



A Promise Fulfilled: A Legacy of Shared Responsibility for Educational Opportunity

For the Students and Families of El Monte and South El Monte





MISSION

Ensure a college-ready culture in El Monte and surrounding communities.

VISION

A community that supports its children to reach their full potential.

COMMITMENT

Our commitment is to diversity, equity and inclusion. We support our students and families by building partnerships and developing collaborations that reflect the diversity of our community and break down barriers to access.

We facilitate transformational changes that eliminate outcome disparities for historically underserved and underrepresented populations. We work to model equity within our organization and support this work in our community.

FOUNDING DEDICATION (2011)

*To all El Monte students and their families –
May a Pledge and a Promise
carry you forward into the
light of the future.*

A MESSAGE TO EL MONTE

For more than a decade, the El Monte Promise Foundation brought together people who believed in a simple but powerful idea: every child deserves the opportunity to reach their full potential.

From the beginning, our work was about more than any one program. It was about building a community where schools, families, colleges, businesses, nonprofit organizations, local government, and philanthropy shared responsibility for the success, well-being and future of young people.

Over the years, thousands of students and families participated in programs that helped children prepare for college, encouraged families to save for higher education, strengthened parent leadership, and connected families to information and resources. More El Monte students continued on to higher education, and later cohorts of Scholars Savings participants showed strong college enrollment and persistence. Just as importantly, the community built stronger relationships across institutions, parents grew as leaders, and collaboration became part of how El Monte approached educational opportunity.

As the El Monte Promise Foundation concludes its work, we do so with tremendous gratitude for everyone who built and sustained this effort.

The El Monte Promise Foundation may be closing, but the Promise continues—in the people, partnerships, and shared commitment that remain.



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Services, Rio Hondo College
Jessica Ancona, Mayor, City of El Monte

El Monte Promise Foundation Staff

Alejandro Araujo, Project Manager
Sergio Silva, Intern
Miguel Zavaleta, Intern

Chapter One

OUR BEGINNING: WHEN A COMMUNITY UNITED FOR EDUCATION

The El Monte Promise Foundation began with a simple but ambitious idea: every child in El Monte should have the opportunity to reach their full potential, and the entire community should share responsibility for making that possible.



The idea grew out of a period of significant community investment and reflection. In 2007, the California Community Foundation (CCF) selected only El Monte out of many communities throughout Los Angeles County, for a ten-year, \$10 million Community Building Initiative—a place based investment designed to strengthen local leadership, build community capacity, and address long-standing inequities.

CCF's investment began with listening to the community. Through the Community Building Initiative, resources were dedicated to engaging parents, residents and other stakeholders to identify the needs and priorities of El Monte families. The community raised many issues, including affordable housing, open space, economic development and immigration, all reflecting the realities of a working class community. Through these conversations, a clear and shared priority emerged: El Monte families wanted to build stronger systems of opportunity for their children. Over the course of a decade, CCF's \$10 million investment supported multiple organizations, partnerships, and initiatives across the El Monte community, reflecting priorities identified through the broader community-building effort. The El Monte Promise Foundation was one of the initiatives that grew out of that work.

Together, El Monte families envisioned a community where young people could access quality education and career pathways, pursue college, and build a foundation for greater economic mobility. Families wanted their children to have the support, resources and opportunities to succeed. That community voice helped establish a shared vision for El Monte's future.

El Monte Promise Foundation Board member Norma E. Garcia-Gonzalez recalled a community deeply committed to education—including residents who had repeatedly supported local school bonds—but where many parents did not have the information they needed to help their children navigate the path to college. A broader vision took shape: that every child should have the opportunity to pursue higher education, and that schools, colleges, families, civic leaders, businesses, and community organizations could work together to help make that possible.

By 2010, that vision was beginning to take institutional form. The El Monte Union High School District, Rio Hondo College, Cal State LA, and UC Irvine signed the El Monte Pledge Compact, committing to work together to strengthen educational pathways for students.

But the community wanted to understand more deeply what it would take to turn that commitment into opportunity for more children.

In 2011, nearly 300 parents participated in a community needs assessment alongside representatives from local school districts, higher education, community solution, the process asked families and community members what children needed to succeed.

The findings reinforced what community conversations had begun to reveal. Parents had high aspirations for their children, but many lacked clear information about college requirements, financial aid, and how to prepare early. Institutions were doing important work, but often separate from each other, families, and the broader community. There was no shared structure connecting what happened in elementary school to high school, college, and beyond.

The challenge was not a lack of commitment. It was a lack of connection. That realization shaped what came next.

In 2012, the El Monte Promise Foundation (EMPF), as a backbone organization, was established to create the connective infrastructure the community needed. It was not designed to replace the work of schools, colleges, families, or community organizations. Its role was to bring those efforts together: convening partners, engaging families, using data to identify barriers, testing new approaches, and building systems that could make college preparation a shared community responsibility.

Former EMPF Project Manager Christina Davila later described EMPF as both “the glue” that kept conversations alive and “an incubator for ideas.”

That role allowed EMPF to work across institutional boundaries in ways individual organizations often could not. Parents, educators, colleges, businesses, civic leaders, and community organizations could come together around a common goal. The Foundation created space not only to coordinate existing efforts, but also to identify gaps, develop new approaches, and build stronger connections across the institutions serving El Monte children.

That collaboration helped create systems and practices that became part of the community’s educational landscape—from workshops that helped families understand college requirements, to stronger connections between high schools and colleges, to efforts that made college information and support more accessible to students. Garcia reflected on how deeply some of those changes eventually became embedded:

“There were a lot of systems that were built that now we take for granted because they are now in place. The El Monte Promise Foundation built those structures.”
— Norma E. Garcia-Gonzalez,
EMPF Board Member

From the beginning, EMPF understood that no single program could create a college-going culture. The work had to begin early, continue across a child’s educational journey, involve families as partners, and address the barriers that made college feel out of reach.

That philosophy became the foundation for what followed: a cradle-to-college partnership built around shared responsibility, early preparation, family engagement, financial readiness, collaboration, and the belief that the future of El Monte’s children belonged to the entire community.

