

# NVELI

## Napa Valley Early Learning Initiative

*A success story in the making*

By Noel Brinkerhoff



### SETTING THE STAGE

For many, the Napa Valley is synonymous with wine, as well as food and comfort, even splendor. Its combination of bucolic scenery and exquisite amenities prompt millions of people to visit the valley every year.

But for those who live in the Napa Valley, including the makers of its renowned Cabernet Sauvignons, Sauvignon Blancs and Pinot Noirs, they know there is much more to this picturesque place than pleasure and refinement.

Napa County has undergone tremendous change, in part because of the success of its wine industry. As the number of wineries grew to more than 500 and the acreage of vineyards expanded, the need for labor also increased. The opportunities for employment attracted workers from not only outside the valley, but outside the country.

Like so many communities throughout California, Napa has become a home for thousands of immigrants, mostly from Mexico. Hispanics now make up nearly half the population of the city of Napa, and represent more than half of the 17,000 students in the county's largest school district, Napa Valley Unified.

*Napa County, in fact, is a microcosm of the educational situation facing California when it comes to schooling children whose first language is not English, and who are living in poverty.*

Statewide, 54% of all public school students were Hispanic, and 22% were English Language Learners (ELL) in 2015-16, according to the most recent data available from the California Department of Education. Most of the ELL kids (84%) were Spanish speaking.

In Napa County, 55% of all students were Hispanic in 2015-16. The ELL rate was 24%, but an even higher percentage (95%) had Spanish as their primary language.

Children who grow up in homes where English is not spoken regularly can fall behind other students from the very first day of kindergarten. This difference between ELL and English fluent students — known as the school-readiness gap — usually continues as ELL students advance in grade, making it more and more difficult for them to perform, let alone excel, academically.



## NVELI IS BORN

Alarmed by this struggle, the Napa Valley Vintners (NVV), a local, nonprofit wine trade association, decided to do something to help ELL children.

Since 1981, the NVV has given \$170 million, through Auction Napa Valley proceeds, in grants to local nonprofit organizations dedicated to improving the health and education of community members. But when it came to doing something about the achievement gap for Hispanic children, they opted for a new strategy. They partnered with experts who understand the struggles and challenges of ELL children to develop a comprehensive plan for getting them ready to succeed in the classroom and beyond.

That's how the Napa Valley Early Learning Initiative (NVELI) came about. Five years ago, the NVV teamed up with First 5 Napa County, who are experts in early childhood learning and development. *Together, they strategically targeted key programs that could help preschool English Language Learners get up to speed and start on the same level as English fluent students once they were in kindergarten.*

NVELI directed its efforts at four elementary schools with high ELL populations located across Napa County to improve kindergarten readiness for children in Napa, Calistoga and American Canyon. The initiative not only developed and fostered programs directly aimed at young children, but also their parents.

"One of the things I love about this initiative is it doesn't put the onus on just the student," said Michelle Laymon, NVELI's program officer. "We engage the whole family."

Laymon and others working with this community discovered that many immigrant parents lack secondary education because they had to drop out of school and go to work at an early age. NVELI decided to do something to help these adults, particularly the moms, so they could help their kids.

"We know the mother's education level is definitely connected to the outcomes for the student," she said.





## THE HUMAN IMPACTS

*The achievements of the Napa Valley Early Learning Initiative go beyond data and metrics. NVELI has produced success stories like those of Maria Martinez and Margarita Mucino, who have demonstrated the multi-generational effects of the initiative. These two immigrant mothers have watched their children blossom as a result of the help they received. They benefitted personally as well from programs designed to make them more engaged parents, as well as stronger, more confident, independent women.*

Maria, 32, mother of two young children, is a prime example of the challenges facing many immigrant parents with limited education of their own.

Born in the state of Michoacan, Maria spent her own childhood moving back and forth between her native Mexico and the United States as her father sought construction work wherever he could find it. She failed to complete high school, doing her best to learn while being uprooted time and again.

As Maria put it: “We say not from here, not from there, from everywhere!”

At age 19 she settled in Napa, and started her family. Her six-year-old son, Miguel, spent his first several years at home because daycare and preschool were out of her reach.

Prior to Miguel starting kindergarten, Maria heard about the First Step Kinder Academy at Phillips Elementary School,

a four-week summer program created for kids with no access to preschool, thanks to funding from the Napa Valley Vintners.

First Step helped Miguel get ready for kindergarten in multiple ways. First, there was the socialization it provided to the shy child. Miguel got the opportunity to learn how to interact with other children his age, and discover how much fun going to school could be.

“He was always happy to go to school,” Maria said. “He was, ‘I want to go to school! I want to go to school!’”

The positive environment motivated Miguel to learn and improve his reading level. By the time kindergarten came, he was fully ready, according to tests that gauged his cognitive skills and his social-emotional abilities.

