Profile 1 - Dr. Sofía Jiménez, Immigrant Leader -

"We have to work 10 times harder. We have to be 10 times more credentialed. We could be doing 10 times better work, but we aren't seen."

Dr. Sofia Jiménez is a high-achieving Latinx superintendent in Connecticut whose professional trajectory was born out of a profound commitment to social justice, fueled by personal experiences of immigration, language barriers, and educational inequity. Born in a Spanish-speaking country, Dr. Jiménez immigrated to the United States as a child and spent many years traveling back and forth with her family to visit her homeland. Her upbringing was characterized by strong family values centered on education as "the key out of poverty" and a deeply embedded sense of community responsibility.

Dr. Jiménez excelled academically, yet encountered systemic barriers in navigating the monolingual educational landscape of the United States. She was fortunate to encounter some support from school staff, such as a coach who helped her overcome the barrier of opening her locker to avoid detention, and teachers who mentored her and opened the library early for her to practice reading. Her ambition to enter education was crystallized by a loving teacher in ninth grade, who "fought for us as a group of Latinx students." That teacher's influence solidified Dr. Jiménez's desire to become an educator and to "look out for Latinos." She realized that the only way to effectively create change and dismantle inequity was "to be at the higher ranking level of education."

Dr. Jiménez initially aspired to become a lawyer, but the financial barriers caused her to pivot, realizing that she could "barely afford [her] first year of college." She shifted her focus to education as a means to dismantle the very barriers she faced. She leveraged her background as an immigrant and Spanish-dominant speaker to advocate fiercely for students who looked like her, eventually ascending through teaching in high schools in multiple districts, principalships,

and central office roles, driven by a desire to ensure all children had the opportunities she initially lacked.

Dr. Jiménez's experience as a Spanish-dominant student reveals a duality: the intense need for English mastery combined with the realization that the system often viewed her linguistic identity as a deficit rather than an asset. On the challenge of navigating the system as a Spanish-dominant speaker, Dr. Jiménez reflects, “My limited English was definitely a handicapping condition for me, because teachers did not really know what to do with bilingual students…they didn't know what to do with monolingual students from another country, much less bilingual students.” Even after achieving professional success, she often used her accent and ongoing effort to connect with parents. She would share with them, "I don't speak the language perfectly. I used to have a little book that I used to write down the words that I didn't know or I couldn't pronounce." Despite her high academic performance, Dr. Jiménez experienced firsthand the subtle and overt exclusion from advanced coursework and opportunities for mobility. She saw that students who were not known or understood were frequently placed in lower tracks. She expressed that her counselors "want[ed] to put me in a special education class, or they want[ed] to put me in low-level classes." Upon entering high school, she approached her guidance counselor about college plans, only to be told, " I recommend that you go to a community college.” She said it was because “you've only been out of the bilingual program for a year, and so I don't think you're ready yet."

In one professional opportunity, Dr. Jiménez noticed an attempt to steer her away from a respected track in which she would be spearheading a science and math program. She challenged her supervisor, "Why am I not going to [lead] the STEM Academy? Look at my transcript. Makes better sense for me to go to the STEM Academy... But, I guess a Latina wasn't good

enough for the STEM Academy." In later leadership roles, she discovered the damaging lack of access for Latinx students, having found data showing "no Latinos in AP classes." This motivated her to develop classes for AP specifically that recruited Latino students, asking the teaching staff, "Where are the Latinos? I mean, they have the same brains [as] all the kids have."

The systemic discrimination and the realization that barriers were deliberately erected against students of color transformed Dr. Jiménez's professional ambition into a deeply personal quest for social justice. The motivation to enter education was driven primarily by external injustices: "It was because of my lived experiences as they relate to injustices and the injustice that I experienced for the very first time." This determination evolved into a deliberate strategy to take on administrative roles to influence change at the highest level. "It was that quest for breaking those barriers… making those wrongs into rights. That drove me to say, I wanted to set policy. I needed to be in that superintendency seat."

Dr. Jiménez often faced resistance, even being told by a board member in one search process that "They didn't want a Latina," despite her being "The best candidate." She understood that her core mission required fighting for resources and systems for marginalized communities. "I didn't go in there because I love kids... I went in there because I wanted to make sure that I could contribute to helping Latino kids and minority kids get an opportunity that I knew they were not getting with somebody else." She explicitly chose to champion qualified staff of color, often arguing their credentials despite internal resistance. She refused to allow her core moral obligations to be compromised, stating in a room filled with parents and teachers reviewing a contentious report showing adult misconduct within the district, that if their expectation of her was "Not to uphold the moral and ethical obligation that we have, then I do not want to be your superintendent, and I am fine with that. If that is the expectation, don't pick me."

