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NCLR director visits Laredo to train participants of the Lee y Serás initiative

By María González-Escareño

LAREDO, February 8 - An initiative created by the National Council For La Raza has taken a traditional but underused tactic to help children of Spanish-speaking parents learn English: teach Spanish first.

Antonia Lopez, NCLR Early Care and Education director, spent Thursday and Friday in Laredo training participants on the *Lee y Serás* initiative. *Lee y Serás* is an early literacy initiative which supports parents and communities in building early literacy skills among Hispanic children from birth to eight years of age.

"The goal is to take this literacy initiative to help parents understand how powerful they are as teachers and what good examples they can give their children in language so that they have a strong language base," said Lopez.

Lopez also said that learning Spanish at home is more beneficial than most people think, contrary to critics of bilingual education. She added that teaching children their first language at home helps keep families intact, helps children continue to develop their brain and it also gives them the foundation to learn English.

"The stakes are very high; 84 percent of Latino children in the fourth grade are below proficient," said Lopez. "We have a huge early literacy crisis and a big part of that crisis is children not having language."

"Oral language builds to literacy and parents can make a big difference in helping their children become school-ready for kindergarten and then be at grade level because Spanish builds English," she said.

Lopez also said that when parents receive the message that English is the only language their children can learn to be successful, they are not taking advantage of the time they spend with their children to teach literacy skills. Parents think they're doing the right thing, she said, but it diminishes their children's foundation.

"Our purpose is to help parents understand that children need to develop their first language, develop concepts, knowledge and communications," said Lopez. "It's not just about culture. It's also about content, about all the things that children can learn through conversation."

The *Lee y Serás* initiative, which began in 2004, is taking place in cities throughout the United States, including Los Angeles, Miami, Houston and Dallas. In Laredo, the Texas Migrant Council is working with NCLR in installing the initiative, and will also work in the Rio Grande Valley and throughout South Texas.

Lopez said that they also plan to take *Lee y Seras* to other states including Ohio, Nevada and Indiana, adding that it is a small beginning but they hope *Lee y Serás* will spread throughout the country. The NCLR is working in partnership with Scholastics and the Verizon Wireless foundation.

"This is a *semilla* we're planting," said Lopez. "These are wonderful people and we hope that it will grow."

Write [María González-Escareño](#)



Antonia Lopez

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