

Transforming Education for Hispanic Youth: Recommendations for Teachers and Program Staff

Anne Turnbaugh Lockwood

Patricia Anne DiCerbo, Editor

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 and practice-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 (Hispanic Dropout Project, 1998).

This Issue Brief synthesizes and discusses the Project's recommendations for teachers and program staff.

An overarching conclusion of the Hispanic Dropout Project centered on the teachers who work with Hispanic students nationwide. These teachers, Project members agreed, can find themselves mired in a negative, self-fulfilling prophesy that has more to do with their preservice education or the structure of their school than with their student population. Project members discovered that a sizable number of teachers are simply not equipped to engage Hispanic students who are poor, who are recent arrivals in the U.S., or who are English language learners, in standard classroom practice. Moreover, instructional practices as they exist in many schools, particularly in urban schools of poverty, can alienate students from the life of the school and foster attitudes that lead to students dropping out entirely.

The Hispanic Dropout Project found that, with notable exceptions (Lockwood & Secada, 1999), many teachers believe that Hispanic students are difficult to educate and that the task eludes their capabilities. Project members concurred that these teachers' views may be reinforced by school structures that do not encourage classroom experimentation, project-based learning, or high-quality bilingual education. Teachers may also be influenced by other staff whose views related to immigration and English language learners have become politicized.

Project members pointed out that when teachers are uncomfortable with Hispanic students or

unschooled about linguistic and cultural issues, they may disengage — and draw consolation from similar behavior higher up in their districts. These teachers may expect special programs, such as bilingual education or Title I services, to carry the educational load for Hispanic youth who qualify for these services. In schools where interaction between mainstream teachers and bilingual education teachers is strained or difficult to achieve because of the school's structure, Hispanic youth can end up in an educational ghetto that consists solely of their peers. In such situations, the Hispanic Dropout Project concluded, Hispanic students may view dropping out as a sensible response (Hispanic Dropout Project, 1998).

The Project discovered that teachers may make one of two poor choices: They may decide to blame Hispanic students and their families for their difficulties in school — or choose an equally pernicious path in which they excuse Hispanic youth for poor academic performance because of out-of-school variables such as low socioeconomic status or lack of proficiency in English. The latter attitude is well-meaning but harmful, the Hispanic Dropout Project emphasized in its Final Report (Hispanic Dropout Project, 1998), because it truncates the possibility of higher-level instruction and the development of knowledge that is necessary to function in a technologically sophisticated society.

Teachers who feel sorry for Hispanic youth may decide that it is “kinder” to expect little from them. These teachers share benign intentions that are propelled by pity for their students. They may believe that they are “doing them a favor” by not providing challenging course content. Instead of holding Hispanic students to high expectations and standards — buttressed by a web of supports — they may think such behavior is unwarranted, even cruel.

These teacher-held attitudes, the Hispanic Dropout Project discovered, can extend to the ways in which teachers interact with and think about Hispanic parents and families. Identifying family members as the reason Hispanic students cannot succeed in school provides an easy rationale for school staff to disengage from them completely. If teachers and other school staff are disengaged or alienated from Hispanic families, they may abandon efforts to involve parents in the ongoing life of the school and their children's academic performance. The Hispanic Dropout Project found that in schools serving high concentrations of Hispanic students, many staff assumed that parents and family members would not come to school, would not be interested in their children's progress in school, and had little interest in formal education for their children (Hispanic Dropout Project, 1998).

The Hispanic Dropout Project's key recommendations for teachers, including bilingual education teachers, emphasized a variety of interlocking factors. All of these highlight the quality of interactions between teachers, Hispanic students, and the families of Hispanic students. The Project underscored the importance of drawing upon the knowledge and skills that Hispanic students bring to school with them, rather than treating them as deficient or in need of remedial education because their cultural and/or linguistic experiences and backgrounds may be dissimilar to mainstream U.S. culture and society.

Key Recommendations for Transforming Teaching for Hispanic Students

***Recommendation 1.** Teachers should teach content so that it interests and challenges Hispanic students, helping students to learn that content. They should communicate high expectations, respect, and interest in each of their students. They should understand the roles of language, race, culture, and gender in schooling. They should engage parents and the community in the education of their children (Hispanic Dropout Project, 1998, p. 28).*

One of the ways teachers interest and challenge Hispanic students is to use Hispanic students' out-of-school experiences in a lively way to infuse and inform their classroom learning experiences. Rather than negating these experiences and the knowledge Hispanic students bring to school with them, teachers use these experiences as building blocks for academic mastery of sophisticated concepts and content. Instead of consigning Hispanic students to low-level drill on boring content — and relying on outmoded instructional aids such as worksheets to keep students occupied — exemplary teachers seek out ways in which they can communicate interesting, challenging course content with real-world applications. Whether students work on computers, in cooperative groups, or develop exhibitions and portfolios of their work intended for real audiences, their schoolwork should be purposeful and meaningful. Exemplary teachers showcase the schoolwork of Hispanic youth, displaying it to students' parents and families. They engage students in oral and written explications of their work, communicating it to other students, staff, and family members. These teachers design class assignments that are an essential part of the curriculum, that are not fragmented and meaningless, but connected, cohesive, and focused.

