

Transforming Education for Hispanic Youth: Broad Recommendations for Policy and Practice

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On any given day in the United States, a shockingly high number of Hispanic students drop out of school. They often leave quietly, with no notice to the school or their teachers, as early as the middle grades—sometimes even earlier—and never return. In fact, *nearly one in three* (30 percent) of the nation's Hispanic students between the ages of 16 and 24 leave school without either a high school diploma or an alternative certificate such as a GED (National Center for Education Statistics, 1994).

Unfortunately, when students abandon school, they foreclose a lifetime of opportunities and place future generations at risk of poverty, low academic achievement, and underemployment.

In September 1995, United States Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley appointed a group of seven research scholars, policy analysts, and practitioners to study issues surrounding the Hispanic dropout problem and to provide a set of policy-relevant recommendations. Through the next two years of its work, the Hispanic Dropout Project (HDP) held open hearings and took public testimony in locations around the nation whose schools enrolled large numbers of Hispanic students. Press conferences at those sites publicized the problem of Hispanic dropout. The HDP also reviewed the research on at-risk students and school dropout, and commissioned research syntheses and case studies illustrating: (a) effective achievement programs for elementary and middle school, (b) effective dropout prevention programs for junior high and high

school, (c) issues in the conceptualization of early school departure, and (d) teacher education for diversity and equity.

No more excuses: The final report of the Hispanic Dropout Project (1998) summarizes the project's findings, data, and recommendations, based on its work nationwide. It addresses the role of students, parents and families, schools and school staff, local and state policymakers, and institutions of higher education, including the research and development establishment. For each of these groups, the report presents the excuses typically advanced to explain their failure to act to solve the Hispanic dropout problem, followed by evidence of inaction distilled from the data of the Hispanic Dropout Project and from the sites the project visited.

This is the first of a series of four issue briefs synthesizing the results of the Hispanic Dropout Project. It emphasizes those recommendations of most relevance to education policymakers and practitioners. Three other issue briefs will address recommendations for building-level and district decision-makers, bilingual education teachers and program staff, and state and district policymakers.

The Hispanic Dropout Project made numerous recommendations for improving the education of Hispanic students, tailored to different audiences. The six recommendations listed here are particularly worthy of careful consideration by both school staff and policymakers.



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Improving Schooling for Hispanic Students: Key Recommendations

Recommendation 1. *Depoliticize education for Hispanic youth, separating it from debates about language policy or immigration. Move forward at the local, state, and national levels with a coherent educational agenda.*

Exemplary sites identified by the Project found that it was far easier to develop cogent policies for the education of Hispanic youth when staff were not mired in debate about immigration or language policy. Barriers to effective education for Hispanic youth, the Project found, included attitudes such as the ones outlined in the table below.

Exemplary sites hired teachers and administrative staff who spoke Spanish and were familiar with Hispanic culture. They developed programs that built on students' native language and real-world knowledge as a way to prepare them for higher education, jobs, careers, and citizenship.

Recommendation 2. *Fund public schools appropriately to upgrade physical facilities, curriculum, instruction, and assessment.*

While this recommendation may seem to dwell in the domain of common sense, Project members noted a preponderance of economically poor schools struggling to use their funds creatively. Successful programs in high-poverty schools had waiting lists, and alternative schools—schools that enrolled students at particular risk of dropping out or with other special needs—lived a tenuous existence, never certain if they might continue year to year (Hispanic Dropout Project, 1998, p. 42).



Attitudinal Barriers to Solving the Hispanic Dropout Problem

- Until the full extent of the problem is understood, nothing can be done.
- This is a local school problem; state and national policy should not and cannot affect it.
- There are some successful school programs, but they cannot be scaled up or replicated.
- Hispanic children are not our children; therefore, the Hispanic dropout problem is not our problem.
- The Hispanic dropout problem is only short-term and will vanish once some larger issue (e.g., immigration policy) is remedied or reconciled.
- Serious efforts to solve the Hispanic dropout problem cost more than the public will spend (Hispanic Dropout Project, 1998, p. 41).

