

# Sembrando

## *Summary of Themes from Interviews with Latinx Students and Families*

### Background

#### **What are Wilder’s School-Based Mental Health Programs?**

Wilder’s School-Based Mental Health Services provide mental health and wellness support in partnering Saint Paul public and charter schools. The goal of the program is to provide culturally centered, trauma informed services for the whole family. Each program employs culturally and linguistically diverse staff to support the unique identities and experiences of students and their families in the school setting. Currently, there are four culturally specific programs serving Black/African American, Hmong, Karen, and Latinx families.

#### **What is Sembrando?**

During the 2017-2018 academic school year, Wilder’s School-Based Mental Health program expanded its services to support the mental health and wellbeing of Latinx students and their families. Sembrando, which means “to plant or to sow” in Spanish incorporates culturally relevant mental health support as well as opportunities for students to learn about and draw strength from their cultural identities. Sembrando therapists have a deep understanding of Latinx cultures and are able to communicate in Spanish, which is helpful when providing support to students and families for their socioemotional well-being and development of cultural identity. There is also a strong focus on supporting the needs of students’ family systems. Sembrando therapists understand that many of the students families they serve experience daily stressors and challenges related to immigration issues, shifting political climates, insurance status, etc. Their model places a large focus on nurturing the entire family system in order to help nurture the students they serve.

Sembrando also focuses on celebrating Latinx culture and aims to support students’ healing through the development of a strong sense of pride and confidence of their cultural heritage. Throughout their time in the program, students are given many opportunities to engage in activities events within their communities that teach and reinforce their cultural heritage. These types of events and activities include: exploration and discussions around culturally relevant sites in Saint Paul’s West side, discussions about poems from Indigenous groups in Latin America, celebrating the winter solstice, and exploring how Dia de los Muertos or Day of the Dead is celebrated across different regions.

Currently, Sembrando therapists are located at Academia Cesar Chavez, Riverview Elementary, and Wellstone Elementary School. However, Latinx students who attend other schools served by Wilder are often included in non-therapeutic events such as their community outings or “rites of passage” events that highlight Latinx culture and identity.

*If we have the opportunity to know who we are, it’s like giving us water to grow. - Sembrando therapist*

*A huge part of the [Sembrando] program is the notion that culture heals and that family and community are center. – Sembrando therapist*

## Methods and limitations

Wilder Research staff conducted 15-25 minute semi-structured interviews with seven students and ten parents in the Sembrando program. Student interviews were conducted in person at the student's school, and the parent interviews were conducted over the phone. Both students and parents had the option to complete their interview in English or Spanish with a bilingual interviewer. The evaluation team was purposeful in providing a culturally matched interviewer to ensure connection, comfort, and flexibility with language and other cultural understandings. After completing the interview, Sembrando parents were given a \$20 gift card for their time and participation.

The purpose of this evaluation was to capture the impact participating in Sembrando has on its students and families. Our evaluation activities focused on the following questions developed collaboratively between Wilder Research and Sembrando program staff:

- How has Sembrando impacted students' overall mental health and well-being?
- How has Sembrando impacted how students relate with their cultural identities?
- What are the impacts of having a culturally matched therapist for students and families?

Wilder Research staff collaborated with Sembrando program staff to create an interview guide that helped identify the impact of the Sembrando program. The interview guide focused on understanding the social, cultural, and behavioral outcomes of the program.

This study had a few limitations. First, due to the age of the students being interviewed (5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade), some participants may have had a difficult time understanding some of the interview questions. It is also important to note that our interview numbers were small, which means these findings may not be representative of all Sembrando families. Furthermore, some of the students interviewed were unable to work with a Spanish-speaking therapist at the time of the interview. These students have previously worked with a Sembrando therapist, but have moved to a non-Sembrando school. These students, although no longer seeing a Sembrando therapist, were still involved in other Sembrando activities such as their rites of passage events. Readers should read this report with these limitations in mind.

