

HIGH SCHOOL COMPLETION RATES

The relative importance of a high school education has changed dramatically over the last half century in the United States. When the grandparents of today's high school students entered adulthood, a high school education was an asset in the labor force, held by about half of the population ages 25 through 29 in 1950.²⁰ By the early 1970s, when the parents of today's high school students entered the work force, about 83 to 84 percent of the population ages 18 through 24 who were not enrolled in high school had completed a high school education (figure 3 and table A13). At that time, a high school education still served as an entryway to a number of promising career paths. Now, a quarter of a century later, technological advances in the workplace have increased the demand for a skilled labor force to the point where a high school education serves more as a minimum requirement for entry into the labor force. Completing a high school education is now even more essential in order to enter additional education and training or the labor force.

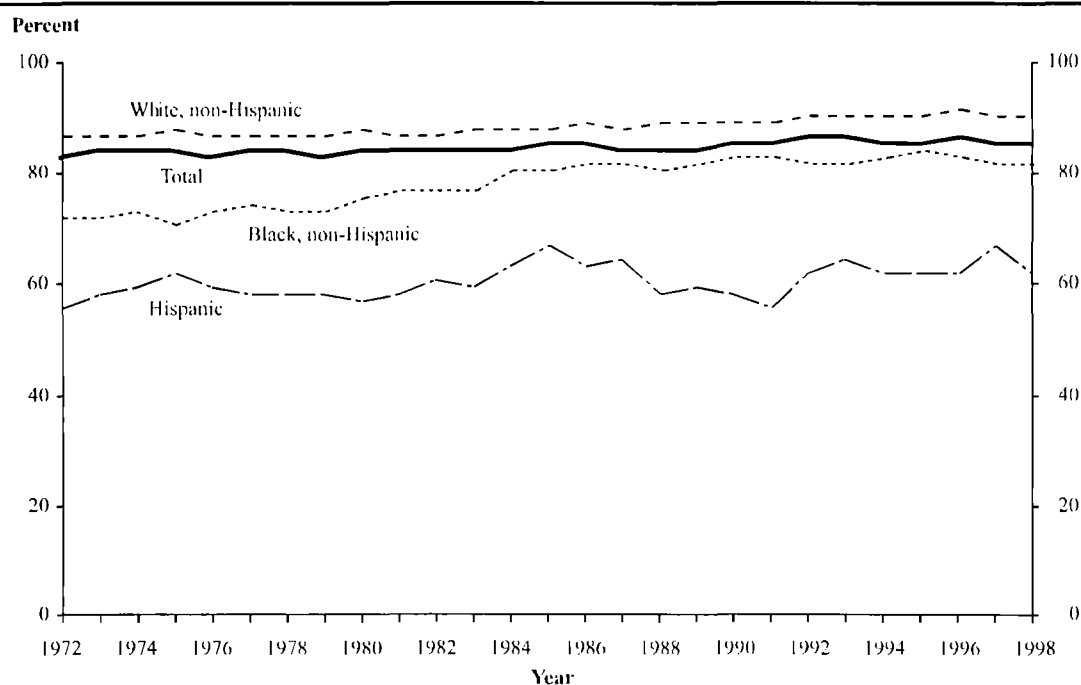
High School Completion Rates

The high school completion rate represents the proportion of 18- through 24-year-olds who have completed a high school diploma or an equivalent credential, including a General Educational Development (GED) credential.²¹ Despite the increased importance of a high school education, the high school completion rate for the country has increased only slightly over the last quarter of a century. Between 1972 and 1985, high school completion rates climbed by 2.6 percentage points (from 82.8 percent in 1972 to 85.4 percent in 1985); since 1985, the rate has fluctuated around 85 and 86 percent (figure 3 and table A13). This net increase of about 3 percentage points over 27 years represents slow progress toward achieving the national goal of a 90 percent high school completion rate.

²⁰U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics 1998*, NCES 1999-036 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1998).

²¹The high school completion rate is based on the population of young adults ages 18 through 24 who are not still enrolled in school; the status dropout rate is based on the population ages 16 through 24. Thus, the age range of the status dropout rate is 2 years wider, and those 18- through 24-year-olds who are still enrolled in a high school program are excluded from the calculation of the high school completion rate. Because of these differences, the status dropout rate and the high school completion rate are not the simple inverse of each other.

Figure 3—High school completion rates of 18- through 24-year-olds not currently enrolled in high school or below, by race-ethnicity:¹ October 1972 through October 1998²



¹Due to relatively small sample sizes, American Indians/Alaskan Natives and Asians/Pacific Islanders are included in the total but are not shown separately.