Recommendation 3. *Streamline and make intelligible those policies that parents and children must follow.*

Parents confronted with an array of bewildering forms to complete often give up and do not make decisions about their children's schooling, the Project discovered. At one site, for example, parents were sent check-off forms that combined information about their children's educational problems and achievements (e.g., attendance, tardiness, behavior) with a list of their educational program options (e.g., Title I, ESL, bilingual education). Overly complex guidelines and policies such as these discourage parents from involvement in their children's schooling and serve to alienate them from the school and school staff (Hispanic Dropout Project, 1998, p. 42).

Recommendation 4. *Change or discard those school policies that tacitly permit dropping out or actually encourage Hispanic students to drop out.*

Schools often make active efforts to keep Hispanic students in school, the Project found, until they have been counted in that year's census. Once schools have received their state monies for the year, there are no sanctions for students leaving, and overcrowded schools can feel relief as the student load decreases. District and state policies also provide incentives for schools to drop Hispanic students from their rosters by allowing schools to exclude students from large-scale assessments because of their limited proficiency in English, need for special education services, or other academic needs. In this way, schools and districts can hide their lowest-achieving students (Hispanic Dropout Project, 1998, p. 43).

Recommendation 5. *Just as standards for content and performance are critical in this age of education reform, districts and states should develop standards for school conditions, school and class size, and student opportunity-to-learn.*

Large schools should be restructured into smaller and more personalized learning environments. Reform agendas—particularly high-stakes testing programs—should be explained to the parents of Hispanic students and their input solicited. High-stakes testing programs should be monitored to ensure that they are implemented equitably so that Hispanic students have a fair opportunity to show what they know and can do (Hispanic Dropout Project, 1998, p. 45).

Recommendation 6. *Districts and state education agencies should design comprehensive strategies for dropout prevention tied to the states' standards and that take account of students' differing needs at different points in their lives.*

This comprehensive approach is more likely to be successful than strict reliance on any one program or intervention. No single strategy—be it early childhood intervention, bilingual education, curriculum reform, student tutoring and mentoring—can by itself solve the problem of student dropout. Just as students and schools are complicated, so a creative mix of programmatic and human resources is recommended to net improved student outcomes (Hispanic Dropout Project, 1998, p. 45).

The self-evaluation tool presented next is intended to help school staff, and district and state policymakers evaluate their own efforts to educate Hispanic youth, using key recommendations of the Hispanic Dropout Project.

Self-Evaluation Tool for School Staff and Policymakers

State and District Policies

1. In my school or district, education specific to Hispanic youth is considered by all stakeholders without reference to debates on immigration, language issues, or the socioeconomic status of Hispanic families.

Completely implemented To some extent In development Not at all

2. In my school or district, we have coherent policies and comprehensive action plans that promote the education of our Hispanic students.

Completely implemented To some extent In development Not at all

3. In my school or district, we can point to specific efforts tailored to the needs of Hispanic students and provide data that reveal how well they are achieving, what barriers to achievement have been identified, and how those barriers are addressed through professional development and other related efforts.

Completely implemented To some extent In development Not at all

4. In my school or district, the education of Hispanic youth is not considered in a vacuum but is connected to all reform efforts, evaluated regularly and rigorously, and must meet accountability criteria that demonstrate adequately that Hispanic students are included equitably in high-stakes, large-scale testing.

Completely implemented To some extent In development Not at all

Physical Facilities

1. My school board regularly allocates monies to ensure that buildings are kept in adequate repair, that students and staff are not trying to learn and work in overcrowded, dirty conditions, and that disorder is kept to a minimum.

Completely implemented To some extent In development Not at all

2. In my school or district, a certain percentage of monies are devoted to professional development that has a concerted and sustained focus: improving achievement for all youth.

