

# issue & brief

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## Transforming Education for Hispanic Youth: Recommendations for Principals and Building- Level Decisionmakers

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School principals and other building-level decisionmakers can feel overwhelmed by what appear to be insurmountable problems some students bring with them to school—the out-of-school factors that affect academic performance and engagement. That was one of the findings from a national study of effective education for Hispanic students, the *Hispanic Dropout Project*. Even the most optimistic educator, the Project found, may feel daunted by the needs of students from poverty, who do not speak English, who are recent arrivals in the United States and unfamiliar with U.S. culture, or whose family members are not connected to the school in the same cultural ways in which parents typically participate in their children's school experience.

The Project discovered that, frequently, educators' feelings of hopelessness stem from the realization that their own preparation to deal with such challenges is insufficient. As a result, they may be well intentioned but timid. They may prefer to delegate or "beg off" from important issues, or ignore some problems in the hope that they will vanish on their own. Intentionally or not, these educators may also use existing school policies and procedures to discourage Hispanic

students from full participation in their own education.

The Hispanic Dropout Project was a two-year study commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education. From 1995 to 1997, the Project studied the problem of academic underachievement and dropout among Hispanic youth, and made recommendations for solutions. Some of the proposals developed by the Hispanic Dropout Project were specifically targeted to the needs of school and building-level decisionmakers. Following these recommendations, Project members believe, can help transform even the most punishing school environment into a positive one for Hispanic youth. This Issue Brief presents five of their main recommendations for building-level decisionmakers.

This is the second of a series of four Issue Briefs synthesizing the results of the Hispanic Dropout Project. The first presented general recommendations for policy and practice. The next will address recommendations for bilingual education teachers and program staff. This series of Issue Briefs concludes with suggestions for state and district policymakers.



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## School-Level Recommendations

**Recommendation 1.** *Schools should prevent problems, responding appropriately and swiftly to early warning signs that a student may be losing interest in school, becoming disengaged from schoolwork, or losing academic ground (Hispanic Dropout Project, 1998, p. 35).*

The successful schools visited by the Hispanic Dropout Project took a proactive approach toward Hispanic youth and their participation in school. Rather than waiting for a low-level, ongoing problem to escalate into an insoluble conflict between the student and school, staff at exemplary sites were attentive to early signals that students were pulling away from school, either academically or socially—unexcused absences, negative changes in grades or behavior, and similar indications. Staff in both elementary and secondary schools did not hesitate to interact with students in positive, direct ways; confront them about their observations and build action plans for improvement; shore up flagging relationships between students and the school; and build bridges to the students' family members.

**Recommendation 2.** *Schools, especially high schools, need to personalize programs and services that work with Hispanic students (Hispanic Dropout Project, 1998, p. 36).*

A large part of the problem Hispanic students experience in U.S. schools—and, in particular, in secondary schools—is the absence of personal attention devoted to their schooling by school staff. When combined with large classes, boring instruction detached from the realities of their lives, and their own limited vision of a future, the lack of individual attention encourages many Hispanic students to drop out of school.

What the Hispanic Dropout Project observed in outstanding sites at both the elementary and secondary levels was the opposite. These schools

paid attention to their students. Specifically, they:

- created classrooms that were caring communities while maintaining high academic standards for all students;
- saw to it that each student had a relationship with some member of the school staff;
- took on an expanded role for themselves that went beyond the school day; and
- created a safety net of options for students to ensure they would stay in school.

**Recommendation 3.** *Schools should be restructured to ensure that all students have access to high-quality curricula. They should reconfigure time, space, and staffing patterns to provide students with additional support needed to achieve (Hispanic Dropout Project, 1998, p. 36).*

Although restructuring long-standing patterns and structures may seem intimidating to school staff, relatively simple modifications can help achieve needed changes. Structural reforms such as schools-within-schools and flexible scheduling can help put the quality of the curriculum first—and make it easier for teachers and other school staff to build positive relationships with students. Long-standing practices such as tracking can be presented for questioning, debate, and discussion among school staff, students, family and community members. Practices that do not work should be dropped or revised.

An action plan with definite timelines and assignments should be a part of any significant restructuring effort so that clarity of roles is maintained and lines of responsibility are kept distinct. These restructuring components can be managed by a series of committees with carefully chosen representation to ensure equity and diversity—so that a type of “group think” about important policies does not dominate.

**Recommendation 4.** *Schools should replicate effective programs. In addition to using new funding to support these programs, schools should redeploy existing resources to run these programs (Hispanic Dropout Project, 1998, p. 37).*

Too many schools believe that the Hispanic dropout issue cannot be affected positively by one school or district. As a result, they wait for some grand action to be taken at a broader policy level. While policies governing the education of Hispanic youth are needed, replicating programs proven effective in similar schools with similar students is a cost-effective, commonsense approach.