²Numbers for years 1987 through 1998 reflect new editing procedures instituted by the Bureau of the Census for cases with missing data on school enrollment items. Numbers for years 1992 through 1998 reflect new wording of the educational attainment item in the CPS beginning in 1992. Numbers for years 1994 through 1998 reflect changes in the CPS beginning in 1994 due to newly instituted computer-assisted interviewing and the change in population controls used in the 1990 Census-based estimates, with adjustment for undercounting in the 1990 Census. See appendix C for a fuller description of the impact of these changes on reported rates.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey, October (various years).

Race-Ethnicity

High school completion rates analyzed within each racial-ethnic group have shown somewhat similar patterns over the past 27 years (figure 3 and table A13). Whites exhibited a positive trend in their high school completion over the last quarter of a century, although rates appear to have stabilized somewhat in the last decade. Specifically, their high school completion rates climbed from about 86 percent in the early 1970s to about 90 percent in the 1990s. Since 1990, white completion rates have fluctuated around 90 percent (figure 3 and table A13). Most recently, the high school completion rate of 90.2 percent for white young adults in 1998 was significantly higher than their completion rates in every year before 1986.

Black young adults also made significant gains in completing a high school education over the last quarter of a century, although, like whites, their completion rates appear to have stabilized in recent years. The 1998 black completion rate of 81.4 percent is significantly higher than their completion rates before 1981, indicating that a greater proportion of black young adults are now completing high school than they were in the 1970s. In addition, completion rates of black young adults continued to rise in the 1980s. Since 1990, black completion rates have fluctuated around 83 percent, and trend data over the period suggest that their completion rates have remained unchanged in the 1990s.

A relatively low percentage of Hispanic young adults complete high school programs. For example, in 1998, about 63 percent of all Hispanic 18- through 24-year-olds had completed secondary schooling. Overall, completion rates for Hispanics have fluctuated over the last quarter of a century, but have shown no consistent trend over the entire period. For example, completion rates for Hispanics increased between 1980 and 1985, declined between 1985 and 1990, and then remained at the same level between 1990 and 1998. The 1998 completion rate of 62.8 percent was not significantly different from the 1985 rate of 66.6 percent.

In 1998, as mentioned previously, Asians/Pacific Islanders were included as a distinctive group in the racial-ethnic categories being studied here. Overall, Asian youth are more likely than their white, black, and Hispanic peers to complete high school (table 4). For example, in 1998, 94.2 percent of Asian youth ages 18 through 24 had completed high school, compared with 90.2 percent of white youth, followed by 81.4 percent of black and 62.8 percent of Hispanic youth. Although a smaller proportion of white youth completed high school than did their Asian peers, they completed high school at higher rates than both black and Hispanic youth.

Table 4—High school completion rates and number and distribution of completers, 18- through 24-years-old not currently enrolled in high school or below, by background characteristics: October 1998

Characteristic	Completion rate (percent)			Number of completers (thousands)	Population (thousands)	Percent of all completers
	Total	Diploma	Alternative ¹			
Total	84.8	74.7	10.1	20,451	24,113	100.0
Sex						
Male	82.6	72.2	10.4	9,854	11,934	48.2
Female	87.0	77.1	9.8	10,597	12,180	51.8
Race-ethnicity ²						
White, non-Hispanic	90.2	80.2	10.0	14,333	15,893	70.1
Black, non-Hispanic	81.4	71.7	9.6	2,680	3,294	13.1
Hispanic	62.8	52.1	10.7	2,381	3,788	11.6
Asian/Pacific Islander	94.2	82.9	11.3	929	986	4.5
Age						
18 through 19	82.3	72.5	9.8	5,479	6,658	26.8
20 through 21	85.0	75.0	10.0	5,970	7,025	29.2
22 through 24	86.3	75.9	10.4	9,002	10,430	44.0
Region						
Northeast	87.8	78.2	9.5	3,845	4,379	18.8
Midwest	88.3	80.2	9.1	4,926	5,518	24.1
South	83.4	74.0	9.4	6,921	8,300	33.8
West	80.4	67.9	12.6	4,759	5,916	23.3

¹Completed high school by means of an equivalency test, such as a GED exam.

²Due to relatively small sample sizes, American Indians/Alaskan Natives are included in the total but are not shown separately.

NOTE: Because of rounding, details may not add to totals.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey, October 1998.

