

## **Transforming Education for Hispanic Youth: The Impact of State and District-Level Policies**

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Patricia Anne DiCerbo, Editor

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One of the most influential findings of the Hispanic Dropout Project, a two-year study commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education, was that state and district policies can exert a negative effect on promising or exemplary classroom practices targeted to Hispanic students. State and district policies, the Project emphasized, directly influence the educational progress of Hispanic students, and may actually encourage Hispanic students to drop out. As a result, the potentially productive futures of these students are compromised — despite the best intentions of mainstream classroom teachers, ESL/bilingual education teachers, and other educational personnel who work with Hispanic students.

From 1995 to 1997, the Project studied the problem of academic underachievement and dropout among Hispanic youth, and provided a set of policy and practice-relevant recommendations. A series of reports from that study (e.g., Hispanic Dropout Project, 1998; Lockwood & Secada, 1999) draws upon Project site visits, public hearings, examination of research and commissioned case studies to present basic requirements for effective schooling of these students. This Issue Brief (No. 4) synthesizes and discusses the Project's recommendations regarding state and district-level policies. Five recommendations are presented.

### **Key Recommendations for Transforming State and District Policies for Hispanic Students**

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Overall, the Project's recommendations pinpoint the need to (1) clarify and streamline existing policies, and (2) communicate these policies with clarity, vigor, and imagination to diverse audiences. States and districts, the Project emphasizes, need to rework bureaucratic and cumbersome policies in favor of policies that are clear and accessible. They need to adopt an ar-

ray of academic standards and an accompanying accountability strategy that will keep all Hispanic students in school — and communicate and explain new standards and accountability measures to the families of Hispanic students in accessible formats. In addition, Project members underscore that resources must be targeted to maximize high-quality educational experiences.

*Issue Brief No. 4 is the final of a series of briefs synthesizing the results of the Hispanic Dropout Project. The previous three presented general recommendations for policy and practice, and more specific recommendations targeted to principals and other building-level decisionmakers, bilingual education teachers and program staff.*



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**Recommendation 1.** *Districts should inform students and parents of their policies in ways that are clear and easy to understand. Policies should not be overly complex. Parents should be warned, well in advance, when their children’s behaviors are deemed unacceptable to the district. Districts should enforce their policies in ways that are equitable. For instance, if a student is charged with a serious infraction, districts should not bypass due process by charging the student with something that is unrelated but easier to substantiate (1999, p. 44).*

If the parents and family members of Hispanic students — particularly those who are English language learners — do not understand state, district, or school-level policies, the state or district needs to streamline and clarify those policies. Once policies are revised, educational personnel need to communicate them in traditional and nontraditional ways to all educational stakeholders. Some possibilities include disseminating policies in Spanish as well as in English and making these dual language policies available to a range of community groups and businesses that serve Hispanic families.

**Recommendation 2.** *States should analyze their policies so that schools no longer have incentives to ignore, if not push out, students who experience trouble. State policies should be rewritten with an eye towards encouraging schools to do all they can to retain students. District and state accountability and incentive systems should encourage schools to keep students through high school graduation (1999, p. 45).*

The Hispanic Dropout Project found that state and district policies can encourage high dropout rates among Hispanic students. For example, policies that do not support disaggregating data on student achievement, attendance, and other indicators of student engagement result in the collection of meaningless information. When data are not collected or used correctly to guide decisions, the high dropout rate among Hispanic students is not surprising. School personnel, family members of students, and other educational stakeholders should know, at minimum, which students are excluded from large-scale tests and which students are enrolled in various tracks (e.g., honors versus vocational). Sound educational decisions are guided by a thorough understanding of these data along with data such as student completion and attendance rates.

**Recommendation 3.** *In addition to developing standards for what students learn and how that should be measured, districts and states should develop standards for school conditions, class and school size, and in general, student opportunity to learn. Specifically, schools should:*

- *invest in smaller classes and units to ensure personalized attention and instruction for all students,*
- *construct accountability mechanisms that ensure that Hispanic students participate in ongoing reform agendas, and*
- *monitor high-stakes testing programs to guarantee that their implementation will be equitable (Hispanic Dropout Project, 1999, p. 45).*

**Investing in smaller classes and improved physical school structures.** Students have more difficulty mastering content when they attend schools that are large, dirty, overcrowded, and decaying — typical observations of Hispanic Dropout Project members as they toured schools nationwide (Hispanic Dropout Project, 1999). Students who are especially fragile because of their low socioeconomic status, or their status as English language learners or recent immigrants, are in particular jeopardy when overcrowded, inadequate, and understaffed schools are their only choice.

Hispanic students can bear similar burdens in large suburban schools, particularly high schools, if they are consigned to low-track classes, suffer instruction that is of poor quality and, in general, never experience a constructive relationship with an adult within the school. Positive relationships with at least one adult — beginning in the early grades and continuing through secondary school — help to protect Hispanic students against the pressures that can lead to dropping out of the educational system entirely.

**Including Hispanic students in reform and**

**accountability.** While a school district or state may pursue an active reform agenda, Hispanic students may not realize its benefits. If accountability has not been put into action with a concrete reform plan that monitors student progress and builds in actions at both the district and school level should student achievement fail to reach the desired standards, reform is frozen at the level of rhetoric.