Profile 2 - Ignacio Pérez, Early Recognition to Ascend for Men

"I am so blessed to have had people who have taken an interest in me... So I've always felt this stewardship that…if they believe in me, then I must be able, I need to rise to that and deliver. Therefore, I wasn't really looking to ascend. It happened."

Ignacio Pérez is a prominent Latinx superintendent in Connecticut, whose rapid ascent from the classroom to district leadership was uniquely shaped by intentional mentorship, strong cultural ties, and a deep, early exposure to systemic inequities. Pérez was born in an area with a strong Latinx presence, having roots in a predominantly Puerto Rican/Cuban neighborhood in Connecticut. He notes that his immediate experience of the world as a child was shaped by his locality, "Often the poor part of town near the railroad tracks." His parents strongly emphasized that education would help him combat poverty, yet he encountered systemic obstacles from an early age. He also observed institutional segregation where anyone who did not speak English or had a disability was put into separate tracks. What ultimately saved me was sports in school, where he describes himself as a curious kid who liked to poke the bear, and a class clown. Despite his eventual success, he regrets not immersing himself more linguistically, noting he is only conversational in Spanish and that fluency would only make himself that much more marketable. However, his family did a great job of balancing assimilation with the retention of "La Cultura," celebrating Noche Buena and other traditions, and he was always proud of his heritage.

Superintendent Pérez initially pursued a business management degree and a minor in psychology, but quickly pivoted to education after finding no fulfillment in the business field, realizing that his calling was aligned with what's best for kids, which should drive everything in education. His professional trajectory began with a tutoring position for English as a second language learners, which led to a fourth-grade teaching position in that same school. He quickly

established himself as one who looked forward to taking on challenges and was accepting of change and new roles, teaching fourth, third, multi-age, fifth, and sixth grade to accommodate budget cuts. His entry into administration came quickly and was often facilitated by others. After just two or three years of teaching, the Assistant Superintendent asked him to apply for an entry-level administrative role in the bilingual department. By age 27 or 28 years old, he was promoted to become the Director of Bilingual Education for an urban city, followed by ascending roles such as Supervising Director for Student Equity and Placement (managing magnet schools, desegregation, and special education placement) and Executive Assistant (Chief of Staff) to the Superintendent. These central office experiences were fraught with adult issues that have nothing to do with children and conflict, leading him to eventually ask for a transfer back to a school, where he became the principal of a junior high. The entire ascension from teacher to Assistant Superintendent took little more than 10 years.

Superintendent Pérez attributed his swift and successful ascent directly to influential mentors and supervisors who recognized and nurtured his potential, noting that he felt very supported along the way. In his first teaching district, the superintendent “must have seen something in me” and subtly mentored him by pulling him in to discuss leadership and handing him educational leadership articles, eventually asking, "Have you ever considered being a principal?" His former superintendent later reconnected with him when Pérez felt a little bit complacent, encouraging him to take on a larger principalship. Another immensely influential figure was his superintendent who was, “By far the most influential person in my life to push me, guide me, mentor me," telling him, "You're destined for bigger things, but you have to stay open to them." Having benefited greatly from this sponsorship, Pérez now views his success as a form of stewardship, feeling a duty to pay it forward. He proactively talks to his director of curriculum

and elementary principal about pursuing the next step, noting, "I feel I need to be selfless in that way, to help them keep growing and keep going for things, because others did that for me."

Regarding gender and opportunities, Pérez asserts, "I don't feel any different than anybody else, in any other ethnicity, any other gender, etc., in terms of my opportunities." However, he acknowledges that his career was significantly influenced and supported by women, including his wife (a social worker who suggested he try teaching), and his Latina Director of Curriculum, making him and her the "two highest ranking leaders of Latino descent" in his district. Although he did not perceive any differences personally between him and his female colleagues as to opportunities, he acknowledges the distinct struggles of women in leadership that he has seen from afar. At the same time, he remembers an instance when he was resented partly because he was popular with a unique professional background. There was an instance in which he recognized the role that bias played when a board member told him he needed to "Go out and get more experience and then come back." A comment he believes they would not have made if he had not been a minority.