THE EL MONTE PROMISE: FROM VISION TO LEGACY



2007

INVESTING IN EL MONTE

The California Community Foundation (CCF) launches the El Monte Community Building Initiative (CBI), a \$10 million, 10-year investment in education, community resources, affordable housing, healthy lifestyles, and opportunity in the El Monte region.

2009

LISTENING TO THE COMMUNITY

Following a series of community listening sessions, CCF refocuses the CBI around a collective-impact education initiative shaped by the educational priorities identified by parents and the community.

2010

CREATING A PATH TO COLLEGE

Rio Hondo College convenes UC Irvine and Cal State LA to form the El Monte Union Pledge, creating a clearer pathway from El Monte Union High School District to community college and four-year universities.

2014

STRENGTHENING STRATEGY & PARENT LEADERSHIP

The El Monte Promise Agreement is formally adopted and signed by the El Monte City School District, Mountain View School District, El Monte Union High School District, Rio Hondo College and the City of El Monte, establishing a shared commitment to expand educational opportunity for El Monte students and families. The agreement formalizes collaboration around data sharing, coordinated programming, shared resources and stronger educational pathways from early learning through college and career. EMPF establishes its Parent Advisory Committee (PAC) and begins implementation of the Scholars Savings Program. EMPF adopts a five-year strategic plan, shared Mission and Vision, a financial literacy curriculum for grades 1–8, and a fundraising plan. EMPF also launches an internship program and convenes an elected officials briefing.

2015

LAUNCHING SCHOLARS SAVINGS & EARNING NATIONAL RECOGNITION

EMPF officially launches the Scholars Savings Program and expands parent financial literacy efforts. EMPF is recognized as a Bright Spot in Hispanic Education by the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics and receives a Citibank grant to advance financial education.



2021

GROWING SAVINGS, PARTNERSHIPS & READINESS

EMPF receives a \$600,000 California Student Aid Commission grant to support college savings accounts and opens its 500th Scholars Savings account. EMPF joins the StriveTogether Network and distributes more than 3,000 summer reading booklets.

2016

MEASURING PROGRESS

EMPF produces its first Educational Scorecard, tracking key educational outcomes for El Monte students.

2017

EXPANDING FINANCIAL READINESS & COLLEGE ACCESS

EMPF commissions teachers to develop and pilot an elementary financial literacy curriculum. Building on the El Monte Pledge Compact, Rio Hondo College became the first community college in the State of California and Los Angeles County to offer two years of free tuition.

2022

LAUNCHING THE ROADMAP TO COLLEGE

EMPF launches the Roadmap to College, providing grade-by-grade college-readiness guidance to 13,000 PreK–8 students.



2011

FROM A PLEDGE TO A PROMISE

CCF publishes A Pledge and A Promise: Building a Seamless Pathway to College for El Monte Students and Families, documenting community needs and opportunities.

2012

ESTABLISHING THE EL MONTE PROMISE FOUNDATION

The CBI establishes the El Monte Promise Foundation (EMPF) to convene and coordinate community partners around the shared work. EMPF creates its leadership structure, Board of Directors, advisory boards, and bylaws.

2013

BUILDING THE FOUNDATION

EMPF becomes a project of Community Partners and holds its first funders briefing and Board retreat. A CCF planning grant supports development of an educational scorecard and work plan with education, family, business, civic, and community partners. EMPF also develops the Scholars Savings Program and welcomes its first AmeriCorps VISTA Fellow.

2018

DEEPENING THE CRADLE-TO-COLLEGE APPROACH

EMPF expands its regional commitment as the City of South El Monte formally adopts the El Monte Promise Foundation Agreement, strengthening a shared educational pathway for students across El Monte and South El Monte.

The Scholars Savings Program expands across all three school districts and more than 30 schools. EMPF hosts its first annual College and Career Conference and partners with Abriendo Puertas to strengthen parent knowledge, leadership, and advocacy.

2019

EXPANDING COLLEGE SAVINGS

EMPF is one of nine programs statewide awarded California's Every Kid Counts College Savings Program Grant to expand the Scholars Savings Program.



2020

RESPONDING TO THE EFFECTS OF COVID-19

EMPF adopts a three-year strategic plan focused on helping the community respond to and recover from COVID-19 while strengthening the cradle-to-college pathway. Development begins on the Roadmap to College, a grade-based guide for students and families from PreK through 8th grade.

2023

EXPANDING CALKIDS PARTICIPATION

EMPF expanded college savings efforts, with the help of a grant by the state of California's Scholarshare Investment Board, to support eligible El Monte and South El Monte students to enroll in the CalKIDS program.

2024-2025

STRENGTHENING PARENT LEADERSHIP

Strengthened parent-led community outreach by training EMPF's Parent Advisory Committee (PAC) parent ambassadors to lead community outreach and connect families with college access, financial literacy, SSP, CalKIDS, and Roadmap to College resources.

2026

DEEPENING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Launched the Peer-to-Peer College Access Ambassador Program in partnership with the El Monte Union High School District, providing paid internships to 24 students across all six high schools. EMPF fulfills its commitment to provide Scholar Savings Dollars to 559 Scholar Savings Accounts (college savings accounts) for a total of \$ 152,000 (funding).

Chapter Two

TURNING THE PROMISE INTO PRACTICE

The El Monte Promise was never intended to be a single program. It was designed as a connected set of strategies that addressed barriers families identified—from understanding how to prepare for college, to navigating financial aid, to paying for higher education, to knowing where to turn for support.

Over time, those strategies evolved as EMPF listened to families, examined data, tested approaches, and worked with partners to respond to changing needs. Former Project Manager Christina Davila described the early years as a period of “trial and error,” with the Foundation learning that even well-designed resources could fall short if families faced other barriers to accessing them.

1 Making College Financially Possible: Scholars Savings

For many El Monte families, one of the greatest barriers to college was financial. Parents wanted their children to pursue higher education, but the cost could make that future feel out of reach.

