

# Springdale

## Embracing Demographic Change in the School District

BY LILIAN NDANGAM

In 1989, close to 97 percent of the 7,691 students at Springdale School District were Caucasian. By October 2016, the district had 21,507 students, 35.4 percent of whom were Caucasian, 46.4 percent Hispanic, 12.3 percent Pacific Islanders, and 3.1 percent black. A further 2.8 percent fell in the category of “other.” The district, located in the northwest corner of Arkansas, is the state’s second largest school district and one of its most diverse.

Immigrants currently make up 5 percent of the population of Arkansas—up from 2.8 percent in 2000. The changing demographics is reflected in Springdale, where, according to 2010 census data, one in four residents are foreign born. Mexico, El Salvador, India, and the Marshall Islands are the four largest origin countries of foreign-born residents of Arkansas. Nationally, many communities are experiencing these demographic changes. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, Latino, African American, Asian, and Pacific Islands students surpassed non-Hispanic whites in public schools in 2014.<sup>1</sup> In the case of Springdale, the school district went from being a majority white school district to majority Latino.

Driven by the economic boom of the 1990s, many immigrants arrived to work in companies in Springdale and surrounding areas where the poultry industry provided stable jobs. A majority of those who arrived were Mexicans. However, a Compact of Free Association act (COFA) between the United States and the Marshall Islands in 1983 paved the way for citizens of the Republic of the Marshall Islands to migrate to the United States. Under COFA, citizens of the Marshall Islands are admitted to the US indefinitely without visas. As nonimmigrant legal residents, they are able to live and work in the country but are neither entitled to any social benefits nor citizenship. Children born to Marshallese parents are automatically US citizens.

COFA offered many Marshallese an easy route to the United States. Attracted by the promise of regular work, a steady income and comparatively low costs of living, the Marshallese began building a substantial presence in Springdale in the 1980s. As a result, Springdale is home of the largest Marshallese population in the continental United States, and the school district has the highest Marshallese population in the state.

In response to the demographic shift, community leaders, educators and the school district came together to identify and develop strategies to improve educational outcomes for children from immigrant communities and ensure they were on a path to success. A significant feature of this effort was the recognition that language acquisition was integral to successful transition for immigrants and school readiness for their children.

In an interview with *Education Week*, school superintendent Jim Rollins recalled “The first thing we had to do was to reorganize our enrollment process. When children enter our district, we want to know exactly where they were in terms of their readiness to learn. We administered English-language surveys. We found out the number of children who were at entry level, levels 2s, 3s, 4s, 5s, because we understood quickly that children had to be in levels 3 or 4 to really deal with the content of the regular or traditional classes. There was a significant immersion initiative early on. We had to create that division of accountability for our immigrant population, and today that is a significant part of our service area for the district.”<sup>2</sup>

Rollins added that instruction had to be adjusted at schools. “It could not just be a teacher standing in front of the class delivering a lesson because kids obviously would struggle themselves with their language readiness. So, you had to alter the way you

organized time. This idea of immigrant children learning in groups became very evident; so cooperative learning became a major lesson that we learned more and more about.”

English language learners comprise 45 percent of the school district’s student population—the largest in the state. The district has invested in expanded teacher recruitment, through high salaries—the highest in the state—and professional development opportunities to prepare teachers to teach learners for whom English is a second language (ESL). Between 2007 and 2012, 90 teachers from the school district earned TESOL certification. About 40 percent of teachers have also obtained an ESL endorsement from local colleges and universities. For the school district, embracing demographic changes in its student population is reflected in its motto “teach them all”—a commitment not just to teaching but to supporting the educational success of all students regardless of background.

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The district’s expanded community liaison services is staffed by bilingual community members knowledgeable of the cultures of different communities represented within the district. “For people who are new in any community, it is helpful to have people from their community to help them settle. Community liaisons are constantly educating parents about the school system in America and are educating teachers and staff about the community,” says Marsha Layer, a Family and Community Partnership Coordinator at Springdale School District’s English to Speakers of other Languages (ESOL) program. Liaisons help provide additional supports for schools. To promote bilingual language development, and support bicultural identities, many school libraries have acquired Spanish language books. Some local high schools teach Spanish for Spanish speakers. While the school district does not

have Marshallese language instruction, in support of native language development and bilingualism, the district ESOL worked with the Marshallese community to produce a Marshallese-English dictionary. Information and communication materials from the district are available in English, Spanish, and Marshallese.

Alvin Lopez is one of the district’s family-school liaison staff. Lopez who joined the school district in 2000, sees his role as facilitating communication and building connections between immigrant families, the community, and schools. “If a school is having problems about not treating parents well. I go and talk to the principal. I sometimes offer to stay around the school and train staff/secretaries on how to treat parents so they feel welcomed. This modeling helps to create a welcoming environment. In the community, I help parents to understand that they have rights. I also want the parents to know they don’t need me in order to get to the school,” he says.