## Key findings

### Key findings from student interviews

#### ***Students felt understood by their therapists and were comfortable sharing their feelings with them***

All students who participated in the interviews shared that they felt comfortable sharing their feelings with their therapist. The Sembrando therapists created a space for their students to feel comfortable to talk about anything bothering them. Students felt like their therapist understood them, was non-judgement, and was a safe person to share things they didn't feel comfortable sharing with other people in their lives.

*I like how I can talk to her about anything. It never feels like I'm talking to someone who would tell someone else, and she always helps and ... she always tries to get me to fix more than like making it bigger or something. –Sembrando student*

*She understands me. When I am feeling down, and I don't want to talk to my parents because they would just tell me to tell the teacher. When I tell the teacher, they just tell me to "stop." However, when I talk to my therapist, she understands me. –Sembrando student*

*She's nice. If I tell her anything, she won't tell anybody else. – Sembrando student*

*When I am talking, she doesn't interrupt every time and waits until the very end. – Sembrando student*

### **Students experience improvements to their social and emotional well-being**

A majority of students shared that their feelings have become more positive since working with their Sembrando therapist. Students commented that they care more about themselves, they don't get as angry, they are proud of themselves, and that generally they are growing.

*It makes me proud of myself. I feel better about myself because she actually understands and I feel safe around her. When I tell her all the things I wouldn't tell my parents, it makes me feel good because I hate keeping stuff from people. –Sembrando student*

*She's helped me care more about myself. She has helped care about myself and care about other people more. –Sembrando student*

*I don't get as angry when I think about thoughts. – Sembrando student*

### **Most students feel like there has been little to no change to their relationship with friends and family**

Most students shared that there were no changes to their relationships with their friends and family. However, one student shared that their therapist has helped them resolve issues with friends.

*When I have friend problems, she will help me surpass them. – Sembrando student*

### **Students appreciated having a therapist who was able to understand their culture and speak their language**

Students who worked with a Spanish-speaking therapist shared that they were given the option to choose whether they spoke English, Spanish, or a mix of both (Spanglish) in their therapy sessions. Although students preferred to speak English with their therapist, some students appreciated the option of being able to choose which language to speak. Some students also appreciated that their therapist was able to understand aspects of their cultural identities.

*We don't speak Spanish, we just speak English. –Sembrando student*

*She speaks English with me most of the time, but she also speaks Spanish with me sometimes. I think it's cool I don't really think about it because that's how I talk" – Sembrando student*

*I like how she speaks English since I don't like speaking Spanish that much. –Sembrando student*

*I like that [my therapist] can talk to me in English and Spanish and that she tells me about feelings and that I will learn English with her. – Sembrando student*

*We mainly speak Spanglish, but not a lot of Spanish. We speak English more. I think that's helpful for me and others so they can talk in whatever language they feel comfortable talking in. I think it's helpful. –Sembrando student*

*Maybe if it was someone else then they might not understand something that I'd say but like someone that knows about Mexican side that I talk about, they would understand more. – Sembrando student*

### **Key findings from parent interviews**

Parents reported that their families have worked with a therapist from six months to over a year. A majority of families reported that they were connected to the Sembrando program by either already being in therapy services, being transferred over, or being referred to by a teacher or other school staff.

### **Parents reported positive changes in their child's social emotional well-being**

A section of questions focused on asking parents if they have noticed changes in their child's behavior at home since working with a therapist. All nine parents expressed that there was a change for their children.

*She is very different now. She's happy, talkative, she's expressing her problems and feelings. –Parent*

*She thinks she does good things. She wants to do good things to please me and feel happy. –Parent*

*He's grown up a lot and is more responsible about his actions. He would blame his siblings, but now he's admitting when he does something wrong--like breaking something around the house for example.*

*He corrects his mistakes and accepts responsibilities. –Parent*

### **Parents reported that their child's relationships with others have improved**

A majority of parents expressed that they have noticed improvements in how their child relates to friends, family, and teachers. Their children are getting along better with their siblings, showing more empathy, and learning better ways to communicate with others.