The Scholars Savings Program approached that challenge differently than a traditional scholarship. Rather than waiting until students reached their senior year of high school, EMPF encouraged families to begin preparing and saving early. Through a partnership with my529, families could open a 529 college savings account with no minimum deposit required, while EMPF provided financial education and incentives that rewarded continued saving.



El Monte Promise Foundation Founding Board Member Jeff Seymour recalled that parents consistently identified money as a barrier. The goal was not to convince families that they could save the entire cost of college, but to help them understand that starting to save mattered—and that limited financial means did not have to put college beyond their children’s reach. Just as important, the act of saving sent a powerful message to children: going to college mattered to their parents, and their families were investing in that future alongside them. The philosophy behind the account was as important as the dollars in it.

With support from the California Community Foundation (CCF), the El Monte Promise Foundation worked with Dr. Ed Khashadourian of Opportunity to Assets, a national leader in developing college savings programs, to create an approach relevant to El Monte’s immigrant and low income families. Rather than importing a model from somewhere else, EMPF and Khashadourian held multiple focus groups with parents and families to design a college savings program by and for the El Monte community.

Parent participation was intentional from the beginning. Rather than automatically opening accounts for students, EMPF asked families to make the choice to participate and begin saving themselves. Parents became advocates for the program, hosting

gatherings, sharing their experiences with other families, and encouraging them to begin saving for their children's educational futures.

The result was the creation of the Scholars Savings Program in partnership with my529, Utah's official educational savings plan provider. Over the life of the program, 559 Scholars Savings accounts were opened, with families and partners accumulating more than \$1.2 million for students' educational futures. EMPF also partnered with local school districts to bring financial literacy into elementary classrooms, reinforcing the idea that saving and preparing for college could begin long before high school.

559 Scholars Savings
accounts opened
\$1.2 million
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educational futures

This community driven approach helped establish EMPF as a statewide leader in children's savings accounts. The Foundation received multiple State of California grants, including funding through the California Student Aid Commission, to strengthen and expand Scholars Savings and incentivize college savings among local families. The experience in El Monte demonstrated how a locally designed program could engage families, build a culture of saving, and make college planning part of a child's educational journey from an early age.

As California expanded its own approach to children's savings accounts, EMPF's role evolved. With the launch of CalKIDS, families increasingly turned to EMPF with questions about how the statewide program related to Scholars Savings and how they could register for and benefit from both. EMPF identified technology and digital literacy as barriers for some families and responded by helping parents navigate the programs, access their accounts, and take advantage of the resources available to their children.

EMPF had moved from helping pioneer the college savings movement to serving as a trusted community bridge, helping ensure that statewide investments translated into real opportunities for El Monte and South El Monte students and families.

That work deepened in 2023, when EMPF received a grant from the ScholarShare Investment Board to expand awareness and participation in both Scholars Savings and CalKIDS. EMPF conducted community outreach, developed multilingual materials, worked through local schools and community events, and ultimately reached more than 3,400 people through the initiative.

2 **Creating a Roadmap to College**

Families made clear that financial preparation alone was not enough. College for first gen students could be difficult to navigate because the path itself was often unclear: what students should be learning at different ages, when families should begin preparing, how financial aid worked, and what steps would eventually lead to college.

The Roadmap to College grew directly from that need. Developed over three years with input from families, students, educators, college and career counselors, and

community partners, it created a framework that gave families a clearer view of the path to college from the earliest years.

The result was not simply one college guide. The PreK–8 Roadmap provided grade-by-grade milestones designed to help families understand what college readiness looked like throughout a child’s early education, including kindergarten readiness, early-grade reading, and middle-grade math. The work was later extended through high school. Dr. Maribel Garcia, Superintendent of the El Monte City School District, recalled that the Roadmap grew out of conversations with parents about the support they needed and collaboration across districts to identify the learning milestones and activities students needed at every grade level. At the high school level, that included preparing students to complete A–G requirements, apply for financial aid, and navigate the college application and enrollment process. EMPF hosted trainings for families on how to use the Roadmaps, along with opportunities and resources connected to their milestones, including college tours and activities that introduced young children to financial planning.

Each year, approximately 15,000 Roadmap materials were distributed through local school districts, with another 6,000 reaching families and community members through other channels.

The Roadmap was one way EMPF made the path to college easier to navigate. Students could also turn directly to El Monte Promise Foundation for support.

{ “I thought I was going to be alone in the process.” }

— Madeline Peralta,
Former El Monte Student

Former El Monte student Madeline Peralta remembers going to the EMPF office during the summer for help with college applications and learning about different college pathways. She recalled the value of having someone with the knowledge and experience to help her navigate a process she had expected to face largely on her own.

3 Strengthening the Transition to College

EMPF also worked with institutional partners to make the transition from high school to college more direct.

Its partnership with Rio Hondo College helped establish the Rio Promise, which provided eligible students with their first two academic years of enrollment fees. The program became the first Community College Promise program in California and reflected a central principle of EMPF’s work: removing barriers required institutions to change systems, not simply asking students to navigate those systems more effectively.

The partnership extended beyond financial support. EMPF helped strengthen connections between high schools and Rio Hondo College, including efforts to

bring college application assistance directly to students and improve the transition into college-level coursework. Former Executive Director Jennifer Cobian recalled pioneering work with Rio Hondo College to use high school transcripts to determine college math placement, part of a broader effort to create more direct pathways into college-level coursework.