Age and Sex

Young adults ages 18–19 who were no longer enrolled in high school were less likely than older adults to have completed high school. In 1998, approximately 82 percent of 18- through 19-year-olds not currently enrolled in high school had completed their secondary schooling, compared with 86.3 percent of young adults ages 20–24 (table 4).

As might be expected given their relatively lower status dropout rates, females ages 18–24 who were no longer enrolled in high school were more likely to have

completed high school than their male peers. In 1998, 87.0 percent of female young adults completed high school compared with about 82.6 percent of male young adults.

Region and State

Overall, young adults in the Northeast and Midwest had higher completion rates than their contemporaries living in the West and the South (table 4). Approximately 88 percent of young adults in both the Northeast and Midwest completed high school compared with 83.4 percent in the South. In addition, young adults living in the West had a lower completion rate (80.4 percent) than those not only living in the Northeast and Midwest, but those living in the South as well.

Often interest in geographic comparisons extends beyond the regional level to state-specific data. In order to compare high school completion on a state-by-state basis, completion rates are computed based on data spanning a 3-year period. The resulting state-specific completion rates represent the average annual rate over the 3-year periods of 1990–92, 1993–95, and 1996–98.²² These data show considerable state-by-state variation (table 5).²³ Using the 1996–98 3-year average, the national rate was 85.6 percent, with the average completion rates ranging from about 75 percent in Oregon to approximately 94–95 percent in North Dakota, Maryland, and Vermont.

²²The sample sizes of the numbers of completers at the state level in the CPS are, by definition, substantially smaller than the counts of completers supporting the national estimates (but appreciably larger than the counts of dropouts). To improve the stability of the state-level estimates for high school completion rates, the rates are displayed as 3-year averages (for example, the data for 1990–92 represent the average of the data from 1990, 1991, and 1992, and the data for 1996–98 are based on averages of data from 1996, 1997, and 1998). Even given this situation, sampling variability is increased substantially, especially in states with relatively smaller populations in the 18 through 24 age range. Thus, it is not surprising that the rates for some states fluctuate over the 3-year periods. Moreover, it should be noted that survey respondents may have attended school in a different state from the one in which they lived at the time of the CPS interview.

²³ A table of overlapping three-year average completion rates from 1989–1991 to 1996–98 is provided in appendix B (table B11).

Table 5—High school completion rates of 18 through 24-year-olds not currently enrolled in high school or below, by state: October 1990–92, 1993–95, and 1996–98

State	Completion rate (percent)		
	1990–92*	1993–95*	1996–98*
Total	85.5	85.8	85.6
Alabama	83.9	83.6	84.2
Alaska	86.9	90.5	88.3
Arizona	81.7	83.8	77.1
Arkansas	87.5	88.3	84.5
California	77.3	78.7	81.2
Colorado	88.1	88.4	85.5
Connecticut	89.9	94.7	91.6
Delaware	86.2	93.0	88.5
District of Columbia	84.0	87.7	84.9
Florida	84.1	80.6	83.6
Georgia	85.1	80.3	84.8
Hawaii	93.5	92.0	92.3
Idaho	84.7	86.1	85.8
Illinois	86.0	86.5	86.6
Indiana	87.8	88.5	89.3
Iowa	94.6	93.2	88.0
Kansas	93.2	90.9	91.6
Kentucky	81.1	82.4	85.2
Louisiana	83.9	80.1	81.6
Maine	91.9	92.9	91.6
Maryland	88.6	93.6	94.5
Massachusetts	89.8	92.5	90.6
Michigan	87.2	88.6	91.0
Minnesota	92.5	93.1	90.0
Mississippi	85.4	83.9	82.0
Missouri	88.1	90.4	90.4
Montana	91.6	89.6	91.1
Nebraska	92.5	94.1	91.2
Nevada	82.1	81.9	78.2
New Hampshire	87.9	86.9	89.2
New Jersey	90.8	91.6	91.8
New Mexico	84.1	82.3	78.6
New York	88.0	87.0	84.7
North Carolina	83.0	85.5	85.2
North Dakota	96.3	96.4	94.7
Ohio	90.0	88.3	89.4
Oklahoma	84.3	86.7	86.0
Oregon	89.6	82.6	75.4
Pennsylvania	90.2	89.4	87.6
Rhode Island	87.9	89.4	86.1

Table 5—High school completion rates of 18- through 24-year-olds not currently enrolled in high school or below, by state: October 1990–92, 1993–95, and 1996–98—Continued

