper translation of Spanish also made digital messaging more difficult to follow and added to this sense of disconnect.



Figure 10 - Drawing made by parents during an activity at the workshop.

3.3.2 Participation in Decision Making

This sense of disconnect carries through to parents' understanding of day to day lives of their students at Yankee Ridge Elementary. Our team heard many times that the curriculum was not effectively discussed with parents, making them feel left out of the loop when it comes to their children's education. Additional stress is caused by the language barrier, as those with limited English skills worry about their children's performance being described in a language they have trouble understanding. A year ago, the new dual-language curriculum was presented in a meeting with parents and suggestions based on other countries' experiences were shared. One parent expressed that in their country, the education process is more participatory, allowing for the families and school to work in collaboration. The current lack of communication and effort to include parents in the process has led to feelings that the school district and administration only conduct "performative participation"; in other words, decisions seem to be made in advance, with opinions being sought after to create a false sense of inclusion. One parent shared that **"There were meetings, calls, and messages [regarding the dual-language changes], but I felt that the decision had already been made."** In the end, parents are left feeling frustrated and helpless in trying to understand what is going on behind the scenes.

During the workshop, parents suggested monthly meetings to help them understand how students are progressing and to provide a platform for parents to propose ideas. Currently, parents feel their ideas are disregarded despite their repeated suggestions and efforts. School board meetings are the intended space for these conversations, however, the limited time to speak and lack of conversation in these settings leaves parents frustrated. One parent stated that the flyers for out of class activities which he takes to the school to be distributed are never handed out as intended. Activities like science club, math club, and activities run by parents for students have been eliminated at Yankee Ridge due to the school's "capacity issues" for certain programs.

"I don't have information about the academic growth on my kids"

-Parent attending the workshop

"I have no idea how to access information about my kid in general, I don't know who to become close to or where to obtain this information"

-Parent attending the workshop

3.3.3 Sense of Otherness

The Latinx community is often portrayed as a monolith within the context of American culture, despite its rich diversity. This was a recurring frustration in the feedback from parents both during our background research and participatory workshop, specifically in the context of the relationship between parents and the school administration. Parents wish for the differences in cultures to be highlighted, rather than grouping all Latinx cultures under one umbrella, which is often skewed toward a Mexican-American stereotype. There is also a perceived feeling of otherness that stems from the difference in communication and treatment between monolingual and bilingual parents. Messages from the school to parents were described as "forceful" and "strict", rather than suggestive and friendly. This has created feelings of humiliation and isolation for some Latinx families, furthering the strain in the communication and creating a hierarchy between parents and the school. With the current messaging, some parents are fearful to speak up or raise concerns due to possible backlash. Yankee Ridge Elementary students also have limited opportunities to interact with their peers outside of the Dual Language Program, despite many students still having friends that attend Leal Elementary. This affects their English speaking skills and peer relationships, both of which could stunt well-rounded growth.

"...See our Latinx identity as diverse, not only through one stereotype in Mexican/Hollywood culture."

-Parent attending the workshop

"I would like to feel integrated. As Latinos, we have a lot to share, not only with the school."

-Parent attending the workshop

"...BPAC... tried to bring spaces to talk about the changes and Board meetings, but the meetings saw the same families who participated in the other meetings. Reflecting on the meetings there was an absence of Latino families. The possible reasons could be that families without documents feel that they don't have the right to express their opinions and feel limited to accepting decisions made without their participation or opinion."

-Parent attending the workshop

3.3.4 Emotional Impacts

Conversation between a parent and student:

“Son, do you want to change schools?”

“No, my friends stayed at Leal and I like my school.”