Completely implemented To some extent In development Not at all

3. In my school or district, professional development is connected to the ongoing life of the classroom. Concentrated time is spent identifying procedures and school-level policies that nudge Hispanic students out of school, and an equivalent amount of time is dedicated to finding solutions to replace these punitive policies.

Completely implemented To some extent In development Not at all

4. In my school or district, there is a limited waiting period to get into a program if a student is at risk of dropping out of school or at risk of academic failure. There is a high-quality program for students on waiting lists so that they do not lose ground academically or socially.

Completely implemented To some extent In development Not at all

Policies and Parents

1. In my school or district, staff have taken the lead to work actively with community members so that school policies are clear, easy to understand, and can be communicated in effective ways.

Completely implemented To some extent In development Not at all

2. In my school or district, our accountability plan measures how many parents understand our policies, where communication can be improved, and what currently is done to improve policies that are questionable.

Completely implemented To some extent In development Not at all

3. In my school or district, staff connect with parents in ways that extend beyond conventional parent/teacher conferences and back-to-school nights. Staff may visit parents at home, parents are welcome at school, special facilities have been designed for parents, and an ethos of an extended family prevails.

Completely implemented To some extent In development Not at all

4. In my school or district, staff regard Hispanic youth as “our kids” rather than as “those kids.”

Completely To some extent In development Not at all

Standards and Hispanic Dropout

1. In my school or district, we have linked state and district standards for content and performance to a set of standards for school conditions, class and school size, and student opportunity-to-learn. These standards are a key part of our accountability plan and are evaluated on a regular and rigorous basis.

Completely implemented To some extent In development Not at all

2. In my school or district, we have decided to restructure our largest schools into smaller learning academies where students can build one-on-one relationships with teachers.

Completely implemented To some extent In development Not at all

3. In my school or district, parents are familiar with our educational agenda for Hispanic youth, and understand both our goals and our methods for achieving those goals.

Completely To some extent In development Not at all

4. In my school or district, considerable attention and money is devoted to the development of equitable large-scale testing in which all Hispanic students can participate. This testing and its consequences are explained clearly to parents and family members, and as many Hispanic students as possible participate in an effort to gather data about their performance.

Completely implemented To some extent In development Not at all

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Anne Turnbaugh Lockwood, an education writer and policy analyst, is an Associate Researcher with the Wisconsin Center for Education Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison. She is the author of numerous educational reports, monographs, and articles as well as four books: *Tracking: Conflicts and Resolutions* (1996), *Character Education: Controversy and Consensus* (1997), *Conversations With Educational Leaders: Contemporary Viewpoints on Education in America* (1997), and *Standards: From Policy to Practice* (1998). She (with Walter G. Secada) is also co-editor of *Charter Schools: Developing Policy & Practice* (forthcoming) and co-author of *Transforming Education for Hispanic Youth: Exemplary Practices, Programs, and Schools* (1999). Dr. Lockwood has been commissioned to write reports and other publications by the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (NCREL), and the U.S. Department of Education—including the Office of the Under Secretary, Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), and Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Languages Affairs (OBEMLA). At the University of Wisconsin-Madison, she initiated and directed two nationally respected publications programs for the National Center on Effective Secondary Schools (1986-90) and the National Center on Effective Schools (1990-94). A former Honorary Fellow in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, she is the recipient of the 1993 American Educational Research Association Interpretive Scholarship Award for relating research to practice through writing, and the Distinguished Achievement Award of the School of Education, University of Wisconsin-Madison. Dr. Lockwood holds a Ph.D. in Educational Psychology from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.



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No. 2: Transforming Education for Hispanic Youth: Recommendations for Principals and Building-Level Decisionmakers

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The four NCBE Issue Briefs, a copy of the final report of the Hispanic Dropout Project, a monograph based on case studies examined in the project's work, and related documents are available through the National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education (NCBE) web site at: <http://www.ncbe.gwu.edu>. Or contact NCBE at the address listed below.

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