State	Completion rate (percent)		
	1990–92*	1993–95*	1996–98*
South Carolina	85.0	87.8	87.6
South Dakota	89.1	91.3	89.8
Tennessee	76.7	84.5	86.9
Texas	80.0	79.5	80.2
Utah	93.9	93.4	90.7
Vermont	87.0	88.1	93.6
Virginia	88.6	87.5	85.9
Washington	90.7	85.7	87.7
West Virginia	83.3	86.8	89.1
Wisconsin	92.4	93.5	90.8
Wyoming	92.0	90.8	87.6

*Numbers in this table reflect 3-year averages. Numbers for these periods reflect new wording of the educational attainment item in the CPS beginning in 1992 and changes in the CPS beginning in 1994 due to newly instituted computer-assisted interviewing. They also reflect change in population controls used in the 1990 Census-based estimates, with adjustments for undercounting in the 1990 Census. See Appendix C for a fuller description of the impact of these changes on reported rates.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey, October (various years).

Method of High School Completion

The pressures placed on the education system to turn out increasingly larger numbers of qualified lifelong learners have generated increased interest in alternative methods of high school completion. At this point, most students pursuing an alternative to a regular diploma take the GED tests, with the goal of earning a high school equivalency credential.

From 1972 to 1998, approximately 20 million adults took the GED tests, and about 11.5 million, or 60 percent, received a high school equivalency credential based on these tests.²⁴ A minimum passing score is set nationally by the test administrator at the American Council on Education, and individual states set their own passing scores at or above the minimum requirement. In January of 1997, this minimum passing score was raised to a new standard that requires that all GED graduates must exceed the performance of at least 33 percent of traditional graduating high school seniors. In 1998, about 510,000 of the 718,000 adults (70.9 percent) worldwide who took the GED test earned a high school equivalency credential.²⁵

²⁴American Council of Education, *Who Took the Ged? GED 1998 Statistical Report* (Washington D.C. GED Testing Service, 1998). These numbers represent totals for adults worldwide who took the GED tests and earned high school equivalency credentials. For U.S. totals and more detailed GED trend data, see appendix C, figure C1 and table C3.

²⁵IBID.

Anyone age 16 or older who is out of school and does not hold a high school diploma can register and take the GED test. Historically, the GED was established as a means of offering a high school credential to World War II veterans who might have interrupted their schooling to go to war. Since that time, the GED has been viewed as a second-chance program for people who failed to graduate from a regular high school program. Seemingly in contradiction with these programmatic goals, data on GED test-takers show that while the average age of GED test-takers is about 26, over the last quarter of a century, one-third of the test-takers have been ages 16 through 19.²⁶

In recent years, research on the adult outcomes for GED credential holders, as compared with dropouts on one hand, and regular diploma recipients on the other, has fueled a debate over the value of the GED credential. There is conflicting evidence in the research literature concerning the effects of having a GED credential on labor force participation, employment, earnings, wage rates, postsecondary program participation, and persistence in postsecondary programs.²⁷

These conflicting findings have led some researchers to question the efficacy of promoting GED programs for youths who are still young enough to participate in regular high school programs. This debate highlights the need to monitor the characteristics and the relative size of the groups of dropouts, high school graduates, and alternative completers.

Most of the 84.8 percent of 18- through 24-year-olds who had completed high school by October 1998 graduated with a regular diploma. In 1998, 74.7 percent of the 18- through 24-year-olds who were not still enrolled in high school held regular diplomas, which represented the high school graduation rate (as opposed to the high school completion rate) (table 6).

²⁶U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics 1998*, NCES 1999-036 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1996), table 104.

²⁷See, for example, R.J. Murnane, J.B. Willett, and J.H. Tyler, *Who Benefits from Obtaining a GED? Evidence from High School and Beyond*, NBER Working Paper No. W7172 (1999); R.J. Murnane, J.B. Willett, and K.P. Boudett, "Do High School Dropouts Benefit from Obtaining a GED?" *Education and Policy Analysis* 17 (2): 133-47; Iowa Department of Education, *What Has Happened to Iowa's GED graduates? A Two-, Five-, and Ten-Year Follow-Up Study*, ED 344-047 (Des Moines: State of Iowa Department of Education, 1992); J. Baldwin, I.S. Hirsch, D. Rock, and K. Yamamoto, *The Literacy Proficiencies of GED Examinees: Results from the GED-NALS Comparison Study* (Washington, D.C. and Princeton, NJ: The American Council on Education and the Educational Testing Service, 1995). Also, for a detailed review of the literature, see U.S. Department of Education, National Library of Education, *Educational and Labor Market Performance of GED Recipients*, by D. Boesel, N. Alsalam, and T. Smith (Washington D.C.: 1996).