“Well you will have to only speak in English”

“It doesn’t matter, I want to stay with my friends and make new ones”

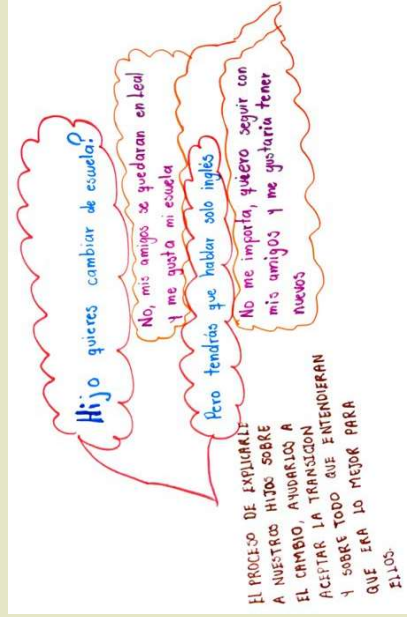
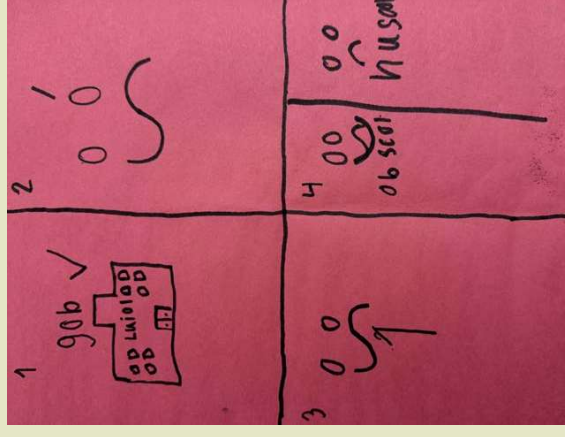


Figure 11 - Drawing made by parents during an activity at the workshop.

As our team had conversations with parents and students throughout the various methods, it became very clear that the decision-making process and the transition from Leal Elementary to Yankee Ridge Elementary had an emotional impact on the families. Parents had repeatedly expressed intense feelings of frustration due to the absence of both communication and information. Though parents noted the decision makers had sent out a few surveys asking for feedback on the question of moving schools, there was a sentiment amongst the parents that the decision was already made. This had contributed to the overwhelming response we received from parents stating that at every step of the decision making process they felt left behind. It became clear as our team compiled feedback all together that the parents have developed a feeling of general mistrust with the Urbana School District and school administration. In addition to the negative feelings between the school district and parents, parents have also been left to anticipate and manage the emotional impacts of the transition on their children.

Our team found that nearly all responses received by students from the participatory workshop have been identified under the theme “Emotional Impacts”. Students appeared to be overall unaware and unincluded in the decision-making process. All the students knew is they were informed they would need to change schools if they wished to remain in the Dual Language Program. For many students, even if they had wished to continue attending their prior school to stay with familiar teachers and friends, they would face a harsh transition of attending school completely in English. As can be seen in the quoted conversation above, this was a decision students did not take lightly. The change to the new school had left students having to deal with the feelings of missing their old school and having to adjust to the differences at their new school. Students told us that they had a hard time learning where things are at their new school and that they missed the extracurricular programs, such as “SPLASH and engineering camp”, which was available to them at Leal Elementary.

Nearly every student stated that they had some friends remain at Leal Elementary, and that they miss their friends and teachers. When asked to describe what they were feeling about moving to a new school in our workshop, one student drew a happy/sad face on their paper, which can be seen in the image below. As the other students saw the face, they identified their feelings with the drawing as well and added it to their own responses.



The transition to the school has resulted in the students having to navigate a variety of emotions. Overall, for both parents and students, the decision-making process and the transition has become a sore topic. This can be seen most clearly in the drawing made by a parent below, which shows that for their family, they avoid passing by their former school, Leal Elementary, due to the unpleasant feeling it leaves them.

Figure 12: Answers to the questions asked to a student during the workshop.

3.3.5 Frustration Over Structural Disparity

In conversations with parents it seemed that there were always complicated feelings over the intent of the decision making process, and ultimate transition to the new school, versus the implications. Though the Urbana School District and Board had wanted to receive parents' feedback, the manner in which information was distributed and feedback was solicited, left parents feeling that their input was not valued. Parents felt ultimately unable to voice real concerns. For example, though there can be a reason seen in having all the dual language programs in one school, it also leaves parents feeling that there is a negative connotation. The dual-language programs were made in the efforts of easing the transition to US schooling for non-English speaking immigrant children. Placing all the dual-language programs in one school has, for some, felt like a method of isolating immigrant students and non-Native English speaking students. One parent had even expressed safety concerns, stating that having all the students in one school can make it a target of violence for those with anti-immigrant sentiments.