*He gets along better with his brother. He has conversations with us, and I noticed he's more sure about talking to us when were all together. –Parent*

*He now is more caring. He lets me kiss and hug him, he tells his mother he loves her, he picks flowers when we walk around the neighborhood and he picks some and gives them to his mother. –Parent*

*He shows more empathy towards others and communicates more with me. – Parent*

*He argues less with his dad. He's talking more with me and confides and expresses himself more with me. –Parent*

*He has better communication with the teacher and his classmates. The teacher told me that he's getting along with all the kids in his class, he participates more in class, and he's more talkative. –Parent*

### **Parents reported that their child's moods have improved, and are better able to manage their emotions**

A majority of parents expressed that they have seen improvements in their child's mood and how they manage their emotions, such as anger and sadness. Parents shared that their children have learned different ways to cope, such as through listening to music and playing sports. Some parents also shared that, since working with their therapist, their children no longer have feelings of wanting to die or harm themselves.

*Yes, he used bad strong words or language when he was upset, but now he's more calm and has patience with situations. He controls his emotions better and accepts his errors. He's more aware of his mistakes and does everything to make things right. –Parent*

*He listens to music more and that calms him down and makes him feel good. He likes to play soccer and that makes him think of different things. - Parent*

*He is so calm and I feel like he is just really grounded and part of it is his age in getting older, but I feel like the strategies that he's learned and the space he has had to do this exploration with his therapist has helped him tremendously. –Parent*

*If he's mad at something or someone, he looks for ways to calm down. –Parent*

*Before, he would cry and would want to hurt himself. Now he doesn't have those issues anymore.–Parent*

*Before, he would get very angry or upset for anything. He couldn't control his anger, but now he's learned how to work on controlling it and is slow to anger. Last year, he would say that he wanted to die, but since then he has not mentioned that anymore. –Parent*

**Parents share that their children have higher self-esteem, are more confident, and can communicate about their needs**

Most parents expressed that their children are more open and confident to expressing and sharing their feelings. Parents shared that their children are better at advocating for themselves, accepting their personal identities, and having more open conversations with them.

*At school he would get bullied a lot and the kids would tease him that he will run to his parents and tell them, but now he's advocating for himself and quickly goes and lets the teacher, staff, or someone at the school know. –Parent*

*He's more confident in talking to me and even tells me the bad things he's doing at school as soon as he gets home. –Parent*

*She sits with me and has a conversation with me, unlike before I had to force her to sit with me and talk to me. She now looks for me, and talks and laughs and cries with me, like I do with all my children. We do this and I like that we do this together"–Parent*

*I feel like he has changed in this aspect. He accepts himself now...he told me that he is gay, but that he likes being this way. –Parent*

**Most parents appreciated having a therapist who spoke their language and understood their cultural backgrounds**

Most parents appreciated that their children were working with a culturally matched therapist. These parents shared that they were better able to communicate with the therapist about their child in both English and Spanish, and the therapist was able to relate with them about aspects of their culture such as customs, traditions, and food.

*My husband does not speak much English, so she talks to him in Spanish. So, she also understands that the therapist speaks Spanish, so this is very special to her. Also the therapist invited me and my daughter to an event about the Mexican Day of the Dead. We were able to learn about her parents' culture and make some art crafts that reflect our country and beliefs. My daughter really enjoyed this and so did I. –Parent*

*I think it's terrific because I can understand the therapist and she can understand us culturally and our language. My daughter likes it that she can talk to the therapist in Spanish. –Parent*

*We understand each other and it's easy to talk and express our needs with a Spanish speaking therapist. – Parent*

*[The therapist] speaks Spanish and if she speaks to me in English, I can also understand. I feel more comfortable talking and expressing myself in Spanish. – Parent*

**Parents reported that their children have shown more interest in learning about their cultural practices since joining Sembrando**

Over half of parents shared that their children either have been more active or are starting to learn more about their cultural identity. Some parents also shared that their children were feeling more proud of their Latinx heritage since joining Sembrando.