Table 6—High school completion rates and method of completion of 18- through 24-year-olds not currently enrolled in high school or below: October 1988 through October 1998

Year	Completion method (percent)		
	Total	Diploma	Alternative ¹
1988	84.5	80.3	4.2
1989	84.7	80.5	4.2
1990	85.6	80.6	4.9
1991	84.9	80.7	4.2
1992 ²	86.4	81.2	5.2
1993 ²	86.2	81.2	4.9
1994 ^{2,3}	85.8	78.8	7.0
1995 ^{2,3}	85.3	77.5	7.7
1996 ^{2,3}	86.2	76.5	9.8
1997 ^{2,3}	85.9	76.7	9.1
1998 ^{2,3}	84.8	74.7	10.1

¹Completed high school by means of an equivalency test, such as a GED exam.

²Numbers for these years reflect the new wording of the educational attainment item in the CPS beginning in 1992.

³Numbers in these years reflect changes in the CPS beginning in 1994 due to newly instituted computer-assisted interviewing and the change in the population controls to the 1990 Census-based estimates, with adjustments for undercounting in the 1990 Census. See Appendix C for a fuller description of the impact of these changes on reported rates.

NOTE: Because of rounding, details may not add to totals.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey, October (various years).

In 1998, 2 million young adults 18 through 24 years old were reported as having earned high school credentials by passing an equivalency exam such as the GED test.²⁸ The young adults who completed high school through this alternative route accounted for 10.1 percent of the 18- through 24-year-olds who were not still enrolled in high school in 1998 (table 6).

CPS data indicating whether high school credentials were obtained through a regular diploma or through an alternative route were first collected in 1988.²⁹ Between 1988 and 1998, the diploma rate declined by 5.6 percentage points, falling from 80.3 percent in 1988 to 74.7 percent in 1998. In comparison, the alternative credential rate increased by 5.9 percentage points, climbing from 4.2 percent to 10.1 percent over the same period. As noted in appendix C, the rate increase from 1993 to 1994 coincided with

²⁸The GED test is the principal equivalency exam in use at this time. In 1997, more than 780,000 people living in the United States age 16 or older took the GED test, and 59 percent, or more than 460,000, passed the exam in order to earn a high school credential. See GED Testing Service, *Who Took the GED? 1998 GED Statistical Report* (Washington D.C.: American Council on Education, 1998).

²⁹In the CPS data there may be some ambiguity concerning students who complete high school with a certificate of attendance. While they should be counted as noncompleters, some respondents may report them as completers when asked about educational attainment.

the CPS implementation of computer-assisted interviewing procedures. However, the rate continued to increase between 1994 and 1998.

Among young adults in the four racial-ethnic groups under study, Asians and whites were about as likely to have earned a high school diploma (82.9 percent and 80.2 percent, respectively), followed by blacks (71.7 percent) and then Hispanics (52.1 percent) (table 4). Although Hispanic youths were the least likely of the four racial-ethnic groups to have earned a high school diploma, they were as likely to complete school with an alternative credential (e.g., a GED) as white, black, and Asian young adults (approximately 10 to 11 percent of each group).