Additional concerns have risen as parents have felt a difference in governance and school culture, especially those who transferred from Leal Elementary to Yankee Ridge Elementary. Parents told our team on multiple occasions that they do not feel the same sense of community as they once did at their previous school. For example, multiple parents remarked that they feel they cannot even freely walk into the school to discuss issues with their student's teacher. Additionally, parents feel more restricted when it comes to being able to advocate for and help coordinate relevant extracurricular programming. Student's had noted that as well in our conversations, stating that at Leal Elementary they had science or engineering nights and math clubs. At a school board meeting our team attended, a parent raised a concern about students at Yankee Ridge Elementary no longer being allowed to play on the playground before or after school, as they once could at Leal Elementary. This issue resurfaced during a later meeting with our team, where parents expressed frustration. They were particularly upset because the Board's explanation—that parents can supervise students before school at Leal but not at Yankee Ridge—underscores what they see as unequal treatment. In summary, the difference in activity and advocacy parents are able to exercise at the school has added to further the disillusionment of the parents with the school and district administration.

I thought I was in the loop and by the end of the summer I learned I was not"

-Parent attending the workshop



4. Recommendations

Our recommendations for future processes within the Dual Language Program are specific to the case assessed, but overall represent good practices in planning and public participation that can be replicated in different contexts if carefully tailored. The overarching issue we identified throughout the data analysis was a lack of openness for a bottom-up communication, and thus most of the recommendations aim to build a stronger base of trust. As we discuss the recommendations and their details, we will also relate the participatory processes embedded in them to the levels on Arnstein's Ladder of Participation.

01 Monthly classroom meetings

We recommend the implementation of monthly classroom meetings where teachers, parents, and students come together to discuss class schedules, upcoming curriculum, and future events. Currently, parent-teacher conferences only occur once per semester with limited time to speak in depth about student progress. Monthly meetings could provide a platform for collaboration, mutual understanding, and community, both in teacher-parent and parent-parent relationships. In many Latinx cultures, community-based gatherings and collaborative discussions between families and educators are the norm. Introducing this platform could create a sense of inclusion culturally and academically. It would also allow teachers to gain insight into individual family dynamics or learn about specific concerns parents may have pertaining to their student. A proposed meeting structure could include a welcome and overview from the teacher, classroom updates on curriculum and challenges, parent-family dialogue where parents can share concerns or provide recommendations, and community connection that includes short relationship building activities or time to chat and exchange contact information amongst families. These actions would involve levels of participation such as informing, consulting and partnership. As far as timing of these monthly meetings, perhaps working them into extracurricular or event nights, where students are preoccupied with an activity outside the classroom, would provide time for parents and teachers to connect and discuss at a deeper level.

02 Improve communication in Spanish

We strongly recommend the improvement of communication in Spanish, both written and spoken. Currently, messages in Spanish sent out by the school are poorly translated using programs as Google Translate, which includes grammatical errors, typos, and doesn't account for context, colloquialisms, or tone. The lack of effort to properly translate from English to Spanish causes many Spanish speaking parents to feel excluded or even disrespected, as though their culture is not being taken seriously. It can also cause frustration as incorrect translations can lead to misunderstandings and incorrect interpretations of intended messages. It is vital for messaging about student updates, timely decisions, or upcoming events to be clearly communicated in an academic setting. Additionally, some of the messaging at the school is sent out entirely in English, such as the principal's update videos. This does not portray a message of inclusion or cultural sensitivity, especially at a dual-language school. Hiring a professional translator or seeking volunteer native speakers, such as parents or staff, to review translations for accuracy and clarity would promote cultural inclusion and respect for the Spanish language and the families that speak it. It is possible that parents are interested in building partnerships to achieve these goals, but overall we see this as a process of consulting to make sure changes proposed would be effective.