While Miguel attended First Steps, Maria took advantage of an NVELI program for herself: Parent University. She so enjoyed the short-term classes that Maria wound up taking nearly 30 of them, and eventually was chosen to teach some of them.

The learning experience at Parent University motivated Maria to finish her high school education and get her GED. She then moved on to Napa Valley College, where she is studying early childhood development and wants to become a bilingual preschool teacher — something Napa needs more of.



## THE HUMAN IMPACTS

A native of Mexico, Margarita came to Napa a decade ago. The 26-year-old struggled to raise three young children, two boys and a girl. She found herself homebound much of the time, feeling cut off and depressed.

"I felt like I was in jail," said Margarita. "I didn't want to go out. I was going through hard times."

Margarita's case was all too familiar to Susana Garcia, program director for On the Move, which has used grants from NVELI to support a variety of programs, like Parent University, which help turn undereducated adults into empowered parents and community leaders.

"Many of these moms are isolated," said Susana. "They don't have jobs. So we're their first employer in a sense," providing them with opportunities "to get away from the isolation, and be engaged in school."

*Margarita credits her discovery of NVELI programs with turning her life around, and boosting the education of her children.* She began attending Parent University, and particularly loved the class Latino Literacy, during which she made a book about her family.

The experience "helped me open my eyes," she said, and climb out of her dark state.

Margarita started volunteering at her children's school and assisting teachers. She became inspired to focus on her own education, and get her GED.

"I have to show my kids," she said. "If I can do it, they can do it. I want to show my family I can be someone," more than just a stay-home mom.

"Now I'm free," said Margarita with an enormous smile. "I can help my children."

While things brightened for Margarita, she witnessed the advantages of putting a child through NVELI programs. Her middle child, Azel, was the right age to participate in the initiative.

He is now a first grader reading at the same level as his older brother, who is in third grade, but wasn't able to take advantage of the program.

"It's a huge difference. Oh my god!" Margarita said. "You can see my Azel can read at the level of my other son."





## THE RESULTS

After nearly five years of work, and almost \$5 million in funding, the NVELI has produced anecdotal and empirical evidence to prove its success.

In the NVELI Third Year Report, research showed children who participated in a NVELI preschool were more likely to have higher readiness scores, compared to similar children from other preschools.

- Among English Learners who attended NVELI preschool, 54% were ready for school in the domain of Kindergarten Academics, compared to 33% of English Learners who attended non-NVELI preschool or no preschool.
- Thirty percent of NVELI-preschool attendees were ready across all three domains of readiness, compared to 20% of those who did not attend NVELI preschool.

The study also revealed the positive impacts of NVELI services on parents of ELL children.

Mothers and fathers who participated in NVELI parent education programs were more likely than other parents

to have engaged in a range of kindergarten preparation activities, including:

- Visiting a library with their child
- Talking to childcare providers about their child's transition to kindergarten
- Visiting elementary schools with their child
- Attending parent meetings/orientations at elementary schools

Participants in NVELI parent education programs also reported telling stories and singing songs with their children (which research indicates provides vocabulary building, among other positive connections), more frequently than parents who did not participate in the programs.

NVELI has produced its own stories as well. These accounts reveal the human impact of the initiative, both on parents and their children. *The NVV set out to help brighten the educational outlook for preschool kids, but because their project includes the mothers and fathers, the successes will extend beyond a single generation.*



## THE FACILITATORS

*The success stories of Maria Martinez, Margarita Mucino and other parents wouldn't be possible without the help of people who reach out to the immigrant community and connect with them so they can learn about NVELI services.*

People like Yesenia Gonzalez not only provide a valuable service, but also a personal understanding of what it's like to be newcomers to America and the adjustments immigrants face.

Gonzalez, a family engagement facilitator for Phillips Elementary School, acts as a liaison between Parent University and the mothers and fathers who could benefit from the classes and grow as a person. Her job entails finding these parents — before or after school in the campus parking lot, in local supermarkets or laundromats— and building relationships with them.

Some are reluctant at first to give Parent University a try. But Gonzalez is persistent, employing a warm, gentle determination. She refuses to take “no” for an answer.

“I’ll kill you with kindness,” she says with a wink and a smile, “then I’ll leave you alone for a while.”

The 25-year-old speech therapy graduate of San Diego State can relate to the families she assists. Gonzalez was

born in Mexico, and came to the U.S. as a young child. She spent most of her youth in Napa, where her first school was the same one she now works at: Phillips Elementary.

Gonzalez loves her work, and she appreciates the financial assistance provided by the NVV to programs like Parent University.

“We couldn’t do all of this without Auction Napa Valley proceeds,” she says. The funding has helped “jump start” efforts to get parents engaged, become learners themselves, and support their children.

“They’re feeling more empowered and more confident” as moms and dads according to Gonzalez.



napa valley vintners

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