4 Putting Families at the Center

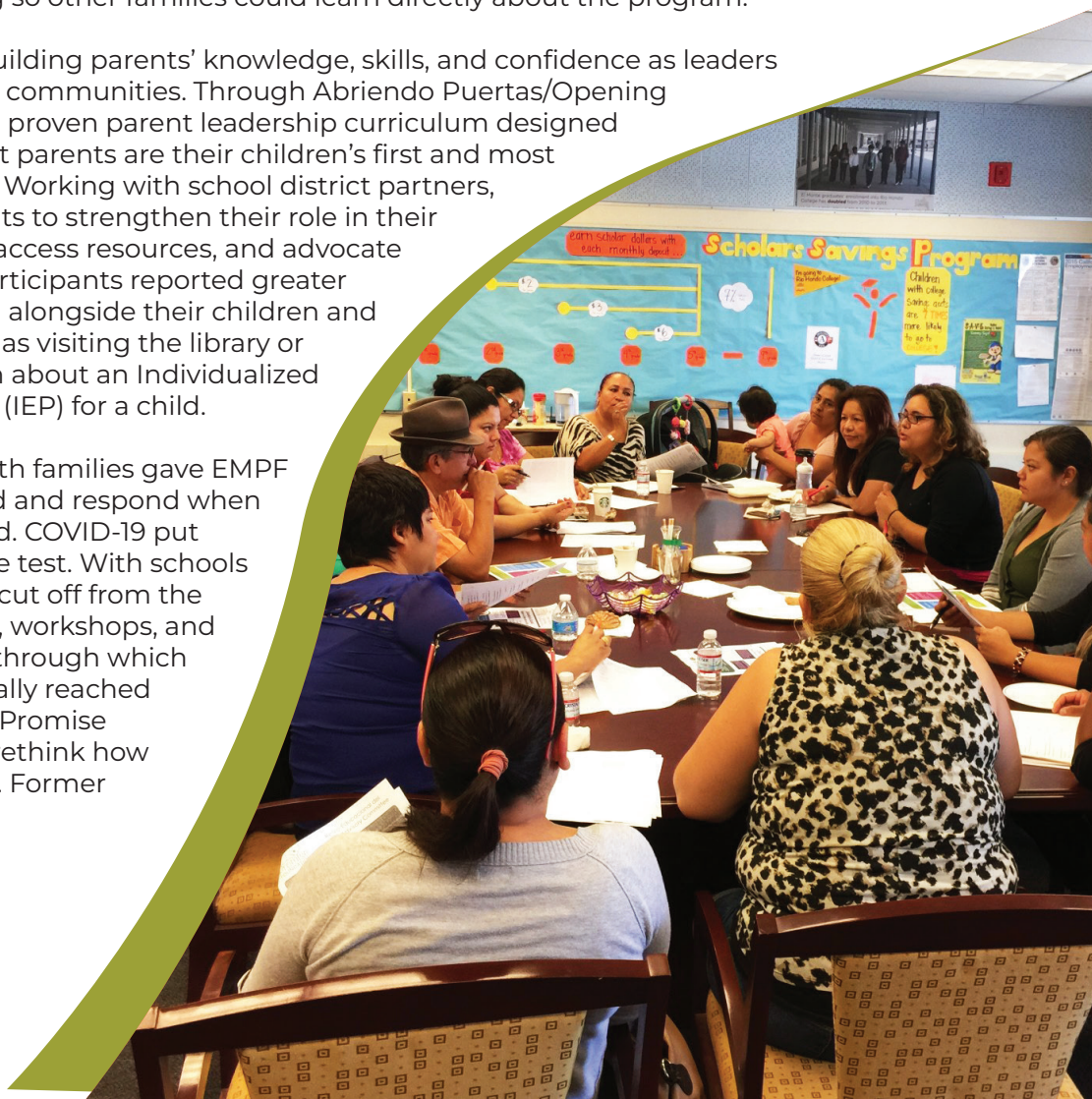
Across its work, EMPF treated families not simply as recipients of information, but as partners in building a college-going culture. Parents helped identify needs, shape programs, and determine how those programs could better work for families.

The Roadmap offers one example: its development began with a need identified by parents, who then worked alongside students, educators, college and career counselors, and community partners to shape the Roadmap. Their input helped generate resources and activities including college tours for students and parents, conversations about how parents could support their children academically, and information about vocational pathways.

Through the Parent Advisory Committee, parents became messengers and leaders within the community. They shared information and referrals with other families and brought their perspectives into EMPF's decisions about programs and outreach. In 2021, for example, feedback from the Parent Advisory Committee about how to promote Scholars Savings led EMPF to organize a public presentation during a committee meeting so other families could learn directly about the program.

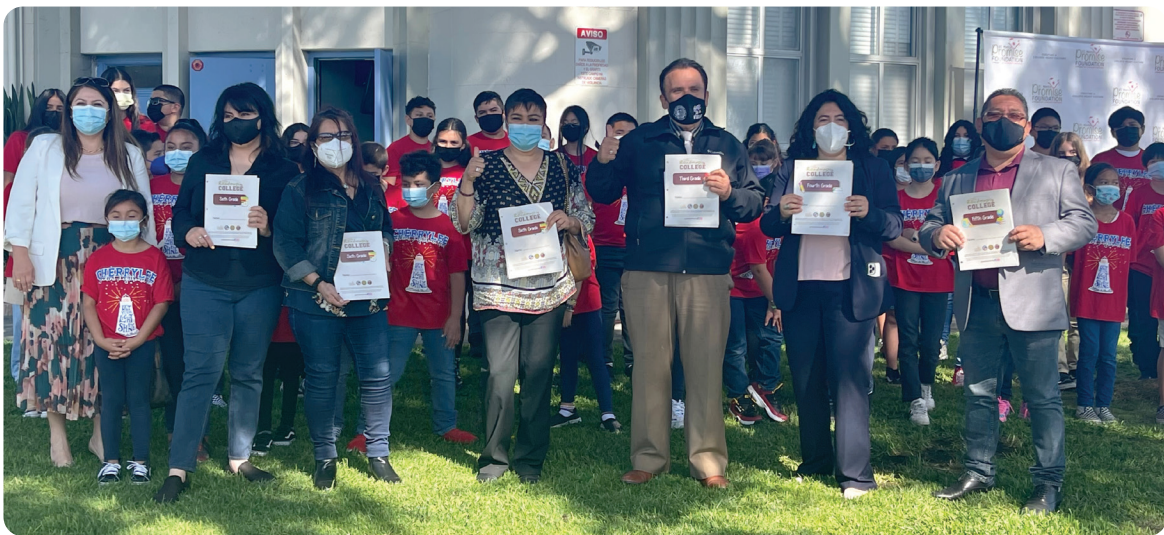
EMPF invested in building parents' knowledge, skills, and confidence as leaders in their families and communities. Through Abriendo Puertas/Opening Doors, EMPF used a proven parent leadership curriculum designed around the idea that parents are their children's first and most influential teachers. Working with school district partners, EMPF trained parents to strengthen their role in their children's learning, access resources, and advocate for their families. Participants reported greater confidence learning alongside their children and taking actions such as visiting the library or seeking information about an Individualized Education Program (IEP) for a child.

