



PROGRAM  
SPOTLIGHT



# Cardinal Community Learning Centers

Crete, NE

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The Cardinal Community Learning Centers (CCLC) project team in rural Crete, NE recently discovered language barriers in their community that did not exist a few years ago.

The team reviewed school district data and learned that 58% of the K-12 student body speak a language other than English (16 non-English languages total). This represents a barrier to youth and family access and engagement with STEM learning opportunities. The two most commonly spoken languages are Spanish and Karen (spoken by the Karen people from southeast Burma/Myanmar and in Thailand).

## Cardinal Community Learning Center's Family Engagement Plan

CCLC convened an open-house STEM event for Grades K to 5, designed to lower language barriers and increase STEM belonging, especially among Spanish- and Karen-speaking families.

The team *addressed language barriers by translating family-facing information and materials* (e.g., fliers, social media, exit surveys) and recruiting dual/multilingual speakers to engage with families at STEM activity tables.

The team further *created an inclusive environment by recruiting diverse staff and volunteers from local schools and community organizations* (who may already know youth and families), and *servicing culturally relevant foods*. The event included experts from each field (S, T, E, & M), and families were invited to participate in activities that connect with their everyday lives (e.g., cooking, building, farming). Link to [Video of the Event](#).



### The A-HA Moment

The CCLC team were awed by the power of a simple act of engagement: reaching out to a student of Karen descent to ask if his mom might be willing to tell the team about authentic food that could be included and offered at the STEM event.

According to the Site Coordinator, the student “...was like ‘sure, I’ll ask her’. What came back was a handwritten note—she had written out all these recipes and said, ‘Let me know if you want me to help and cook.’ It evolved into her cooking this traditional Karen dish that was offered as part of the event...their family wanted to share their culture with us. This turned into something I hadn’t expected.”

The program team recognized and supported this mother’s interest in taking a more active role in the STEM event (cooking and providing a traditional Karen meal), and provided her the resources to do so (budget for food, transportation to purchase the food, space to cook the food).

The CCLC team shared how they now place cultural sensitivity and responsiveness at the forefront of their thinking about family engagement planning. “Being hyper aware of the language barrier. With the language barrier comes a cultural barrier. We wanted to be sure there are things available to [diverse families]...We’ve tried hard to always be sensitive to these things... now this is more in the forefront...” Thinking more intentionally about the language barriers led to changes in how they invited families.

**“We took the time to present the fliers in different ways...we also handed fliers out to K-5, hung them around town, sent home in backpacks, and the week of the event the kids went home with stickers on their shirt—English and Spanish, just a little sticker they wore home so parents could remember.”**

The CCLC team used multiple methods to measure their success: attendance (# families, # staff, # translators), partnerships (# organizations), event “passports” to show where families engaged, an exit survey to measure satisfaction (in English and Spanish), and anecdotal reports.

When CCLC staff talked with parents the day before the event, one parent shared that their child (an Elementary student) had been looking at the event flier over and over, circling the things she wanted to do there.

Another parent shared that her child was counting the number of “sleeps” before the event. During the event, the CCLC team observed one family’s reaction to being introduced to a Karen translator: “I remember speaking with the family...[with the translator] The families’ eyes lit up to hear their own native language at the event.”

After the event, the Program Director shared:

**“It wasn’t an event that just ended that night. It was just ‘Wow, you put a lot of work into that. We see what you guys do now.’**

**They were excited and happy to be part of that experience. They still talk about it this week.**

**It opened up that door of what is needed in the community...it’s nice to bring families back into the school and get the community together.”**