

Personal Statement  
Meghan Ochoa

I have worked in the Olympia School District in both elementary and middle schools for the past ten years. I have lived in Olympia all my life; I even work at the same middle school I attended as a student. We are a diverse community filled with pockets of different cultures with the majority being latinx. However this is NOT represented in our staffing. Due to the large number of staff that only know English, this disproportionately impacts our MLL students. If we are unable to communicate a wealth of knowledge to those that have been historically oppressed, then we are doing a great disservice to our community and our progress as a country. People in positions of leadership and public service should understand and represent the people they serve. When students see people they identify with as doctors, engineers, caretakers, teachers, they internalize their own belonging in the community and ability to consider such roles for their own future. To get these types of people, we must first educate them. If we are unable to communicate that knowledge to an individual, then who are we to demand they know it?

It is our responsibility as humans to pass on what we know to others so that humankind can persist and thrive. It is our responsibility as educators to impart knowledge to our students. If you have a student that is unable to understand the way that you are communicating, it is your responsibility as an educator to adapt and change to communicate in a way that the individual CAN understand. Otherwise you are withholding knowledge from a certain group of people, which has been the unfortunate reality in our country since the conception of the United States. If we are to progress as a society, we need to embrace our community members' different ways of thinking and communicating instead of providing a box and forcing them to fit in it. Those who have had good reasons to remain silent should be given the opportunity to speak up. We need to provide a supportive and welcoming community to those we may not yet understand but strive to. This is why I want to not only apply for the Masters in Teaching Program, but am excited for the opportunity and would be honored to be a part of the Integrated Multilingual Learner Pathway.

Language is culture. It represents the rich diversity and personal expression that gives an individual connection to their native land, no matter how many generations removed or miles apart. Racism, colonialism and forced integration removes this connection. When my grandparents immigrated from Mexico and had my father and his six siblings, they would not teach him Spanish because they didn't want him to face discrimination and wanted him to assimilate to the culture of the United States. It was a way to afford him a different level of safety and opportunity that my grandparents could not have as they faced a multitude of difficulties adjusting to life in the U.S. Both of my dad's parents had a basic elementary education. My dad's father was particularly harsh on him as my dad struggled with undiagnosed ADHD, and often resorted to corporal punishment for poor grades as that is what he knew to do. My father attended Catholic school and struggled in class, as many students with ADHD do, and was what was known as a "hallway kid" - someone who was always sent to the hall for behavior and was admonished and punished by the nuns. My father felt caught between two worlds; his parents were desperately trying to push him towards the customs of the

U.S. while he wanted and needed the connection and support of shared culture with his family. The impact of his upbringing was a loss of culture, personal expression, and connection that was passed on to me. Later on in life, I took Spanish classes and attended a Spanish conversational group led by a friend who emigrated from Mexico as an adult. During these moments, I fully realized the loss and disconnect within me to my cultural background. Not only did I lose family history, it was replaced with a white-washed worldview. With the loss of language, came the loss of culture. This is a grief similar to losing a loved one.

However, inspiration comes from places of darkness just as it comes from places of light. In my position as a middle school para-educator working in special education and science classes, I am the only Latinx educator in the school. This is NOT representative of our student body, which is far more diverse than our staff team. My experience working with and observing students in both elementary and middle school settings has shown me that what has happened in my own family is still commonplace amongst the Latinx students in our community. I heard a six-year-old scold his two younger cousins to stop speaking Spanish and that when they are at school, they are to only speak English. Two of the Special Education classes I assist in have a majority of Latinx students. We provide certain support for children who meet specific qualifications, but I have yet to see translated textbooks provided or grade level MLL instructors. We have had multiple staff discussions regarding teachers writing up students of color at a disproportionate ratio to the student body. The district talks about equity, but I have yet to see them teach and enact it within their staffing. I have heard multiple staff discussing their issues regarding students of color and their behaviors. There is often a lack of empathy for the student and the situation of their family. They often fail to take into account generational trauma, language barriers, different cultural norms, and the impacts of poverty on marginalized families.

The impact of racism on POC, throughout our entire history, is horrendous. Bodies should not have to handle that much consistent stress. The chemicals released by stress literally change your brain and cause lasting harm. When under stress, we are pushed into a fight, flight, or freeze response and this can have generational consequences. For example, my father not receiving a promotion at work due to racism would bring that stress home to our family. The struggle that he was going through at work transferred to a harsher child-rearing method. This caused me to live in a constant state of anxiety. My father didn't understand this anxiety because at least it wasn't like the belt he got growing up. I see similar life experiences with the students I work with, and they come to school in fight, flight or freeze mode. Getting angry and explosive, yelling at their teacher and peers: fight. Chronic absenteeism, tardiness, and frequent breaks: flight. Not performing during class: freeze. More of our teachers need to understand where these students are coming from, but are prevented by a language barrier. These students are our community, they are our future, and we continue to hold them back by not providing a genuinely empathetic and understanding environment. In contrast, a multilingual model gives access to knowledge in the way that the students can best understand it.

Equity runs generations deep. I hear our district speak of equity, and I know that we have made progress, but it is not enough. It is hard to not call into question the dismissiveness of the district, especially when a resounding majority of our staff are white which does not represent our Olympia community as a whole. If we are to repair this world, we need to understand and help each other. In doing so, we strengthen our community. We need to bridge these gaps of understanding through language. Tracy Chapman once said "There's a power in words. There's a power in being able to explain and describe and articulate what you know and feel and believe about the world, and about yourself." I want to put that power into the hands of our children. I want them to believe in their own ability, their own ideas, and share all that they can with the world around them. I want to empower ALL of our students, but especially those who come from cultural backgrounds that have historically had their power stripped from them. I want to help those students realize their own strengths, resiliency, creativity, and self-

awareness by learning in a space where students learn languages together and support each other in the learning process. With an MLL endorsement from Evergreen, I could not only accomplish my dream of repairing a broken line of family traditions lost due to forced language and cultural assimilation, I could connect with a multitude of others for the rest of my life. As a group of educators, we can create a classroom where we teach and celebrate various languages, cultures, and diversity. We can help mend the tears in our society. We can establish a practice of multicultural celebration rather than trauma. This creates a ripple effect of reparations towards a more empathetic, kind, supportive, and caring community and world.

I've grown up with a strong connection to the Olympia community. I have worked in this community as an educator for the majority of my adult life. I have experience and a story that can heal both myself and the students that I work with. It is for all these reasons that I would be honored to participate in the Masters In Teaching Integrated Pathway to elevate the voices and experiences of English Language Learners and Multilingual Learners. I value the education of children deeply and I look forward to expanding my own educational background so as to better serve the diverse group of students that I work with. I'm excited to help support them to combine their multicultural influences with their own thoughts and feelings. In my experience, racism comes from a lack of understanding; if we can't speak the same language then we are depriving ourselves of profound connection. The dominant culture of white, monolingual, English-speaking Americans puts the pressure on immigrants and minority groups to learn the English language to successfully assimilate to the United States. However, as educators, we should not turn away from opportunities to broaden our own minds. By teaching in a way that embraces multilingual communication, we connect with more students and their families, in our own community as well as others. Our goal as educators should be to create a unified and empathetic student body and I believe I am an individual who can help drive our future to that realization.