



BRIGHT SPOT:

La Piñata del Aprendizaje

Modeling quality care through community leaders rooted in culture, dignity, and compassion

Serving FFNs since: **2019**

Area served: **Denver Metro: Montbello, Globeville/Elyria-Swansea and Thornton**

Case study authors: **Ana Elizabeth Chávez Mendoza, Xixi Shen, María de los Ángeles Osorio Cooper, Ph.D.**

La Piñata leadership and staff: **Blanca Madrid and Guadalupe Martinez**



Origin story

In 2018, Blanca Madrid and Guadalupe Martinez launched a pilot program that would eventually become La Piñata del Aprendizaje (The Piñata of Learning). Born from a shared desire to honor and support Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN) caregivers, the initiative centers the dignity of Hispanic¹ women as the first educators of young children in their communities. Guadalupe and Blanca committed to working alongside FFN caregivers to elevate, recognize, and support them in developing their unique expertise within an environment that honors their cultural values and ways of knowing.

As longtime facilitators of early child care training, Blanca and Guadalupe witnessed firsthand how caregivers were often mistreated and even humiliated. Public shaming and ridicule were sometimes used to promote so-called “best practices,”

¹ La Piñata del Aprendizaje uses the term Hispanic to encompass Spanish-speaking cultures from Mexico, Central and South America.

acompañamiento (n.), the practice rooted in Hispanic culture of walking alongside someone, symbolically taking their hand to help them reach their goal



showing a lack of empathy for and sociocultural understanding of FFN caregivers. In La Piñata leadership's eyes, this not only hindered the caregivers' learning but also undermined their confidence and ability to improve their caregiving practices. "Families were just a number to organizations," Guadalupe recalled.

The two co-founders also recognized a broader issue: early education is often undervalued within Hispanic communities. "How can we expect our community to grow in this important area of early education?" Guadalupe asked. In many of their home countries, early childhood programs are rare and financially out of reach. "There are very few programs in our countries," she explained. Motivated by these intersecting challenges, Blanca and Guadalupe began to design what would become La Piñata del Aprendizaje.

The piñata is a symbol of joy, celebration, and collective effort.

The name La Piñata del Aprendizaje carries deep cultural meaning. At many Hispanic celebrations, children take turns striking a piñata, working together to reveal the treasures inside. When the candy finally spills, each child takes what they need most. In the same spirit, La Piñata del Aprendizaje creates a shared space where caregivers and families build community and support one another in the pursuit of knowledge and growth. Each participant takes what they need, in their own way, at their own pace—always in an atmosphere of joy, dignity, and mutual respect. "Everyone who walks through our doors is our guest of honor," says Blanca.

Version 1.0 of the program began with a modest \$1,700 grant, focused on helping FFN caregivers and families build skills—but most importantly, helping them see themselves as a child's first teacher. "We wanted every family to understand their vital role in early education," says Guadalupe. Over time, the program grew

into a full-fledged nonprofit. Today, La Piñata offers six distinct programs for FFN caregivers: three virtual programs, one weekly in-person gathering, one intensive training course, and one employment pathway. Each program reflects the founders' commitment to listening deeply to the community and responding with heart.

"Here, there is no judgment, no blame, no finger-pointing. There is acompañamiento, and a deep understanding that an FFN is a complex, whole human being with so much to contribute."

—Blanca Madrid, Co-founder



Teaching and learning through play and exploration

La Piñata’s pedagogical model centers around learning through play and exploration. Each program session offers a warm, welcoming environment where families and children can explore together. Caregivers receive guidance from facilitators, who model effective learning interactions. The goal is to empower caregivers to personalize and replicate these educational activities on their own. Daily sessions include activities like music, animal sounds, numbers, and letters. Each session ends with guided, age-appropriate activities such as storytime, snack, and a warm farewell—constantly reinforcing the caregiver’s role as the child’s primary support for learning and growth.

“We give the explanation, model the activity, identify the areas to focus on with each child—and then the parent or caregiver takes the lead, because we won’t always be there. They have to learn to bring this structure into their own homes.”

–Blanca Madrid, Co-founder

The organization offers classes for both FFNs and the children they care for in three Denver Metro locations with large Hispanic populations: Montbello, Thornton, and Elyria-Swansea. They partner with faith-based organizations that generously offer their space in exchange for a small donation. “We know they lend us the classrooms with love, and we want to give back in kind,” says Guadalupe. Once a week, each church classroom comes to life as La Piñata facilitators transform the space into a haven of love, respect, and learning.

Participants express appreciation for the thoughtful and compassionate way they are treated. La Piñata goes beyond early

education to address the broader needs of FFNs through what the co-founders call “doing fieldwork”—spending time in the communities to uncover unmet needs. As one caregiver, Ms. Ana Luisa, puts it: “Well, Guadalupe and Blanca really care about us. I mean, they truly care about our well-being.”

Partnerships expand impact

Since 2023, La Piñata has evolved from an educational initiative into a more holistic family well-being program. The COVID-19 pandemic made clear that meeting basic needs is a prerequisite for learning. “We can’t ask a parent to read to their child if they’re worried about paying rent,” says Blanca. In response, La Piñata forged strategic partnerships with aligned organizations to offer services such as financial guidance and access to culturally relevant resources. One such collaboration is with a nonprofit (not a food bank) that purchases culturally appropriate groceries for the Hispanic families La Piñata serves.