Lopez’s musical background and knowledge of the local broadcasting scene has enabled him to forge strong connections with local radio stations, especially DJs, and to use these avenues for strategic messaging around school attendance and reading. With help from students and the community, Lopez initiated weekly bilingual public service announcements for local media. These announcements help communicate information to connect families with the district. Lopez says the announcements, which are also available on YouTube, have received more views from audiences in the Marshall Islands than from Springdale residents. Lopez thinks many islanders are keen to learn about community resources in Springdale before migrating.

While support for English language learners was vital, teachers recognized that the parents of children they served also faced language barriers that affected their ability to help their children. With support from the district and a local foundation, teachers who worked with English language learners developed a Family Literacy Program where among other things, the focus is on language literacy for parents and empowering them to become full partners in their children’s education. As part

of the 15-week program, parents spend 10 hours at their children's school weekly. The bulk of the time is spent learning English (6 hours) while the rest of the time is split between observing their children's classroom and discussions on parenting. Parents participating in the program have found it beneficial not just in helping their children at home with homework but also in enabling them to advocate for their children. Many Marshallese and Spanish speaking parents volunteer as interpreters at schools during parent-teacher conferences.

Engaging parents and increasing parental involvement has also been at the core of work done by One Community Reads, unacomunidad leyendo! through its Parents Taking Leadership Action (PTLA) initiative implemented at three schools. The initiative complements the school district's Family Literacy Program. Classes facilitated in Spanish consist of 15 modules that focus on promoting family literacy, strengthening parent-school communication, increasing educational awareness, and enhancing the leadership skills of parents from immigrant communities. The PTLA culminates in a Legacy Project activity where parents create and implement a project to fill a need they have identified in the school and community. Earlier, legacy projects have included developing a public service announcement on bullying and internet safety, which was broadcast on Spanish radio.

### **Cultural Competency and Strategic Community Engagement**

Seeing the changing demographics of her school, Maribel Childress, principal of Monitor Elementary School, traveled to the Marshall Islands in 2005 and 2006. While there she spent time teaching summer school and immersing herself in the culture. Childress says the visit gave her an insight into Marshallese culture. "I just really tried to be an observer so that I could have a better understanding of the values in their culture and what is important in their culture so that I could use that information to better serve my students and families. They are also very spiritual and believe that the more kindness you show to others, the more likely you are to go to heaven. And so they honor personal relationships and value people so much that it is very hurtful to them when someone does not speak kindly to

them. Such a reaction [from the school] can mean they can just go and not come back and we miss out on the engagement piece. Parents are more apt to be involved if they feel welcomed. So we have worked hard to build trust for one another and for their intentions." The school's population is 25 percent Marshallese, 40 percent Hispanic, and 35 percent Caucasian. About 9 out of 10 students at the school are on free and reduced lunch.

Community liaison Alvin Lopez recalls trying to organize information sessions with Marshallese parents in schools. "At the meeting, everyone was talking, the interpreters were talking. Some kids were running around. Some people might have taken that as disrespectful," he says. "But I went and talked to the leaders of the Marshallese community and found out a bit more. I learned that in church and other social gatherings in their community, this was a just a normal behavior for kids and the community was used to it. So I asked: "what will get people's attention?" They said "children performing." So, at the next meeting, we had children perform, then we provided information for parents, then children performed again. And it was amazing how everybody was just focused. One of the beautiful strengths that the Marshallese has is their art form through music, singing, and ukulele playing. We used these as a way to engage children and families into the school because that is a strength that they bring already." Including children's performances at parent information meetings, encouraged more parents to attend events at the school.

As part of the national Campaign for Grade Level Reading, the state, local nonprofits, parents and families, government agencies, community foundations, educators, business leaders, and policymakers partnered to launch the Arkansas Campaign for Grade Level Reading. In Springdale, community organization One Community Reads, unacomunidad leyendo! led the campaign which seeks to support the educational success of children from low-income communities through initiatives aimed at accelerating school readiness, improving attendance and increasing reading proficiency.

Chair and co-founder of One Community, Diana Gonzalez-Worthen said, "One of the things that was exciting about the work is the goal for every student

to be successful regardless of income level or native language. Joining the campaign helped our community identify and focus on issues around early childhood literacy, school readiness, the importance of reading, and reading on grade level by third grade and chronic absenteeism. Learning more about that and sharing it with parents who are learning English and who are learning more about the educational system in America were exciting things that we could build on. It was a natural collaborative fit because we are all striving for the same thing but we can move it to the next level by working together. The collaboration with parents enabled us to look at all this not just within the scope of the school but also going out in the community as well.”

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To help stem summer learning loss and ensure that kids have access to books outside of school, One Community initiated Feed Your Brain—a summer reading program which it implemented for low-income families at a local school. While participation from the Latino community was substantial, there was little participation from the Marshallese community. To meet the community where they were, the organization moved the initiative to a local housing project where many Marshallese families lived and organized reading time at lunch using Marshallese and English books. While the organization was able to recruit a Marshallese volunteer to help with the summer reading program, it has not been successful getting a bilingual English-Marshallese facilitator for PTLA program. District wide, there are few Marshallese teachers working in the district.