Family is very important to Superintendent Pérez, and he has always made sure that the Board of Education knew that his commitment to the district is only outmatched by his commitment to his family. He has always made it a point to carve out important time to be present for his family and calls himself “a family-first guy.” He explained that when he puts family first, it contributes to his ability to serve and persevere in the job. He also wanted his unapologetic devotion to family to serve as a model for up-and-coming educational leaders, so they too seek balance in their positions because it will make them better leaders.

Profile 3 - Dr. Consuelo Colón, Strategic Networking and Advocacy

"We have this external entity, constantly shaking the jar, and then we're fighting with one another, not realizing that they are intentionally doing this because they don't want us to work in collaboration with one another, of course."

Dr. Colón used the analogy of ants in a jar, some black and some red, to articulate that internal conflict and lack of collaboration among people of color that are often driven by outside political entities whose aim is to maintain control by preventing unity. When the jar is still, the ants get along just fine, but when the external force shakes the jar, the ants go to war with each other, unaware of the external forces. Dr. Colón says this underscores the critical need for strategic collaboration among people of color to counter these external forces. She recognized that people of color must intentionally foster this support.

Dr. Consuelo Colón is a highly successful Connecticut Latinx superintendent whose trajectory into educational leadership was driven not only by personal achievement and resilience but also by a strategic, deliberate commitment to collective advancement through networking and organization. Dr. Colón recognized early in her career that individual success was insufficient to dismantle the deep-seated inequities in the education system, particularly the severe underrepresentation of Latinx leaders in Connecticut.

Dr. Colón's motivation stemmed from a profound sense of social justice, born from her experiences growing up poor in a tight-knit Latino community, where her family supported her drive and ambition through educational attainment. With their support, she overcame the firsthand consequences of systemic tracking and exclusion. Despite being highly capable, she was tracked into low-level classes, denied access to AP or dual enrollment courses, and nearly missed college due to financial barriers. This trauma of injustice turned into anger at the system, leading her to pursue education with the goal of institutional change, realizing that kids shouldn't

have to struggle like I’m struggling. I'm going into education because I'm going to change it.” She quickly understood that influence meant *breaking barrier*s and that meant being in increasingly higher positions of power.” Dr. Colón's career progression was intentional, seeking out roles that would build her capacity to lead entire systems. After success as a teacher and building leader, moving from teacher straight to principal, skipping assistant principal roles, she purposefully moved into central office positions to gain holistic experience, believing she needed to experience as many roles inside the system before going into the superintendency. She deliberately sought out advanced training, completing her doctorate through a special union partnership program to gain the credentials necessary for leadership in any type of system, in any state. She recognized that university programs alone were insufficient, stating that they "Don't do a good job of really bringing the reality of the superintendency to the program." Therefore, she supplemented her degrees by attending leadership academies like the New Leaders for New Schools that took her to Boston for an entire summer of leadership training, and the Broad Superintendents Academy (where she was the "first Latina" participant), which offered the "Real, hands-on on about the reality of the superintendency" needed for the job.

Dr. Colón’s success was not a solitary effort; it was the result of prioritizing and cultivating strategic networking and mentorship within a predominantly White and often hostile professional environment. She recognized that to overcome institutional skepticism, she had to seek out mentors and leaders from other backgrounds and political clout. Dr. Colón intentionally cultivated relationships with white male mentors to gain perspective on navigating the White male-dominated field. She believes that as a result, she was consistently encouraged and promoted by people who saw her potential, often women and minority leaders. One of her most influential mentors was a Latina superintendent who told her to stop limiting herself and pushed

her to get certified, saying, "If you don't have your credentials, get them ready. I'm recommending you to be the next superintendent." Another Latinx mentor told her, "You need to go be a superintendent; we need women like you."

She found power in affinity groups of Latino leaders. Upon moving to a large urban district, she was relieved to find herself surrounded by other Latinas who were also leading schools, creating an affinity group where members could have honest conversations and support one another. Dr. Colón is emphatic that this type of networking is the single most important action for Latinx leaders to ascend. She strategically used opportunities like attending state events through her small district position to network with like-minded people around the state. This networking led directly to the creation of a powerful advocacy group.