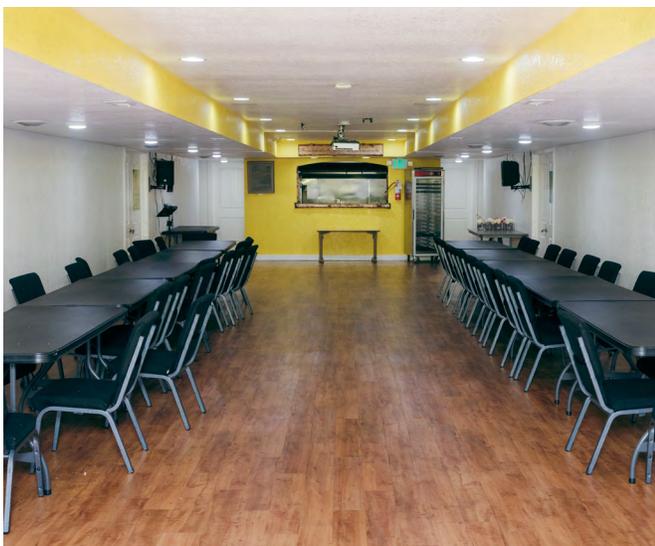
“Every single one of our partnerships is an extension of our values. As our reach grows, so does our responsibility—because the needs are real, and our families are telling us what they need.”

–Blanca Madrid, Co-founder

La Piñata measures its success through children’s developmental progress across various domains, as well as through observations made by individuals outside the organization. They use tools like the ASQ (Ages & Stages Questionnaire), a widely used developmental screening tool, to help assess children’s development across cognitive, motor, and knowledge domains. Recognition has also come from outside organizations. Social workers at a Montbello clinic noticed notable improvements

among the families they were serving—many of whom were attending La Piñata. They saw improvements not only in the children themselves, but also in parents’ understanding of child development. This led them to visit the La Piñata to learn more about its methods and impact. This growing recognition has led city organizations to support La Piñata’s expansion into the Swansea and Thornton neighborhoods. In each new location, the program has been met with enthusiasm: demand quickly exceeds capacity and generates waitlists.

Most recently, La Piñata launched a caregiver paid internship program, connecting 15 FFN caregivers with employers such as local organizations and government agencies for on-site childcare. These organizations specifically sought out La Piñata FFNs to deliver high-quality onsite child care because of their experience and training. This employment initiative functions as both practical training and dignified, fair-paying work.



What makes La Piñata del Aprendizaje a **BRIGHT SPOT?**

La Piñata’s mission is to strengthen caregivers’ knowledge and skills in supporting child development while enhancing their autonomy and sense of responsibility as children’s first teachers. At the same time, the program emphasizes self-care, recognizing that personal well-being is essential to providing quality child care. It also nurtures an understanding of what it means to be part of an interdependent, caring community.

La Piñata has been embraced with enthusiasm by the FFN caregivers it serves. These caregivers not only recognize their own personal growth, but also credit the respectful, dignified treatment they receive with helping them understand the essential role they play in early childhood education. La Piñata is transforming how Hispanic communities perceive and engage with early learning, uplifting the self-esteem of caregivers whose work has long been undervalued or made invisible. Ms. Isela shares: “Before, I described myself only as a babysitter. Now, I see myself as a professional. Thanks to La Piñata, I have more tools and materials to improve the care I give children.”

La Piñata recognizes that many FFNs may not have had access to formal education or up-to-date information about child development. Knowledge is therefore shared with empathy and cultural awareness, in a space where participants feel safe to ask questions, learn, and grow—free from fear or judgment.

Through modeling, caregivers are taught how to implement developmentally appropriate

“**For me, La Piñata is family, love, and wisdom. Family, because we feel at home here; love, because Guadalupe and Blanca transmit that affection to the children and to us; and wisdom, for everything they’ve taught us through the courses and *acompañamiento*.**”

Ms. Rosa
FFN

practices with children in a culturally respectful way. Rather than imposing strategies, La Piñata warmly invites participants to explore new ideas and try them for themselves. Guadalupe explains it through a well-known saying: “I’m telling you, Juan, so you can hear me, Pedro,” illustrating how indirect communication can encourage organic growth.

Modeling also fosters leadership and empowerment. More experienced participants help guide new families, building a community of peer learning. As Blanca shares: “Current families are the ones guiding the new families. We just say, ‘Come sit here with Jocelyn and see how they’re using the sensory area,’ and little by little, they learn.” In this way, caregivers don’t just acquire knowledge—they become agents of change. Many of them now work with La Piñata as facilitators and family liaisons after first participating in the program, completing the

training, and joining the employment initiative. As Blanca reflects, “We can see that we are helping mothers climb the professional ladder.”

One of La Piñata’s central goals is to support children and families in transitioning into formal education. Guadalupe explains: “We want that transition to be as smooth as possible. As Hispanic families, we’ve identified many factors that make it difficult—and our job is to help prepare them.” To that end, the program emphasizes the value of a strong support network, rooted in the belief that parenting is a collective responsibility.

La Piñata also promotes caregivers’ emotional and physical well-being, offering spaces for reflection and psychological support. One

participant, Naty, shares: “One thing that has really impacted me is that they promote self-care. I’ve learned that if I’m doing well, the children will be even better.” These practices boost caregivers’ confidence and reinforce their identity as professionals.

La Piñata’s inclusive, culturally-grounded, and compassionate approach empowers FFNs and elevates their crucial role in children’s lives. The organization meets real needs, affirming that collective well-being depends on mutual care and solidarity. Its commitment to education, dignity, and community well-being has fueled its growth—making it a true model of grassroots transformation.

**“If we want to make an impact,
we must go beyond the classroom. We need to
reach homes, families, and communities.
Raising a child is a shared task.”**

–Blanca Madrid, Co-founder