In its submission for the 2017 All America City, One Community Reads, unacomunidad leyendo! noted how the community identified and addressed chronic absenteeism—defined as missing 10 percent or more of the school year. Angela Duran, statewide director for the Arkansas Campaign for Grade Level Reading, said the community’s involvement in the campaign had brought a lot of awareness around

issues of chronic absenteeism and the importance of grade level reading. “Joining the campaign opened our eyes to a lot of data. We partnered with Attendance Works and we were really able to get the data broken down in subgroups. And what really jumped out for most people was that the Marshallese students had a much higher chronic absence rates than the rest of the students.”

After reviewing data which showed that 30 percent of Marshallese students were missing a month or more of school, school liaisons reached out the community to explore the reason for the high rates of absenteeism. They learned that funerals and other religious celebrations in the community often lasted multiple days and children were often pulled out of school for these. The community engagement process also revealed that when a child was late for school or was sick, many Marshallese families felt intimidated by the school’s front staff and kept their child home all day instead of calling or visiting the school to face questioning from the front office staff. On learning this, Maribel Childress set out making some changes at Monitor Elementary. Bilingual staffs were recruited at the school to help serve the community. With training and orientation, the school’s front office staff adopted a customer service culture that emphasized empathy, kindness, friendliness, and approachability in all parent-staff interaction.

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Recognizing the value of personal connections in Marshallese culture, the school also went further and developed a home visit initiative. “If a child does not come to school and we do not hear from the family, we get in our car and go there,” says Childress. “If the child is there and perhaps just missed the bus because they overslept, we put them in our car and bring them to school. Just trying to show that personal touch and letting the families

know we really care about your child, that school is important and learning is important, shows the family how much we care about their children that we are willing to leave the school and come check on them. And that makes a big difference.

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The school's counseling department oversees home visits variously undertaken by counseling staff, the school nurse, the vice principal, and parent liaison. In addition to developing relationships and building trust, the focus on getting children to school helps drive home the message that school attendance is important and that absenteeism affects educational outcomes for kids.

### Building Community Connections

Understanding the importance of community celebrations within the Marshallese community, Maribel Childress worked with staff and parents to launch school attendance ceremonies where emphasis was on rewarding good attendance. The school hosts an Academic Achievement Celebration for Marshallese families where the most prestigious award is the perfect attendance award. "We use that to showcase and celebrate what is most important to school because if we were going to have a parent night where we gave out statistics or lectured them on school attendance and how if your child is not in school and misses 7 days, we will file for educational neglect, that will not be productive. Instead of all that, and because celebrations are so important to the community, we can send out a message through our celebrations without having to say any of those things. So, on the night of our celebration, the first award and the most prestigious is the Perfect Attendance Award. By the things that we choose to give awards for in our celebration, we are sending a message about

what's important in school and what is worth celebrating in school."

Introducing celebrations for the Marshallese community has resulted in stronger engagement from the community. Maribel Childress said, "For a long time, we wanted all our celebrations to be together because we wanted our student body and our families to be, united and be together. But what we found was that when we did it all together, we might get about 10 people from our Marshallese community because it wasn't something they were comfortable with. But when we have one event that is just for our Marshallese families, we would have 250–300 people come.

"So we just had to ask, 'What is our goal?' Is our goal to have Marshallese parents here? Because if that is our goal, then we just need to take a deep breath and do theirs separate. If our goal is to have events where there is unity, then we just need to have a unified event and be okay if only about 20 Marshallese families come. We have family events each month for all our families regardless of what language they speak. However, there are some events we would do separately because they will come and they will get more involved because they are more comfortable."

A deliberate, focused and sustained strategy to engage and involve parents in the schools by building personal connections, has helped to build a trusting relationship with the community and inspire initiatives to best support families and students.

Consistent outreach to families, accompanied by culturally appropriate messaging on the importance of school attendance, is paying off. Between the 2012–2013 and 2015–2016 school years, chronic absenteeism dropped from 19 percent to 11 percent for children in kindergarten to third grade. Chronic absenteeism among first graders fell more than half from 24 percent to 10 percent. Other schools in the region are looking to emulate the success at Monitor Elementary.

Gaining an understanding of the values of immigrants within Springdale has been valuable to developing culturally respectful ways of addressing the

community's needs and making school environments more welcoming and accessible. Lopez says "Instead of tolerating immigrants, celebrate their culture. Find ways and places that they can share with others what they do. Focus on the act of giving versus the language of giving."

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## NOTES

1. J. McFarland, B. Hussar, C. de Brey, T. Snyder, X. Wang, S. Wilkinson-Flicker, S. Gebrekristos, J. Zhang, A. Rathbun, A. Barmer, F. Bullock Mann, and S. Hinz, *The Condition of Education 2017* (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, 2017), 102. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2017144>.
2. Denisa R. Superville. 2014. "Q&A: An Arkansas School District's Response to Population Change." *Education Week* 34(1):12-13. <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2014/08/20/01demographics-qa.h34.html?qs=arkansas+school+district's+response+to+population+change>

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