

[FROM THE NEIGHBORHOOD](#)**Addressing immigrant parents, Sotomayor channels her mother**

Posted By [Emma Sokoloff-Rubin](#) On May 15, 2013 @ 7:06 pm In [Newsroom](#) | [1 Comment](#)

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Justice Sonia Sotomayor left the stage to answer parents' questions after speaking at the Department of Education's

To make sure that all attendees of the city's annual conference for families of English language learners today could go home with an autographed copy of her book, Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor signed 3,000 copies of her book in two days.

She was able to write the book, she told parents at the conference, because her mother – who didn't speak English — taught her to value words. "My mother loved reading. Seeing her read inspired my brother and me to read," Sotomayor said in her speech.

The Department of Education's annual conference is designed to help immigrant families navigate the city's education system and support their children's learning at home. Sotomayor's address, as well as the workshops that followed, was translated into nine languages, just a fraction of the 180 languages spoken by students in the city's public schools.

Mirza Flore, who immigrated to the United States eight months ago and speaks only Spanish, said the hardest part of navigating the city's schools is helping her son with homework in a language she doesn't speak. He attends P.S. 104 in Far Rockaway.

Flore said she used to tell her son "not now" when he tried to talk to her as she cooked dinner. But after attending the conference, she said, she would use the time to supervise homework or ask her son to teach her something he learned during the day, one of many specific strategies Sotomayor suggested in her speech.

The Department of Education's Division of Students with Disabilities and English Language Learners, which runs the conference each year in collaboration with other divisions of the department, invited Sotomayor to give the keynote. "Education is a difficult system to navigate if you don't speak English," said David Pena, a department spokesman. "[Sotomayor] has a perfect story for what we're trying to do today."

In her speech, Sotomayor went beyond platitudes about reading and writing. Parents who immigrate to the United States sometimes don't know what their children should read, Sotomayor said, recalling what it felt like in college not to have read the books her peers grew up with.

As an undergraduate, she said, she once tried to explain to a friend how out of place she sometimes felt at Princeton. The friend said "You must feel like Alice in Wonderland," and Sotomayor responded, "Alice who?"

"I bet half the audience probably hasn't read Alice in Wonderland," she said today. She suggested that parents ask librarians what their children should read, or schedule a meeting with their children's teachers to discuss reading choices. "Like my mother, you may not know what kids your books should be reading. But you can help them find out," Sotomayor said.

To get kids writing, she said, "Write notes to your children. Ask them to leave you notes about what they plan to do."

Flora Yala, a parent at P.S./M.S. 218, said she came to the conference to learn more about resources available for her children and others at their school. "Sometimes things get lost through word-of-mouth," she said in Spanish. "We want to hear it directly."

Many parents said they heard about the event, which took place at the Javits Center in Manhattan, from the parent coordinators or social workers at their children's schools. Some came in groups after dropping their children off at school, then left the conference in time for dismissal.

"Many times you listen, listen, and you end up wanting to know more," said Nadia Reyes, another parent at P.S./M.S. 218. Yala and Reyes are part of a group of parents from District 9 in the Bronx who made t-shirts especially for the event. They gave one to Sotomayor when she stepped off the stage and, trailed by Secret Service agents, answered questions directly from parents.

When a parent asked why there weren't more educational resources available for the Haitian community, Sotomayor emphasized the role parents can play in shaping education policy. "Organize your community. ... Go beat down the door of that lovely chancellor," she said, "The success of your community is how loud its voice can be."

Sotomayor tied the practical advice in her talk back to her experience in the Bronx — an experience many parents said sounded very familiar — to her experience as a Supreme Court justice, which by definition isn't one to which many people can relate.

"Nobody actually teaches you how to be a parent," she said. "Justice [John Paul] Stevens once said to me when I was insecure about being a justice, 'Sonia, nobody's born a justice.' Well, no one is born a mother or father."

Parents said Sotomayor's story about the impact her mother made on her life's trajectory would stick with them.

"She was poor," said Rosalie Mendez, the PTA president at P.S. 253 in Queens. "It surprised me all her mother was able to do for her."

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