*He wants everyone to know that he's from Peru. He asks me why everything is always about Mexican people and culture, and now he wants to showcase Peru and is telling everybody he's from Peru. –Parent*

*My daughter is fully bilingual. She knows her culture, but we teach her about our Mexican heritage and celebrations. She likes to celebrate her birthday with stuff, food from Mexico. –Parent*

*My child is attending the Spanish bilingual school, so they celebrate everything about Latino/Mexican culture. My son is very active in his cultural identity. [The therapist] reinforces everything the school does. - Parent*

*She talks about her culture and is proud to be Puerto Rican and talks about our music and food and all that. She's always asking me questions about Puerto Rico. She's very interested. - Parent*

**Parents reported that their children enjoy working with the therapist and going on outings with other Sembrando students**

Many of the parents shared that their children enjoy the various Sembrando events they attend such as volunteering at local businesses, celebrations of Latinx holidays, and other social outings. Parents also shared that their children enjoy the conversations they have with their therapists. They shared that their child felt comfortable opening up to the therapist in ways they couldn't to others.

*Well there are many things, but we really enjoyed the events that take place in the evenings--like the one she did in November where we got together with other parents and kids from Sembrando to build an altar for the Mexican holiday – Day Of The Dead. Me and my child built one honoring my grandparents. –Parent*

**Most parents did not experience any challenges when working with their child's therapist**

A majority of parents shared that they and their child experienced no challenges when working with their therapist. Two parents shared that their children had initially felt distrustful towards their therapist due to various challenges such as early childhood experiences, and not wanting to be a part of the program at first. However, parents shared that these challenges quickly faded. One parent found it challenging to wait for their child's therapist to return their calls. This particular parent shared that they call the therapist when their child has anxiety attacks, but is unable to get a response until one or two days later.

*At first he struggled opening up to her and would not communicate with her, but then everything changed. I think it was because he just didn't want to be part of this at first, but he never really told us why he was not comfortable with her, but he was only 10 years old at the time. –Parent*

**Parents shared that Sembrando has made a positive impact on their child and entire family, and would like to see the program continue**

All of the parents shared that Sembrando has made a positive impact on their child and their family. Parents appreciated the help their child's therapist provided in all aspects of their lives, such as with school, family issues, and individual mental health. They want the program to continue serving families.

*That they don't end this program or this great therapist. She is so good at what she does. –Parent*

*Just to continue this therapy because it's working for the best. –Parent*

*I can only say that this whole process has been very positive. I have someone I can talk to and we have only noticed positive growth in our son. – Parent*

*[The therapist] helped us go through some very difficult times in the past year. We found out that my son's grandmother was diagnosed with cancer, and my child had a difficult time understanding this, so [the therapist] really came in contact with my son right on time. – Parent*

*Everything we have received has helped my entire family because we're all doing better because my daughter is doing better. - Parent*

## Conclusion and next steps

Sembrando appears to have a positive impact on the social, emotional, and cultural well-being of students it serves. Students feel comfortable with their therapist, are experiencing improvements in their social and emotional well-being, and are given opportunities to explore their cultural identities in therapeutic and non-therapeutic spaces. Parents also feel satisfied with the services and support given to their children and the family.

Based on the findings in this report, Sembrando staff may want to consider the following next steps in growing and developing this program:

- **Continue to gather information about the needs of Sembrando students and families and ways the program can best support their social-emotional and cultural needs.**

Both students and parents reported improvements in student's interpersonal relationships, ability to regulate their emotions, and talk about their feelings with safe people. It may be beneficial for Sembrando program staff to continue to gather information about the needs of current Sembrando families as well as Latinx families in the surrounding areas.

- **Expand Sembrando into more schools in the community.**

Students and parents appreciated having a therapist who was bilingual in English and Spanish, and could understand the family from a cultural standpoint. Furthermore, parents shared that they would like to see this program continue its work. Based on these findings, it may be beneficial to expand Sembrando into other schools.

## Wilder Research®

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