That relationship with families gave EMPF a way to understand and respond when their needs changed. COVID-19 put that approach to the test. With schools closed and families cut off from the in-person meetings, workshops, and community events through which EMPF had traditionally reached them, the El Monte Promise Foundation had to rethink how it stayed connected. Former



Executive Director Jennifer Cobian recalled that EMPF listened to what families needed at that moment rather than simply continuing with its existing plans. EMPF adapted its outreach as families and schools moved online and adjusted programs to reflect the financial uncertainty many families were facing. In the Scholars Savings Program, for example, EMPF made the initial deposit on behalf of participating families, removing a financial barrier to continued participation during a period of significant economic instability.

The pandemic also reinforced the importance of meeting families where they were. As in-person programming returned, families told the El Monte Promise Foundation they strongly preferred face-to-face engagement to virtual presentations, helping guide EMPF back toward school-site and community-based outreach.



Listening also required recognizing which families EMPF was not reaching effectively. While EMPF had long provided materials and financial literacy workshops in Spanish, it identified Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) families as an underserved community. In response, EMPF expanded its AAPI Adviso Committee, strengthened partnerships with AAPI-serving organizations, translated materials into Chinese and Vietnamese, and began offering financial literacy workshops in Chinese, building on its existing Spanish-language outreach. By 2022, EMPF reported that AAPI families represented 80 percent of new Scholars Savings enrollments.

Together, these efforts reflected a broader approach to family engagement: listen to families, reduce barriers to participation, build parents' capacity to lead, and adapt when the community says something is not working.

5 Using Data to Turn Commitment Into Accountability

From its earliest years, EMPF understood that a shared promise required shared measures of progress.

Partners tracked indicators across a child's educational journey, including kindergarten readiness, reading and math performance, completion of A–G requirements, FAFSA completion, college enrollment, and persistence. Those measures allowed partners to identify gaps, ask where students were being lost along the pathway, and adjust strategies accordingly.

That cradle-to-career approach connected EMPF to StriveTogether, a national network focused on improving outcomes for children and young people through cross-sector partnerships, community engagement, and the use of data. Through its participation in StriveTogether's civic infrastructure framework, EMPF assessed its work across outcomes including kindergarten readiness, early-grade reading, middle-grade math, high school graduation, and postsecondary enrollment.

The relationship gave EMPF a way to assess the infrastructure behind its programs, including how partners used data, engaged families, and worked collectively toward shared outcomes. In 2022, EMPF identified deeper community engagement, stronger data-sharing capacity, and development of new partnerships as areas in which it hoped to continue growing with StriveTogether's support.

The results demonstrated meaningful progress.

Financial aid offers one example. After the pandemic decline, FAFSA completion in the El Monte Union High School District increased 14% after 2021, exceeded pre-pandemic levels, and continued to outperform the state overall.

Academic indicators moved as well. By 2023, four-year A–G completion had increased eight percentage points from the prior year, while persistence among EMUHSD graduates attending Rio Hondo College had increased seven percentage points since 2020.

Longer-term measures pointed toward progress beyond high school. College enrollment among El Monte Union High School District graduates increased from 51% in 2010 to 61% in 2014. Among Scholars Savings Program graduates, the 2023 graduating cohort reached a 75% postsecondary enrollment rate, returning to the program's pre-pandemic high. Of SSP graduates who enrolled in higher education, 65% attended a community college, 21% a CSU, 7% a UC, and the remainder attended private or out-of-state institutions.

Earlier data offered another indication of college success: among El Monte students who entered Rio Hondo College in 2011, approximately 43% completed a certificate or associate degree and/or became transfer-ready, compared with 21% of a comparison group.

These outcomes reflected the collective work of students, families, educators, districts, colleges, and community partners. EMPF helped make the measures visible and useful across that partnership. As explored in Chapter Three, shared data ultimately gave leaders a way to look beyond individual institutions and develop a more complete picture of how El Monte's children were doing.

6 Creating Traditions That Built Community

Not all of EMPF's impact came through formal programs or systems. Some of its most enduring work came from creating traditions that made educational success visible and collective.

The annual **Tamalada** became one of those traditions. Originating with the Coalition of Latino Professionals and continuing for more than two decades, the event brought together families, educators, civic leaders, and community members while raising funds to support the Scholars Savings Program and honoring educators through the **Roberto "Bobby" Salcedo Esperanza Award**.

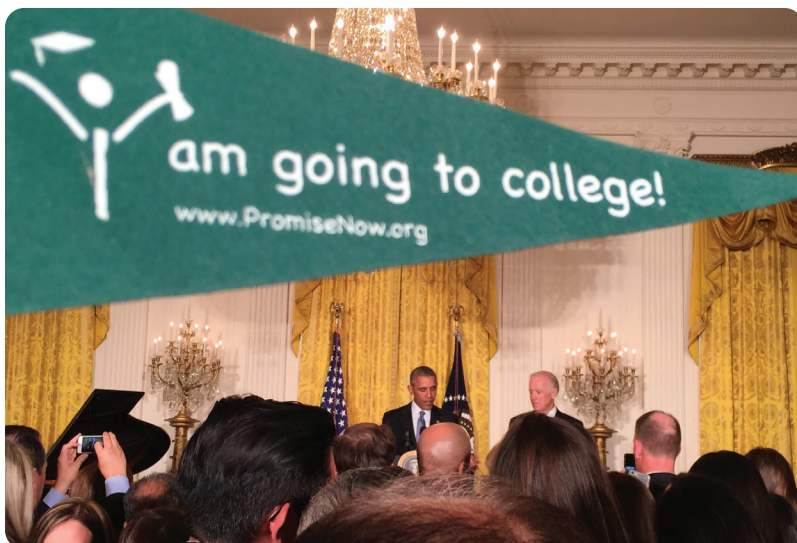
For Dr. Maribel Garcia, Superintendent of the El Monte City School District, the importance of the Tamalada was in what it brought together: "Bringing community together, uplifting culture, celebrating educators... celebrating all the successes that bring our community together."