***Recommendation 2.** Teachers should become knowledgeable about and develop strategies to educate Hispanic students and to communicate with their parents. Teachers should receive the professional development needed to develop those attitudes, knowledge, and skills (Hispanic Dropout Project, 1998, p. 28).*

The Hispanic Dropout Project found that exemplary sites relied upon imaginative strategies to draw Hispanic parents and families into school life. For example, rather than expecting Hispanic families to conform to the conventional schedule of evening PTA meetings, these schools offered parent potlucks at the dinner hour or immediately after school to accommodate parents who worked two jobs or the night shift. Or, they maintained a parent room within the school where parents felt welcome to drop in during the day and visit their child's class. At such sites, staff succeeded in making school an extension of Hispanic families' daily lives and contributed to an overall positive relationship between home and school (Lockwood & Secada, 1999).

In addition, exemplary schools utilized their bilingual staff as team members to make home visits. These visits were planned carefully so that they were not seen as punitive but instead were affirmations of the student's value to the school. Staff at one school, for example, demonstrated the importance of having the child read aloud to the parent at home whether or not the parent was fluent in English (Lockwood & Secada, 1999). This emphasis on drawing the family member into the school's strategy to build literacy gave parents something concrete and manageable that they could do to help their children gain literacy, regardless of their English language skills.

While bilingual staff were an integral part of home visits, these visits were not consigned solely to them. Instead, exemplary schools asked all staff to share responsibility for building positive relationships with Hispanic families. At the school described above, staff who did not speak Spanish participated in home visits with bilingual staff to build their comfort level and expertise with families. And, while bilingual staff supported their non-bilingual colleagues, they did not control and supervise the emerging relationships between their colleagues and the family members of Hispanic students.

The Project added that it is unrealistic to expect teachers to be able to reinvent their practice alone — particularly if they teach in poorly financed urban schools beset with a multitude of daily crises. An ongoing, sustained, and in-depth program of professional development geared to teachers' classroom goals for Hispanic students must be a high-priority budget item that is protected and maintained by the district. Rather than consuming teacher time with disconnected workshops devoted to a long menu of topics, each year's program of professional development should be planned carefully with adequate teacher input so that it is valuable and current. At its best, strong professional development is planned over a period of years to maximize its usefulness and impact, with teacher input to ensure that it is targeted to current instructional needs.

Recommendation 3. *Teachers in high-poverty schools working with large populations of Hispanic students are often the last to receive high-quality professional development related to new instructional approaches, curricula, and unbiased ways to assess students. They should be the first to receive these opportunities (Hispanic Dropout Project, 1998).*

The Hispanic Dropout Project strongly urged school districts to allocate sufficient funds for sustained, in-depth professional development related to instructional strategies that will further the academic achievement of Hispanic students. Districts with high, concentrated enrollments of Hispanic students are typically urban and suffer the constraints of severely inadequate funds. In such situations, professional development frequently is sacrificed as a cost-cutting measure or substantially reduced in scope and quality.

Teachers cannot be held accountable for student achievement, the Project agreed, when they are not provided opportunities to enhance their professional knowledge, skill, and craft. Putting a rigid new accountability plan in place without adequate supports so that teachers have the wherewithal to improve the quality of their instruction is the same as expecting Hispanic students to gain academic mastery without high-quality instruction.

Below is a self-evaluation tool intended to help teachers and other instructional staff develop more effective strategies by evaluating their own efforts to educate Hispanic youth, based on recommendations made by the Hispanic Dropout Project.

Self-Evaluation Tool for Teachers and Other Instructional Staff

Developing High-Quality Curriculum and Instruction for Hispanic Youth

1. In my school, teachers share a common understanding: All youth, regardless of race, ethnicity, linguistic, or socioeconomic status, should be held to high standards for academic performance, and supported in their efforts to gain mastery.