**Accountability planning must be multifaceted.** Educators need to know which students are excluded from high-stakes or large-scale testing, what actions are taken to include them in such assessments (with appropriate accommodations, if necessary), and how well students perform in testing situations that may be alien to their language and culture.

**Recommendation 4.** *Districts and state education agencies need to target their resources strategically and to invest more money in helping schools, particularly urban schools, to provide their Hispanic students with opportunities to learn. For example, additional resources could be tied to (a) schools' implementation of programs that have been proven effective, or (b) the expansion and continuous improvement of a promising program that is already in place (Hispanic Dropout Project, 1999, p. 46).*

One of the sad ironies noted by the Hispanic Dropout Project was that although effective programs — dropout prevention, peer tutoring, literacy development — already exist and can be replicated nationwide, these programs are severely underused (Lockwood, in press). While restructuring efforts may take years to realize their full benefits, there are many programs that can be implemented with little lead time at the local level and configured to fit a community's particular needs. These programs do not necessarily require massive infusions of funds. The Hispanic Dropout Project recommended that districts, with state education agency encouragement, seek out effective programs and have one or more in place while more global reform efforts are underway. In some cases, existing funds or a combination of funds, such as Title I monies, can be mingled to support a much-needed program.

**Recommendation 5.** *Schools and districts must diversify their teaching workforce to include people with the knowledge, language skills, and backgrounds that will enable them to connect with Hispanic students and their parents. Colleges and universities with schools of education need to expend special effort in recruiting students of color and diverse linguistic backgrounds into preservice teacher education programs (Hispanic Dropout Project, 1999, pp. 47-48).*

Schools need teachers and other staff who can communicate with Hispanic youth and their families. This may mean staff who are bilingual; it may also mean monolingual staff with tolerance for diversity. The Project recommends that schools of education, school districts, state education agencies, state boards of education, and postsecondary education's governing bodies assume important roles in diversifying the teacher workforce. Now, in particular, a significant opportunity exists to change the teacher workforce: projections show that a large number of current teachers will retire within the next decade, leaving critical shortages. If talented youth and adults are recruited aggressively into the teacher workforce by universities, districts, and state agencies, the transformation of education for Hispanic youth becomes not only possible, but also probable.

The self-evaluation tool presented next is intended to help state and district educational personnel evaluate the effectiveness of their policies in the context of educating Hispanic youth, based on recommendations made by the Hispanic Dropout Project.

## Self-Evaluation Tool for State and District Decisionmakers

### Simplifying, Streamlining, and Communicating Policies to Educational Stakeholders

1. In my state or district, a team has reviewed educational policies that affect Hispanic youth; when necessary, policies have been clarified and streamlined so that they are free of burdensome or confusing language.

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

2. My state or district has a communication plan in action that ensures that educational policies affecting Hispanic students are known and understood by parents, family members, community members, and other educational stakeholders.

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

3. My district uses a combination of traditional and nontraditional communication strategies to include parents of Hispanic youth in the enactment of current policies and the development of new educational policies that affect their children.

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

4. If a student in my district experiences trouble in school, s/he knows well in advance of any disciplinary action; parents or family members are brought into the decisionmaking process to emphasize the importance of remaining in school and building a positive future.

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

### Constructing Standards and Accountability for Equity

1. In my district, the board of education and key building personnel have developed an action plan with timelines to deploy resources so that smaller classes and greater personalization of the educational experience can be achieved.

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

2. My district carefully disaggregates and publicizes data so that all staff and the public are aware of key indicators of school success and the students who continue to be excluded from opportunities.

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

3. My district uses disaggregated data to guide its decisionmaking, acting swiftly to take appropriate measures when student achievement fails to meet desired standards, when dropout rates do not diminish, and when a high percentage of students continue to be excluded from large-scale testing.

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

4. In addition to efforts to personalize instruction for all students, an action plan with timelines has been constructed to repair buildings and improve the physical condition of schools in the district.

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

## Implementing and Replicating Effective Programs for Hispanic Youth

1. My school or district has a review team that represents different levels of educational personnel; this team has an agenda with timelines to review effective programs and make recommendations to our school board.

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

2. My district has made a commitment to an investment of monies earmarked to a program for the needs of Hispanic youth; this investment is sacrosanct for a period of years.

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

3. My district has a timeline for program implementation that allows sufficient startup time, time for ongoing professional development, and time to measure program effectiveness and make modifications, if necessary.

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

4. My district is willing to use a blend of program personnel from outside the district along with key staffers inside the district to commit to the program over a period of time.

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

## Targeting Resources for Maximum Benefit

1. My district has a structured plan for funds that will be allocated to one or more effective programs for Hispanic youth.

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

2. My district deploys its resources so that all students can experience maximal educational productivity; this includes combining Title I with other funding streams when possible to finance reform and special programs for Hispanic youth.

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

3. My district draws upon the expertise of both outside experts and key figures inside the district — along with community leaders and other educational stakeholders<sup>3/4</sup>to make sound budget decisions that will improve the quality of buildings, ensure high-quality teaching staff for all students, and protect new programs for a given period of time so that they have a fair trial period.

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

4. My district has made a time and financial commitment to effective programs, so that they are not in jeopardy at each budget review.

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

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## References

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## 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.



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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.

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