Dr. Colón was instrumental in forming the Connecticut Association of Latino Administrators and Superintendents (CALAS) affiliate to address the dismal representation statistics. The formation of CALAS was intentionally political and strategic. The founding members, a team of strong Latinx women primarily, were intent on a collective strategy and very clear about wanting to start this new organization to promote Latino educational leadership within the state. They understood that they needed a collective political apparatus because "We are not strategic at all" on a large scale. The group deliberately planned to elevate their members by elevating their visibility, knowing that success would be shared. To her, they said, "You are our face, because we have to put you out there, your name out there for the public to see, so the public knows who you are."

Dr. Colón actively engaged leaders of influence, including Dr. Miguel Cardona, as an early member, prior to his ascent to Commissioner of Education in CT. This was part of a larger, deliberate strategy to gain power and representation. She recalled meeting a future colleague and

saying, "I got her, I got her, I'm definitely going to hook her" to bring her into the network and support her trajectory. Dr. Colón's mission has been to use her position to engage in "Intentionality to support one another." She actively mentors, often telling young leaders, "You could do this, you could do this, YES, you could do this" when their confidence wavers.

Dr. Colón maintains that this organized strategy is necessary because the environment remains toxic and competitive, even among Latinx peers. She has faced sabotage from within the Latino community, where individuals intentionally disparaged her and fed negative information about her to search committees to promote someone else. This internal strife proved to her that Latinx leaders *are not pulling together* in the way necessary for political efficacy and that the Black community is further ahead in creating strong coalitions that the Latino community can use to increase representation of Latinos in leadership.

In difficult times, she has witnessed friction between immigrant Latinos and U.S.-born Latinos, and in CT, where the largest group of Latinos are Puerto Rican, she has witnessed exclusionary actions from the majority group, explaining that at times she detected a pattern of Puerto Rican Board members attacking Latinx superintendents from other Latinx heritages. She says this is likely because, “They don't have a fear of deportation, they don't have vulnerabilities that the Latinos that are coming from other places do, and they resent that Latinos that are coming to [CT’s urban cities] from other places.” She was disheartened by the lack of support of prominent Puerto Rican leaders when non-Puerto Rican Latinx superintendents needed solidarity from their colleagues. Instead, some embattled Latinx superintendents reported they felt slighted and ignored because they “Never heard from [Puerto Rican educational leaders]...[they] stopped taking calls” almost as if they were disassociating with those in trouble.

Ultimately, Dr. Colón believes that Latinx leaders must establish a *strategy* for greater cohesiveness among Latinx leaders, increasing representation, challenging the status quo, and fighting for resources—a fight that *is getting worse* in the current political climate. She warned that without a political strategy and organization, Latinx leaders will continue to face the reality that Connecticut is a place with "Two different standards based on race" and a place where the entire Latino educational pipeline is at risk.

Profile 4 - Dr. Julia Sánchez, Critique of Connecticut

"I will not work in Connecticut again, because Connecticut is a suicide track for people of color."

Dr. Julia Sánchez is a highly influential Latinx superintendent who has led multiple districts across the East Coast, bringing an unyielding focus on social justice derived from her lived experiences as a Latinx student and educator. Her professional and personal trajectory was built on overcoming systemic barriers, instilling in her a unique understanding of the toxicity and challenges facing educational leaders of color, particularly within the complex political landscape of Connecticut.

Dr. Sánchez's early life was marked by a deep sense of family and a keen awareness of socioeconomic and racial disparities. She grew up in impoverished urban areas with parents who supported her as best they could. Her motivation to enter education was not initially pedagogical; she considered careers in medicine or law, but pivoted when she faced the high costs of law school and later when she realized that to answer her calling for service, demanded her presence in schools.

This commitment was primarily driven by her experiences of *injustice.* As a child, she recalls being pulled out of first and second grade to translate for new Spanish-speaking families, noting, “There's something wrong with this picture." She also observed overt tracking and segregation firsthand, remembering that anyone who did not speak English or had a disability was relegated to a demoralizing place known as "room one." At just 15, she opened a small, free *Escuelita* in her home for children whose parents could not afford kindergarten, an effort born from a sense of equity and social justice, though she "Didn't call it equity, I didn't call it social justice" at the time.