El Monte Promise Foundation Founding Board member Norma E. Garcia-Gonzalez similarly saw the Tamalada as an expression of community strength and generational leadership, including educators who had once been El Monte students themselves and returned to serve their community.



Former El Monte student Madeline Peralta remembers experiencing that sense of community firsthand. Attending the Tamalada helped her see the breadth of EMPF's reach and the number of people invested in El Monte's students.





7 From Local Innovation to Broader Impact

Over more than a decade, several approaches EMPF developed, tested, or advanced locally became part of broader conversations about educational opportunity.

The Río Promise demonstrated an early model for reducing the cost of entering community college before Promise programs expanded throughout California. Scholars Savings introduced families to college savings and financial literacy years before California launched a statewide children's savings initiative. The Roadmap to College demonstrated how college preparation could begin in early childhood and give families concrete milestones to follow across a child's educational journey.

El Monte Promise Foundation's work also attracted national attention. Under the Obama Administration, EMPF was recognized as a **White House Bright Spot in Hispanic Education**, highlighting its community-based approach to expanding educational opportunity.

But EMPF's legacy was not that it single-handedly produced broader changes in California. Its contribution was showing what could happen when a community identified barriers early and worked collectively to address them. The programs differed, but the approach remained remarkably consistent: listen, connect, test, learn, and build with the community.



THE PROMISE IN ACTION

21,000

Roadmap to College
booklets distributed
annually through partner
schools and community
outreach

559

College savings
accounts opened

3,000+

Families served in 2022–23

14%

Increase in FAFSA completion
after 2021, surpassing pre-
pandemic levels and continuing
to outpace California overall



NATIONAL RECOGNITION

Named a Bright Spot in
Hispanic Education by the
Obama-Biden White House
Initiative on Educational
Excellence for Hispanics



FAMILY ENGAGEMENT & LEADERSHIP

- >Parent Advisory Committee
- >Abriendo Puertas
- >Family workshops
- >Multilingual resources
- >Community outreach



COLLEGE & CAREER READINESS

- >Roadmap to College
- >K–12 College-
Readiness Guidance
- >College Visits
- >Financial Aid Support
- >Río Promise

\$1.2 MILLION

Accumulated by participating students and families toward future education

75%

Postsecondary enrollment among 2023 Scholars Savings Program graduates, returning to the program's pre-pandemic high

FIRST IN CALIFORNIA

Río Promise became California's first Community College Promise program

40+

Educators honored through the Roberto "Bobby" Salcedo Esperanza Award



SHARED DATA

- >Kindergarten Readiness
- >Academic Milestones
- >A–G completion
- >FAFSA
- >College Enrollment and Persistence

FINANCIAL WELL-BEING

- >Scholars Savings Program
- >Scholar Dollars
- >Financial Literacy
- >Early College Savings

COMMUNITY & CULTURE

- >Tamalada
- >Educator Recognition
- >School Districts
- >Higher Education
- >Cities
- >Community Organizations
- >Businesses
- >Philanthropy

Chapter Three

THE PROMISE WE LEAVE BEHIND

The legacy of the El Monte Promise Foundation cannot be measured only by the programs it created, the savings accounts it opened, or the students and families it reached.

Its deeper legacy can be found in what changed around that work: how institutions worked together, how leaders understood and used data, how families began preparing for college earlier, how parents came to see themselves as leaders, and how El Monte increasingly approached educational opportunity as a responsibility shared across the community.

Those changes are harder to count. But in conversations with the people who built, led, partnered with, worked for, and experienced the work of the El Monte Promise Foundation, they emerged again and again.

Looking Beyond Institutional Boundaries

El Monte's educational landscape is divided among multiple school districts and institutions. Children, of course, do not experience their lives that way. They move from elementary to high school to college carrying the same aspirations, needs, family circumstances, and experiences with them.

EMPF created a place where the institutions and people serving those children could look beyond their individual responsibilities and consider the full journey together.

That connective role mattered in a community with multiple elementary school districts feeding into a separate high school district and then into higher education. EMPF brought school districts, community colleges, universities, families, community organizations, civic leaders, and others into sustained conversation around the same children. Former Executive Director Jennifer Cobian recalled that one of EMPF's most important contributions was creating greater alignment among the school districts and Rio Hondo College.

The relationships themselves became part of how El Monte worked. Dr. Edward Zuniga, Superintendent of El Monte Union High School District, described relationships among the three partner school districts as strong and said their intention is to continue working together on the pathway from a child's earliest years through secondary education and beyond.



“We’ve always wanted kids to go to college and do good—but we all stayed in our lanes. EMPF helped create the space to move beyond those lanes.”

— Dr. Maribel Garcia,
Superintendent,
El Monte City School
District

Seeing El Monte's Children as One Community

Working across institutional boundaries also required partners to see the same picture of how El Monte's children were doing.

From early in the work, EMPF brought partners together to examine what became known as the **“State of El Monte’s Children”**—looking across schools and institutions at the conditions affecting children, the assets available to them, the barriers they encountered, and the outcomes the community wanted to improve.

Former Project Manager Christina Davila remembers EMPF retreats evolving beyond meetings of the Board of Directors. Parents, students, educators, and community members joined the conversation, looking together at data, community assets, and challenges. Community members were not simply there to listen; they had a role in decision-making.

The effort eventually developed into shared measures spanning the cradle-to-college pathway: kindergarten readiness, early-grade reading, middle-grade mathematics, A–G completion, college enrollment, and student experiences. Former Executive Director Jennifer Cobian recalled EMPF increasingly using data to understand children’s experiences from before they entered school through what happened after high school and to help partners think about where resources were needed.