03 Varied platforms for communication

To ensure effective communication between the school and parents, we recommend the variation of platforms for communication and participation. This would help accommodate diverse preferences, schedules, and access to technology, promoting inclusivity and clarity. Different communication options include digital platforming, such as emails or text messages, in-person communication, paper-based communication, or virtual options, such as pre-recorded videos or Zoom sessions. Surveying families to determine preferred methods of communication would be necessary and could take place at the beginning of the school year or each semester. It would be important to streamline the mix of platforms by ensuring each communication method includes the same information. This could be ensured by creating weekly or monthly newsletters with classroom updates and schedules of events. Varying platforms for communication would improve accessibility and transparency and increase engagement to help parents stay informed and active in their child's education. The participation level in this would be informing, but consistency is the key to ensuring effectiveness.

04 Reevaluate current programming and relevance of events

We recommend the reevaluation of relevancy of current extracurricular events put on by the school. Parents are interested in seeing more academically related programming, such as science night and math night, as was present at Leal Elementary School. Prioritizing academic enrichment programs could support student learning, allow exploration of their interests, and better align events with educational goals. The school could consider partnering with local institutions, such as the university, the Urbana Free Library, or small businesses to bring in experts to put on interactive activities for academic nights. Parents had shown interest in being involved in the conceptualization of such programming, through for instance partnership or delegated power. Internally, the school could consider student-led events like science fairs or art showcases, which could be worked into the curriculum, to integrate opportunities for students to display projects and be celebrated for their achievements. Such events could provide opportunities for connection among families, teachers, and students, strengthening relationships and building community.

05 Allocate resources for cultural competency training

Expanding on the previous recommendation of reevaluating the relevance of school events, we also consider it important to allocate resources to improve cultural competence among school staff, in order to provide them with proper training to embrace families coming from several different backgrounds through school initiatives and interpersonal communication. Parents noted that events and the general manner of communication made them feel that school administration did not see the Latinx community as diverse and nuanced. The creation and implementation of additional cultural competency training can further open a channel for dialogue with families about cultural relevance and depth. Parents could be involved in the decision making process for how to spend the resources, through partnership or delegated power, and once the program is implemented, consulting and informing should be sufficient levels of participation.

06 Designate liaison between school and parents

Improve general communication between the school (teachers, administration, staff) and parents. This can include sending out reminders for future events in advance and together (for example, every Monday send out an event agenda with descriptions for the week, or next two weeks). This would additionally tackle the current communication issue, and would not only allow parents to be more involved with school activities, but also to enjoy school resources. The participation level desired here should be informing.

07 Tailor specific engagement plans for major changes

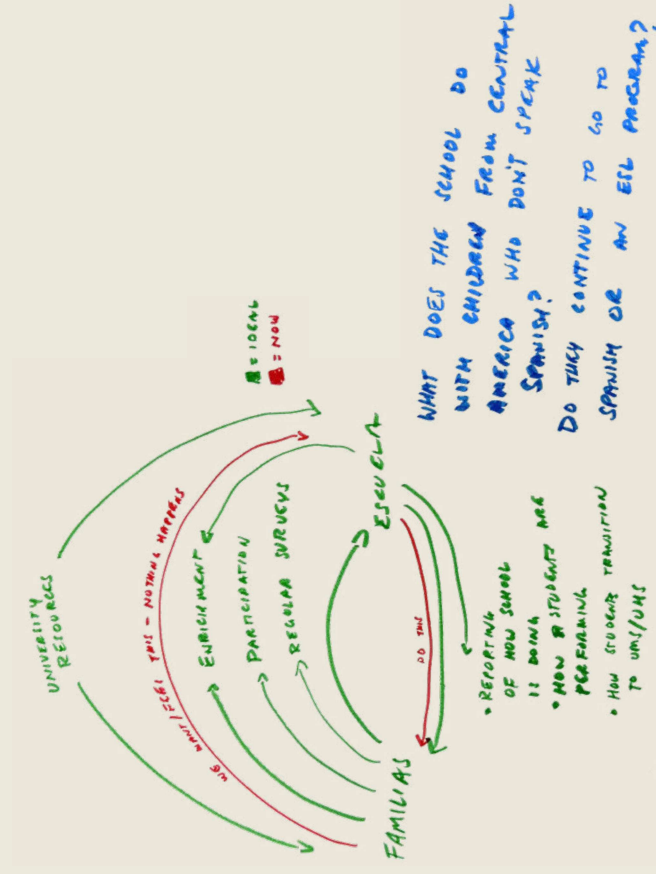
If the school district is planning to conduct a change that will significantly impact children's educational life, such as the redistricting that led to changes in the Dual Language Program, a specific engagement plan should be designed and implemented. Both the development of the engagement process and the decision-making process itself should account for several levels and methods of participation, such as citizen control, delegated power, partnership, consultation, informing; workshops, focus groups, surveys, meetings, interviews.