Dr. Sánchez began her professional career teaching science and English in urban high schools in the northeast. However, despite graduating with honors from college, she was blacklisted by her own hometown district as a *troublemaker* because she had previously organized protests for bilingual staff and was rejected for a new teacher position. She was forced to seek employment elsewhere. Later, through hard work, her administrative path started in central office roles, leading diversity and equity initiatives, such as serving as the Director of Bilingual Education in a major city, then supervising Director for Student Equity and Placement, developing magnet schools, and managing special education services. She found that her time in the central office was less focused on student performance than she'd hoped for, leading her to prefer time in schools, ultimately becoming a principal.

Dr. Sánchez holds multiple degrees, including a PhD in bilingual education and teacher preparation, and an EdD in leadership from one of the most prestigious universities. She noted that traditional university programs were insufficient, stating that "University programs don't do that job [preparing Latinos for leadership]...they do a different job. They will give you the license." Her essential preparation came instead from intensive training academies and mentorship from influential leaders of color. Her professional choices were intentionally focused on maximizing her influence on the vulnerable population: "My choice has always been to be in a school district with a large population of Latino kids and or a large population of minority kids." She has held several superintendencies and is critical of the unique ways that CT contributes to the difficulty of Latinx superintendents.

Dr. Sánchez offers a strong critique of the systemic barriers and political climate in Connecticut, frequently describing the state as a challenging and hostile environment for leaders of color due to the political climate and the board dynamics in the state. She believes the

environment in Connecticut is "So hostile and vitriolic, there is no opportunity for anyone who is an outsider to come in and exert real change, none. It is a suicide track for people of color." She noted that, despite being considered a blue state, many of the values and political behaviors are "Very conservative and politically toxic." She believes Connecticut is "Heavily invested in making sure its working class remains undisturbed" and views minorities as "The help." This toxicity manifests through constant opposition and microaggressions, where she has received derogatory emails and dealt with union leaders who behave in ways they "Would not have behaved if I were a white male."

She observed that Latinx superintendents must constantly outperform their peers to justify their presence. Dr. Sánchez recounted one instance, declining a superintendency offer after a board member stated that the biggest challenge was "That those Latinos from the Bronx were moving up to their school district, and they were damaging their school district." The failure of other board members to intervene signaled a pervasive, hostile culture.

The challenges extended to interpersonal relations, where Dr. Sánchez noted that she is constantly under attack, navigating curve balls, and managing her environment in fear for her job. She attributed this to the board of education churn, which requires board member elections to occur every two years, some on a rolling basis, but on other boards, all members are elected in the same year. She says building trust, combating inequities, and sustaining change is *nearly impossible.* Adding to the problem of *churn* is a small pool of board member candidates from relatively small towns, making it difficult to attract and sustain candidates with collaborative dispositions that understand the work of the board should be *non-political*.

Dr. Sánchez highlighted the extreme disparity between the growing Latinx student population (currently 32.1% and rising) and the flat number of Latinx superintendents (2.9%).

She specifically noted that the largest urban districts, such as Waterbury and Bridgeport, which are "majority Latino" in terms of student population, are not led by Latinx superintendents. This profound mismatch shows that CT is "Still extremely segregated." She criticized the state's lack of action, noting that the State Department and universities are not actively recruiting or organizing leaders of color to fill these positions. Furthermore, when Latinx superintendents leave, they are often replaced by non-Latinos, preventing growth in representation.

The fight for a Latinx superintendent, according to Dr. Sánchez, is fundamentally about securing resources and opportunities for marginalized students. She criticized districts that tell candidates they want change but then refuse to support necessary systems. She found low expectations in districts “goes beyond the school…it goes beyond the principal…it is the culture of the entire system, and that includes the board." She explained that the low expectations, such as the absence of Latinx students in college-level courses, are not confined to teachers or principals but represent a deeply shared "belief system" throughout the entire district culture, including the board. The desire for equity demands costly resources, such as creating "an algebra camp for kids, they can take algebra in the summer" for students whose parents cannot afford private tutoring. She lamented the lack of rigorous teaching standards in CT, noting that the state does not mandate that all teachers and administrators receive training in second language acquisition, a requirement in states like Massachusetts. She views Massachusetts as "Much more progressive because it dedicates money to have bilingual development for the workforce."

Dr. Sánchez concluded that while superintendency is rewarding because it allows her to fight for opportunities, Latinx leaders need to be prepared "mentally and emotionally" for the difficult conversation required to procure those resources, a fight that she believes is worsening in the current political context.