In a community without a unified school system, shared data created a common language. It allowed people responsible for different parts of a child’s journey to look together at what was happening across El Monte and ask: Where are children thriving? Where are they encountering barriers? What assets already exist? Where does someone need to act?

The result was a different way of understanding student outcomes. They were no longer simply information belonging to one district or institution. They became information the community could use together.

Starting Earlier Changed the Conversation

Another important shift was when El Monte began talking with families about college.

For many first-generation families, the aspiration was already there. Parents wanted their children to continue their education and have opportunities they themselves may not have had. What was often missing was information about how to turn that aspiration into a plan.

Dr. Zuniga reflected on first-generation students whose immigrant parents deeply wanted them to succeed but did not always have the knowledge or familiarity with the educational system to guide them through it. Families could provide enormous “love and cariño,” he noted, but students also needed direction, knowledge, and institutions that welcomed families into the process.



EMPF helped move those conversations earlier in a student's educational career. Instead of waiting until high school to discuss college requirements, financial aid, or how families would pay for higher education, children and parents began encountering those ideas in the elementary years. Saving for college, understanding educational milestones, visiting campuses, and imagining life after high school became part of a much longer journey.

The individual programs mattered, but the larger change was in expectations. Christina Davila remembered hearing the language itself begin to change among young people—from talking about **“if I go to college”** to **“when I go to college.”**

The changing expectations traveled through families as well. Parent Advisory Committee Member Aracely Ocampo spoke about learning to save for college and then teaching other parents what she had learned. Manuela Saldaña, another Parent Advisory Committee Member, similarly recalled learning to engage with other parents, motivate them to participate, and help them take advantage of opportunities available through EMPF..

The information traveled because parents carried it.

Parents Became Leaders

EMPF's relationship with parents also evolved beyond traditional family engagement.

Parents recruited families, shared information, participated in outreach, helped shape programming, interacted with civic and education leaders, and in some cases served on EMPF's Board of Directors.

El Monte Promise Foundation Founding Board member Jeff Seymour recalled that, over time, EMPF came to understand just how significant parent voice could be. Parents developed a sense of ownership in the work and came to understand that they had an equal say in it.

For El Monte Promise Foundation Founding Board member Norma E. Garcia-Gonzalez, that contribution was fundamental: “Our parents are the heroes for this work. They knew what the community needed.”

Parent leaders themselves described that growth. Rosy Alcaraz, Parent Representative on the EMPF Board of Directors, recalled receiving training not only about education but about becoming more involved in the community and speaking publicly. She described a culture in which parents were welcomed, respected, and heard. Teresita Vega, another Parent Member of the EMPF Board of Directors, similarly described parents supporting outreach to other families, building relationships beyond EMPF, and learning to work through differing perspectives while remaining focused on “the well-being of the children.”

For Aracely Ocampo, the growth was deeply personal:

“This program helped me grow as a person, human and a mother. I learned to share what I was learning and contribute to their (other parents) growth.”

— Aracely Ocampo,
EMPF Parent Advisory
Committee Member



And that leadership extended beyond EMPF. Jeff Seymour pointed to parents who had become engaged through the work and later came together to advocate for a park in their community—evidence, in his view, that parents had developed a greater sense of their own voice and ability to make change.

When parents gained knowledge, relationships, and confidence, the benefit did not stop with their own children. They carried those assets into other families, schools, and the broader community.

Building a Community Behind Every Child

Ultimately, the El Monte Promise tested a larger proposition: Could an entire community organize itself around the future of its children?

The El Monte Promise Foundation did not educate children itself, operate schools, or control what happened when students entered college. Its role was to help the people and institutions that touched different parts of a child's life see themselves as part of something larger.

“The entire community is responsible for what happens with kids.”
— Jennifer Cobian, Former EMPF Executive Director

That shared responsibility mattered especially for families navigating educational systems for the first time. Opportunity should not depend on whether a parent knows the system, a student encounters the right counselor, or a family finds the right resource at the right moment.

“We want opportunities to be systematic, not luck.”
— Dr. Maribel Garcia, Superintendent, El Monte City School District

That may be the clearest expression of what the El Monte Promise Foundation was ultimately trying to build: a community in which information, relationships, financial preparation, family leadership, and institutional responsibility made opportunity more intentional and accessible.

WHAT WE LEARNED



Look at the whole child—and the whole journey.

Children move across schools and systems, but their lives do not divide neatly along institutional boundaries. Start with what children and families need, not with who is responsible for providing it.



Use data as a shared tool.

Measure progress across the educational pathway, bring partners together to understand what the data is saying, and use it to identify barriers, assets, and opportunities for collective action.



Start early.

College readiness begins long before high school. Early conversations about education, saving, and the future help families turn aspirations into preparation.



Families are partners and leaders.

Ask parents what they need, invite them into decision-making, and build their capacity to carry information and opportunity to other families.



Relationships are infrastructure.

Dedicated time, trusted spaces, and repeated collaboration create relationships that can endure beyond an individual program, leader, or organization.



Make opportunity systematic, not luck.

A child's future should not depend on whether a family happens to know the right person or find the right resource at the right moment. Build information, support, and opportunity into the systems surrounding children.

Chapter Four

A PROMISE THAT CONTINUES

The El Monte Promise Foundation is closing. The El Monte Promise to families is not.

That distinction came through clearly in conversations with the people who built, led, partnered with, worked for, and experienced EMPF.

The organization that convened partners, raised resources, operated programs, and kept people focused on a shared goal will no longer exist. But much of what EMPF built has already moved beyond the Foundation itself.

It lives in relationships among school districts that intend to continue collaborating. It lives in schools where college and career readiness, financial aid, and family engagement have become part of supporting students. It lives in parent leaders who learned to navigate educational systems, advocate for their children, and connect other families to information and opportunity. And it lives in the expectation that El Monte's children belong to the whole community.