08 Transparency towards public comment

We recommend that the school district as well as the school administration are consistently transparent about the process of incorporating public comment made in participatory spaces, such as board and school meetings. Assessment of how parents' contributions have been used in the past, and an evaluation and communication about how parents' input will be used in future decision making would enhance the quality of implemented policy and programs, and build trust with the community. This can be done through transparency on methods used, a summary report, follow-up with parents on specific matters when adequate, etc. This level of involvement of the community can be classified as a mix of consultation (incorporating comment) and informing (transparency on how it was done).

09 Assessment of missing participants

Besides designing and implementing participatory processes in various levels and within different contexts of the school system, it is also necessary to be aware of who is not able to participate. Collecting and analyzing demographics of the parents and students attending meetings can be very telling of certain groups that might not be able to engage with school decisions and activities. In such cases, it would be important to specifically reach out to these families, understand particular issues they might be facing, what type of aid they need, and the participation level they would desire to engage with. Depending on the case, such dialogue could use the help of community representatives or leaders that can be of support in ways to contact families.



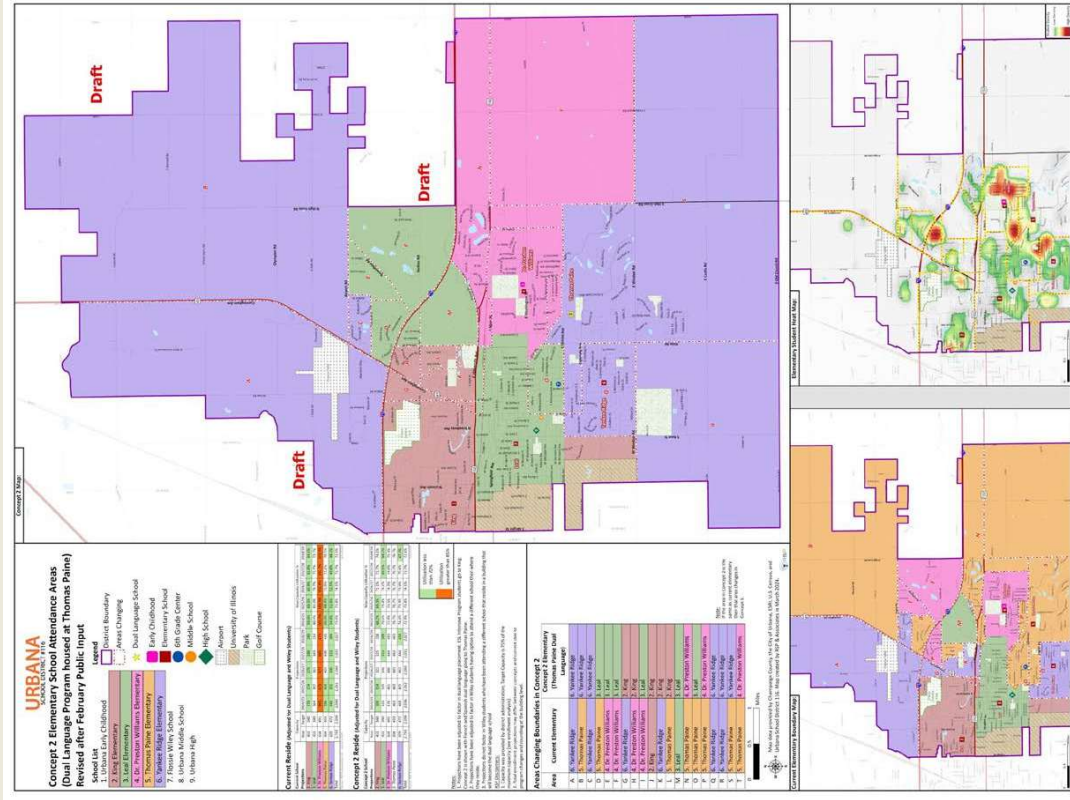
5. Conclusion

The findings from this report reveal significant concerns about communication, transparency, and cultural inclusion. Dual-Language Parents felt disconnected from the decision-making process due to unclear or late communication, while students struggled emotionally with the program's transition. The recommendations focus on improving communication, increasing transparency, and offering more opportunities for parents to be involved in decisions affecting their children's education. The Urbana School District can build trust, foster inclusivity, and create a more supportive environment for students and their families by addressing these concerns.

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Appendix A

Figure 13: Approved Elementary Boundary Plan.
Source: Urbana School District Website



Appendix B

Figure 14: Map showing percentage of Population over 25 years with a Bachelor's Degree or Higher.
Source: Created by Our Team

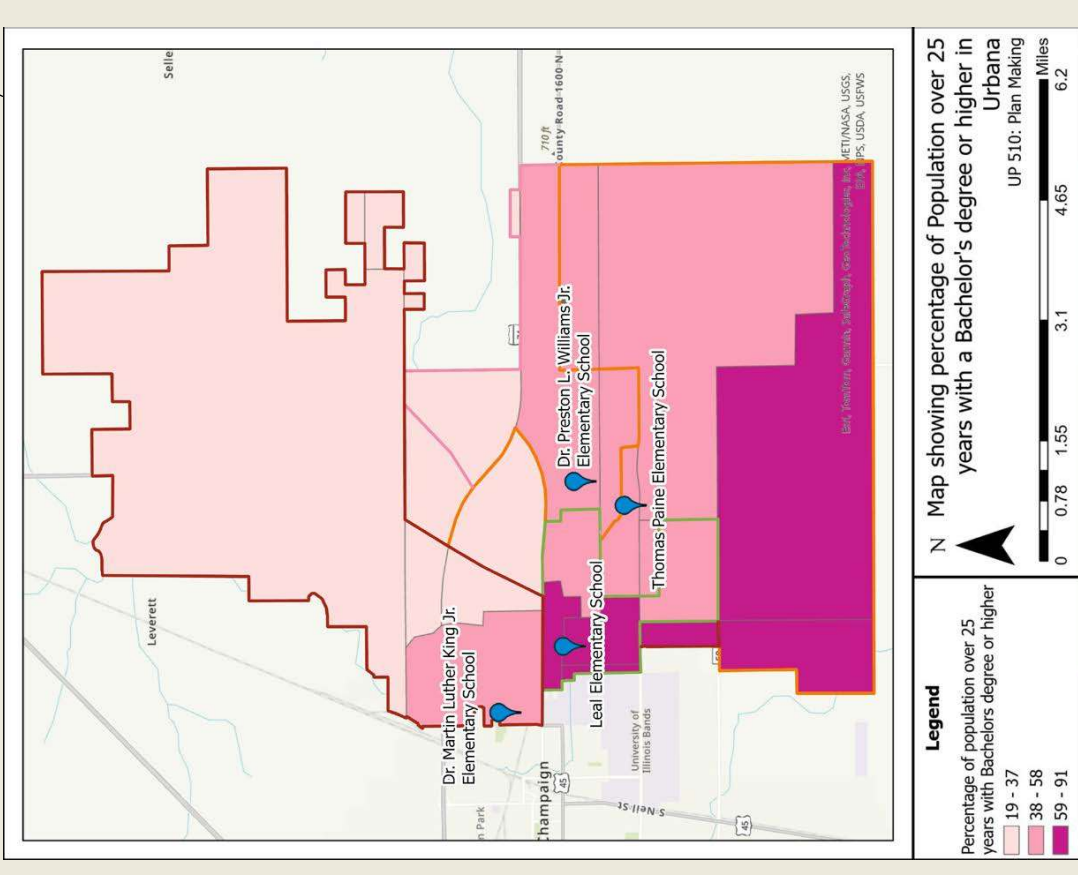


Figure 15: Map showing median income group across census tracts in Urbana.
Source: Created by Our Team