Exemplary sites, the Hispanic Dropout Project discovered, were willing to adopt programs that had been shown to be effective—whether they featured mentoring, peer coaching, an emphasis on literacy, or comprehensive school reform. Schools found that they could combat Hispanic dropout by beginning with a small-scale program, e.g., a program that fostered positive relationships between older and younger students, or one that emphasized the use of computers to build literacy skills while also providing tutoring to low-literacy adults in the community.

At these exemplary sites, scarce resources were used creatively or redirected to fund new programs. While this occasionally meant sacrificing some other program or educational option within the school or district, staff and school boards alike were willing to try to tailor existing programs to address the growing crisis of Hispanic dropouts.

**Recommendation 5.** *Schools should monitor carefully the effectiveness of their programs and continuously try to improve them. If not effective, these programs should be replaced by strategies that promise better results (Hispanic Dropout Project, 1998, p. 38).*

With a new emphasis on accountability for both schools and students sweeping the nation, school staff and other interested educational stakeholders need to examine their own roles in the persistence of the Hispanic dropout problem. They need to ask under what conditions a program is effective or ineffective, monitor the quality of the teaching that occurs within ineffective programs, and ensure that the least experienced and least prepared teachers are not those automatically assigned to work with Hispanic students. If inexperience, fear, or lack of content knowledge bars teachers from full participation in a program in which the district has invested, the district must also invest in sustained professional development to boost teachers' performance so that they are capable of helping lift students' academic achievement and engagement in school.

One of the findings from the Hispanic Dropout Project was that promising programs were not rewarded for their effectiveness in many of the districts they visited, beyond the enthusiasm of educators working in those programs and experiencing positive results. Such positive outcomes need to be documented fully, with less encouraging results fully noted as well, so that policymakers and educators working on solutions to Hispanic dropout will be well served with empirical, research-based evidence.

As educational decisionmakers engage in this process of heightened accountability for educational outcomes, what they learn will help them shape their programs so that they become more effective in meeting the needs of Hispanic students. The self-evaluation tool presented next is intended to help evaluate the efforts to educate Hispanic youth, using key recommendations from the Hispanic Dropout Project.

## Self-Evaluation Tool for Building-Level Educational Decisionmakers

### Recognizing and Dealing with Early Warning Signs of Disengagement from School

1. In my school, staff are attentive to early warning signs that students are disengaging from schoolwork and the life of the school.

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

2. In my school, when we recognize that a student is beginning to experience problems with school, or with life outside of school, we have a clear strategy for appropriate and swift intervention.

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

3. In my school, we have a team that provides solutions specific to a particular student's problem and a speedy referral process for students who exhibit early warning signs of disengagement from school.

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

4. In my school, when we recognize that a student is withdrawing from school, our intervention does not blame the student and/or family, but focuses on the positive to build a strategy for school success.

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

### Personalized Attention To Youth

1. In my school, our teaching and other delivery of services have been developed to maximize a personalized environment for each student.

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

2. If my school is large, it has been restructured into smaller learning communities, such as academies, so that students can participate in their own learning in ways that build upon cooperative relationships with others.

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

3. In my school, each adult assumes responsibility for building a positive relationship with more than one student—and this responsibility has become a part of the school's ethos.

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

4. In my school, personalized instruction is combined with insistence on high academic standards for all students.

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

### Access to High-Quality Curricula

1. In my school, we have reconfigured our staffing, space, and scheduling to ensure that all students can access high-quality curricula.

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

2. In my school, we have developed an action plan to make the delivery of educational programming as inclusive as possible.

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

3. In my school, restructuring responsibilities are public and distinct. Each staff member serves on a key committee with a definite timeline for action.

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

4. In my school, policies such as tracking are held to public scrutiny that includes representative educational stakeholders.

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

### Replication of Effective Programs

1. In my school, we have a team that researches effective programs, reports their observations to school staff, and makes recommendations for implementation on a specified timeline.

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

2. In my school, we have taken programs and/or practices proven effective in similar settings and replicated them with our students.

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

3. In my school, we have initiated programs for immediate use with our students while restructuring schoolwide.

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

4. In my school, resources are deployed to fund new programs with evidence of success in similar schools serving similar populations of students.

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

### Monitoring Progress and Ensuring Continuous Success

1. In my school, we have a well-publicized accountability plan that ensures all programs are monitored on a timely basis for effectiveness and equity.  
*Completely implemented      To some extent      In development      Not at all*
2. In my school, we have clear criteria for programmatic effectiveness that take into account student achievement and staff effort so that our accountability scheme is symmetrical and equitable.  
*Completely implemented      To some extent      In development      Not at all*
3. In my school, we give programs that have shown disappointing results enough time to demonstrate their effectiveness; ineffective programs are replaced.  
*Completely implemented      To some extent      In development      Not at all*
4. In my school, staff are given in-depth, sustained professional development specific to our programs and the needs of our students.  
*Completely implemented      To some extent      In development      Not at all*

### References

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## About the Author

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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. 1: Transforming Education for Hispanic Youth: Broad Recommendations for Policy and Practice**
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