The task now is not to preserve everything exactly as it was, but to carry forward the relationships, practices, and expectations that made the work matter—and continue adapting them for the students and families who come next.

What Partners Will Carry Forward

The leaders of El Monte's partner school districts were clear that they see their institutions as responsible for carrying forward the culture EMPF helped build.

That includes maintaining collaboration across districts, strengthening pathways from early education through college and careers, engaging families as partners, and removing practical barriers that can stand between students and opportunity.

Some of that work is already embedded. District leaders described collaborative meetings built into their calendars, ongoing financial aid support, support for college savings, and efforts to adapt college-readiness tools to reflect a broader range of postsecondary and career pathways. They also pointed to lessons from EMPF that are informing current Community Schools work.

Dr. Edward Zuniga emphasized that responsibility extends beyond schools:

“We all have an opportunity to support our students. Even our city. We all want our community to be successful.”
— Dr. Edward Zuniga, Superintendent,
El Monte Union High School District

He also described an obligation to remove financial barriers that can limit opportunity, including costs associated with AP courses, college entrance exams, and other parts of preparing for life after high school.

Former EMPF leaders echoed the importance of carrying the underlying approach forward. Norma E. Garcia-Gonzalez pointed to the systems and infrastructure that now exist across the community and said the El Monte Promise Foundation would not be closing if that work had not taken root elsewhere. She was particularly clear that listening to parents—the practice that helped give rise to EMPF in the first place—should not disappear when the Foundation closes. Former Project Manager Christina Davila put the responsibility more simply:

“Everyone plays a role. Doing with, not for.”
— Christina Davila,
Former EMPF Project Manager

The goal, then, is not simply to preserve individual EMPF programs. It is to preserve the habits behind them: institutions working together, families helping shape the work, barriers being identified early, and partners understanding their own role in creating opportunity.

What Families Want to Continue

Parent leaders were equally clear about what they do not want El Monte to lose.

They want future families to have clear information about college, financial aid, and education after high school. They want access to savings opportunities and other support that helps families prepare early. They want schools and districts to remain trusted sources of information, resources, and connection.

Parent Leaders Want for the Future

<u>clear information about</u> college financial aid education	<u>prepare early for</u> savings opportunities	<u>trusted sources</u> information resources connection
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Rosy Alcaraz called for schools and community partners to continue bringing families “new information, funds and resources.” Manuela Saldaña emphasized preserving access to college savings support. Aracely Ocampo expressed hope that families would continue to have an organization or structure with the same purpose so the support and sense of possibility would not disappear. For Teresita Vega, the stakes were clear:

“We are a vulnerable community and decreasing access to the services we have gives our children less opportunities.”
—Teresita Vega,
Parent Member of the
EMPF Board of Directors

Former El Monte student Madeline Peralta offered the perspective of someone who benefited from that support. Her advice for future students was to think beyond high school and understand all the options available to them. But she also recognized that not every student or family knows what those options are. She hopes the community keeps bringing services, information, and support directly to students and families.

Together, their message was not simply to keep specific programs alive. It was to make sure future families do not have to start over—searching on their own for information, relationships, and opportunities that the community has already learned how to provide.

Keeping the Spirit of the Promise

The people interviewed for this report spoke about preserving the spirit of the work: bringing people together, celebrating educators, making education visible in the community, and creating spaces where families, schools, civic leaders, and community partners could see themselves as part of something larger.

The Tamalada, educator recognition, family events, and other traditions mattered in part because they made the Promise public. They created visible moments of shared pride and reinforced the idea that educational success was not only something that happened inside a classroom.

That spirit of celebration and collective responsibility is part of the legacy too.



The Promise Now Belongs to El Monte

When the El Monte Promise Foundation began, it asked a fundamental question: Could a community organize itself around the belief that the future of its children was a shared responsibility?

More than a decade later, EMPF leaves behind relationships, knowledge, practices, and leaders that have become part of the community itself.

The work, of course, is not finished. El Monte students and families will continue to need support. New barriers will emerge. Programs, policies, and leaders will change. What matters is that El Monte's institutions, leaders, and community continue to listen to families, strengthen connections among cities, school districts, colleges, and community institutions, and make educational opportunities easier for every generation to navigate.

The lasting legacy of the El Monte Promise is the understanding that creating opportunity for our children is a shared responsibility, and a promise each one of us must carry forward.

The Promise was always larger than the organization that carried its name. It belongs to the educators and institutions that serve El Monte's students, to the parents and community leaders who advocate for them, and to the young people whose futures remain at the center of it all.

EMPF's work is complete. The community's Promise continues.



Acknowledgments

WITH GRATITUDE

The El Monte Promise Foundation was built and sustained by people who believed in the potential of El Monte and South El Monte's children. We are deeply grateful to the parents, students, educators, board members, staff, volunteers, community leaders, funders, businesses, civic partners, and organizations who gave their time, ideas, resources, and leadership to this work.

This legacy belongs to all of you, and to the community that carries the Promise forward.

Educational and Civic Partners

El Monte City School District
Mountain View School District
El Monte Union High School District
Rio Hondo College
City of El Monte
City of South El Monte

Community Partners

Jeff Seymour Family Center and Staff
Opportunity to Assets
El Monte Coalition of Latino Professionals (emCLP)
Community Organizations and Nonprofit Partners
Business and Philanthropic Partners
City and Civic Partners

Community Leadership

El Monte Promise Foundation Board
Members, Executive Board Members, and
Advisory Board Members
- Past and Present
EMPF Staff, Interns, and Volunteers
- Past and Present
EMPF Parent Advisory Committee (PAC)
EMPF Asian American Pacific Islander
Advisory Committee

Our Educational Community

Teachers, counselors, school-community liaisons, administrators, and staff across the El Monte City School District, Mountain View School District, and El Monte Union High School District.

Most of All, Our Community

The students, parents, families, and residents of El Monte and South El Monte who shaped this work, participated in it, advocated for it, and kept the Promise alive.
And every person who believes in the Promise of our students, our families, and our community.



A Legacy of
**Community, Partnership and
Educational Opportunity**
2007–2026