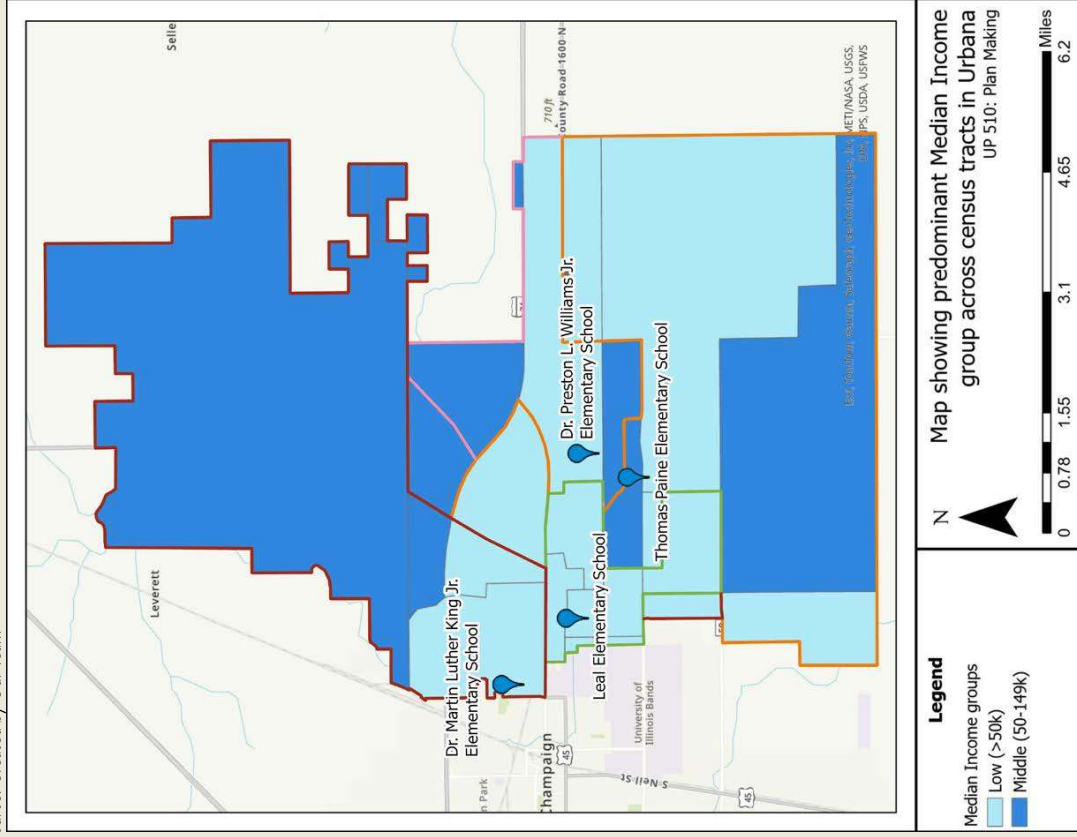
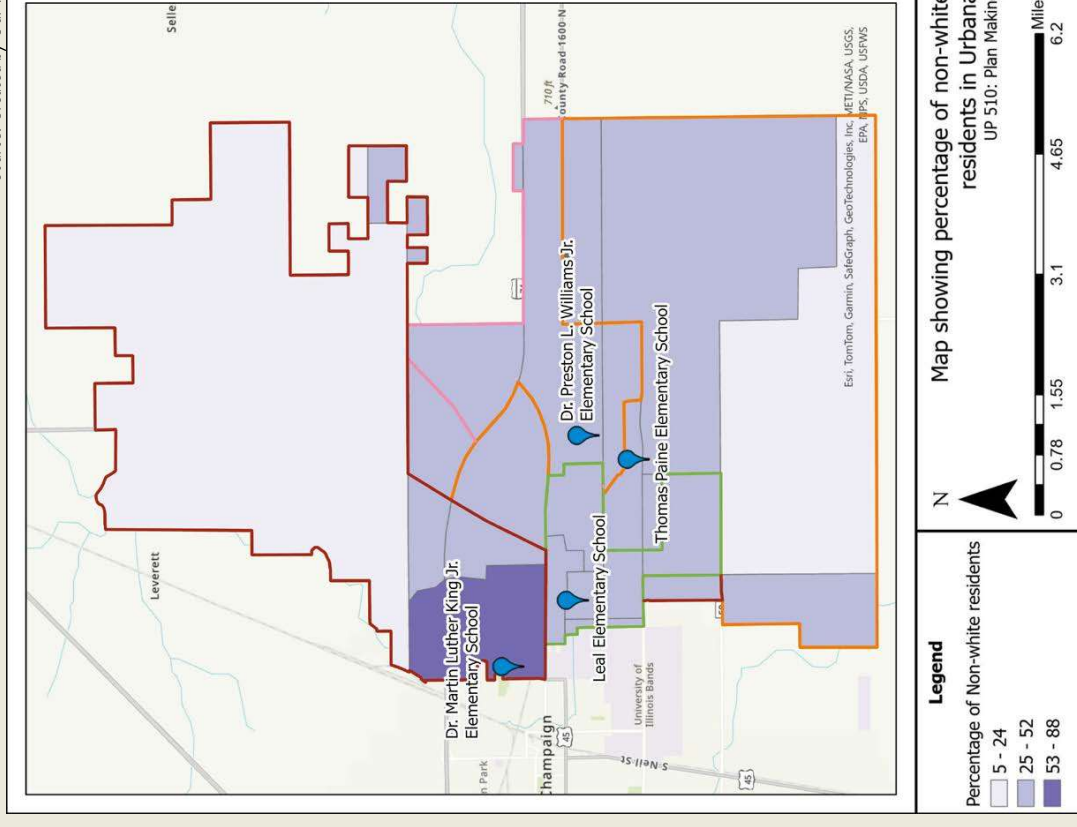