Completely implemented *To some extent* *In development* *Not at all*

2. My school is structured in ways that permit teachers and other instructional staff to personalize instruction and build relationships with students.

Completely implemented *To some extent* *In development* *Not at all*

3. In my school, mainstream teachers work with bilingual education and Title I teachers in partnership to further the achievement of limited English proficient (LEP) Hispanic students.

Completely implemented *To some extent* *In development* *Not at all*

4. In my school, teachers use a variety of methods to engage Hispanic students in their schoolwork, using real-world applications of classroom content to make learning immediate, relevant, and connected to the daily experiences of Hispanic students.

Completely implemented *To some extent* *In development* *Not at all*

5. In my school, students are expected to demonstrate their mastery of content both orally and in writing.

Completely implemented *To some extent* *In development* *Not at all*

Professional Development that Supports High-Quality Instruction

1. In my district, substantive, in-depth professional development that has specific meaning to teachers as they work with high-quality content in the classroom is considered a high-priority budget item.

Completely implemented *To some extent* *In development* *Not at all*

2. In my school, professional development is infused with strategies that meet the real-life instructional needs of teachers, including an emphasis on non-mainstream cultures, ethnicities, races, and languages.

Completely implemented *To some extent* *In development* *Not at all*

3. In my school, professional development includes all instructional staff and emphasizes ways in which bilingual education teachers and mainstream classroom teachers can build effective partnerships to further the academic achievement of Hispanic youth.

Completely implemented *To some extent* *In development* *Not at all*

4. In my school, professional development includes collaborative strategies to help instructional staff draw Hispanic parents and family members into the life of the school.

Completely implemented *To some extent* *In development* *Not at all*

5. In my school, professional development is keenly attuned to teacher needs.

Completely implemented *To some extent* *In development* *Not at all*

Building Partnerships With Hispanic Parents and Families

1. In my school, teachers who make home visits use a variety of strategies to involve Hispanic family members in the instructional life of their children.

Completely implemented *To some extent* *In development* *Not at all*

2. In my school, bilingual education teachers are viewed as an important link to Hispanic parents and families, but all instructional staff share responsibility for developing effective family-school partnerships.

Completely implemented *To some extent* *In development* *Not at all*

3. In my school, staff work hard to make the school a friendly place for the families of Hispanic youth.

Completely implemented *To some extent* *In development* *Not at all*

4. Staff in my school provide families of Hispanic students a concrete set of strategies to help their children with their schoolwork, even if these family members are not proficient in English.

Completely implemented *To some extent* *In development* *Not at all*

Accountability, High Expectations, and Hispanic Youth

1. In my school, teachers hold Hispanic students to high expectations for their academic achievement.

Completely implemented *To some extent* *In development* *Not at all*

2. In my school, high expectations are fortified by school-provided supports, both social and academic.

Completely implemented *To some extent* *In development* *Not at all*

3. My district's accountability plan is clear and disseminated through a variety of means to the parents and family members of Hispanic youth as well as other educational stakeholders.

Completely implemented *To some extent* *In development* *Not at all*

4. My district's accountability plan is symmetric: teachers and students are held accountable for academic achievement.

Completely implemented *To some extent* *In development* *Not at all*

5. Accountability in my district and school is not punitive.

Completely implemented *To some extent* *In development* *Not at all*

References

- Hispanic Dropout Project. (1998, February). *No more excuses: The final report of the Hispanic Dropout Project*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of the Under Secretary.
- Lockwood, A.T., and Secada, W.G. (1999, January). *Transforming education for Hispanic youth: Exemplary practices, programs, and schools*. Washington, DC: The National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education.

About the Author

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.

Other titles in the NCBE Issue Brief series are:

No. 1: Transforming Education for Hispanic Youth: Broad Recommendations for Policy and Practice

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

No. 4: Transforming Education for Hispanic Youth: Recommendations for State and District Policymakers

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.

The National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education (NCBE) is funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Languages Affairs (OBEMLA) and is operated under Contract No. T295005001 by The George Washington University, Graduate School of Education and Human Development, Center for the Study of Language and Education. The contents of this publication do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Department of Education nor does the mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. government. Readers are free to duplicate and use these materials in keeping with accepted publication standards. NCBE requests that proper credit be given in the event of reproduction.

Joel Gómez, Ed.D., Principal Investigator
Minerva Gorena, Ed.D., Director

Graduate School of Education and Human Development

**National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education
Center for the Study of Language & Education
2011 Eye Street NW • Suite 200 • Washington DC 20006
Tel: 202.467.0867 • Fax: 202.467.4283 • www.ncbe.gwu.edu**