Figure 16: Map showing percentage of Non-White Residents in Urbana.
Source: Created by Our Team



Appendix C

Figure 17: Media release form in English distributed at the workshop.

VIDEO/PHOTOGRAPH RELEASE FORM

I hereby grant the University of Illinois permission to use photographs and/or video recordings of me for educational purposes or derivative works.

The findings of the workshop which might be used to write a report which might be published.

I hereby warrant that I am eighteen (18) years old or more and competent to contract in my own name or, if I am under eighteen years old, that my parent or guardian has signed this release form below. This release is binding on me and my heirs, assigns and personal representatives.

Signature of Individual Photographed/Recorded

Date _____

If the individual photographed/recorded is under eighteen (18) years old, the following section must be completed: I have read and understand this document. I understand and agree that it is binding on me, my child (named above), our heirs, assigns and personal representatives. I acknowledge that I am eighteen (18) years old or more and that I am the parent or guardian of the child named above.

Signature of Parent/Guardian of Individual Photographed/Recorded

Date _____

Figure 18: Media release form in Spanish distributed at the workshop.

FORMULARIO DE AUTORIZACIÓN DE VIDEO/FOTOGRAFÍA

Por la presente otorgo permiso a la Universidad de Illinois para usar fotografías y/o grabaciones de vídeo mías con fines educativos u trabajos derivados.

Firma de la persona fotografiada/grabada

fecha

Por la presente garantizo que tengo dieciocho (18) años o más y soy competente para contratar en mi propio nombre o, si tengo menos de dieciocho años, que mi padre o tutor ha firmado este formulario de autorización a continuación. Esta autorización es vinculante para mí y mis herederos, cesionarios y representantes personales.

Firma del padre/tutor de la persona fotografiada/grabada

fecha

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Data source for maps prepared by our team: US Census, 2022: ACS 5-Year Estimates Data Profiles

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COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PLAN

URBANA DUAL LANGUAGE PROGRAM

PLAN DE PARTICIPACIÓN COMUNITARIA

PROGRAMA DE LENGUAJE DUAL URBANA

Engagement Plan prepared by **Master of Urban Planning Students** at University of Illinois Urbana Champaign as a part of UP 510 Plan Making course under the guidance of Prof. Magdalena Novoa
August 2024 - December 2024

Drawings included in the document were made by parents and students who attended the workshop conducted by the team.