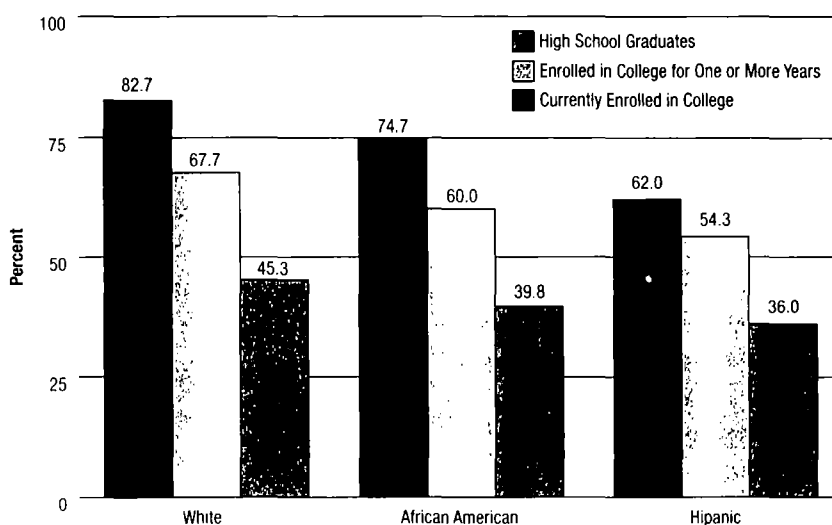
High School Completion

This section examines the most recent high school completion (HSC) rates for white, African-American, and Hispanic 18- to 24-year-olds nationwide, based on the U.S. Census Bureau's 1997 Current Population Survey (CPS). These data include students who earned either a high school diploma or an equivalency such as the General Educational Development (GED) certificate. The U.S. Census Bureau does not report year-to-year HSC rates for Asian Americans or American Indians ages 18 to 24 because the survey sample is too small to provide reliable estimates. The figures cited in this report are national aggregates. It also should be noted that high school completion rates are lower for some groups in many urban and rural areas.

The 1997 CPS data show that African Americans and Hispanics ages 18 to 24 continue to trail whites in terms of high school completion (Figure 1). However, over the past 20 years, African Americans achieved a gain of more than 7 percentage points, thereby reducing the black/white gap during that period (Table 1). As noted in previous reports, gains made before

Figure 1

High School Completion and College Participation Rates for 18- to 24-Year-Olds, by Race and Ethnicity: 1997



Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *School Enrollment—Social and Economic Characteristics of Students: October 1997*, Current Population Reports, P-20 Series, 1998.

1990 account for all of the increases by African Americans. The 1997 African-American HSC rate of 74.7 percent is slightly less than the 1996 rate and more than 2 percentage points less than the 1990 rate.

Although high school completion rates for Hispanics have varied greatly during the past 20 years, the rate remains significantly less than those for whites and African Americans. In 1997, the Hispanic HSC rate trailed those for whites and African Americans by 20 and 12 percentage points, respectively.

Overall, Hispanics ages 18 to 24 improved their high school completion rate by more than 7 percentage points during the past two decades (Table 1). While year-to-year fluctuations in Hispanic HSC rates are common because of the small sample size, their 62 percent completion rate in 1997 represents an increase of 4.5 percentage points from the previous year.

The high school completion rate for whites ages 18 to 24 increased slightly in 1997, to 82.7



NO MORE EXCUSES

THE FINAL REPORT OF THE HISPANIC DROPOUT PROJECT

Hispanic Dropout Project Members

Walter G. Secada, *Director*
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February 1998

Dear Secretary Riley:

It is with a sense of great urgency that I forward to you the final report of the Hispanic Dropout Project, *No More Excuses*. With this report, we have fulfilled the charge that you gave to us in our letters of appointment to the project and at our meeting on September 18, 1995.

Since we first met with you, thousands of this nation's Hispanic students have left school without a diploma. Some left because they felt that other life options were more viable; others left because they felt that they were being pushed out; and still others left because of family obligations. Yet almost all these students left school because no one had established individual relationships with each of them, communicated high academic expectations to them, and provided them with meaningful opportunities to achieve those expectations.

We mourn their truncated education. We worry about their future lives, their unfulfilled dreams and aspirations, their access to this nation's most cherished democratic institutions, and their full participation in the economic, labor, social, and other spheres of life. We share with you a concern for the impact of their inadequate education on this nation's economic and social systems. And we are outraged at the conditions that made possible such a shocking state of affairs in the first place.

In our report to you, we note that parents, teachers, and other school personnel have central roles in supporting this nation's Hispanic youth to complete school and to have a worthwhile education in doing so. What is more, we outline steps that need to be taken by policy makers, the business community, and the larger voting public to support the work of our nation's schools in educating and graduating their Hispanic youth. These efforts will require a concerted and long-term investment of human and fiscal resources; the problem of Hispanic school dropout will not be solved within an election cycle nor within a time frame that lends itself easily to political grandstanding and sound bite news reporting.

For all of us in the project, it has been an honor to serve the nation in this effort. What is more, we feel an obligation to the countless people who shared their expertise with us, who testified at our open hearings, and who hosted our visits to sites around the country. We feel an even stronger obligation to the younger siblings of the dropouts with whom we spoke and, in general, to all Hispanic students whose educational experiences are less than what should be their due in a nation that prides itself on the treatment of its children. We stand prepared to support meaningful follow up to this project. The time for excuses is over; there is much work to be done.

Sincerely yours,

Walter G. Secada
Professor of Curriculum and Instruction
University of Wisconsin-Madison
Director, Hispanic Dropout Project

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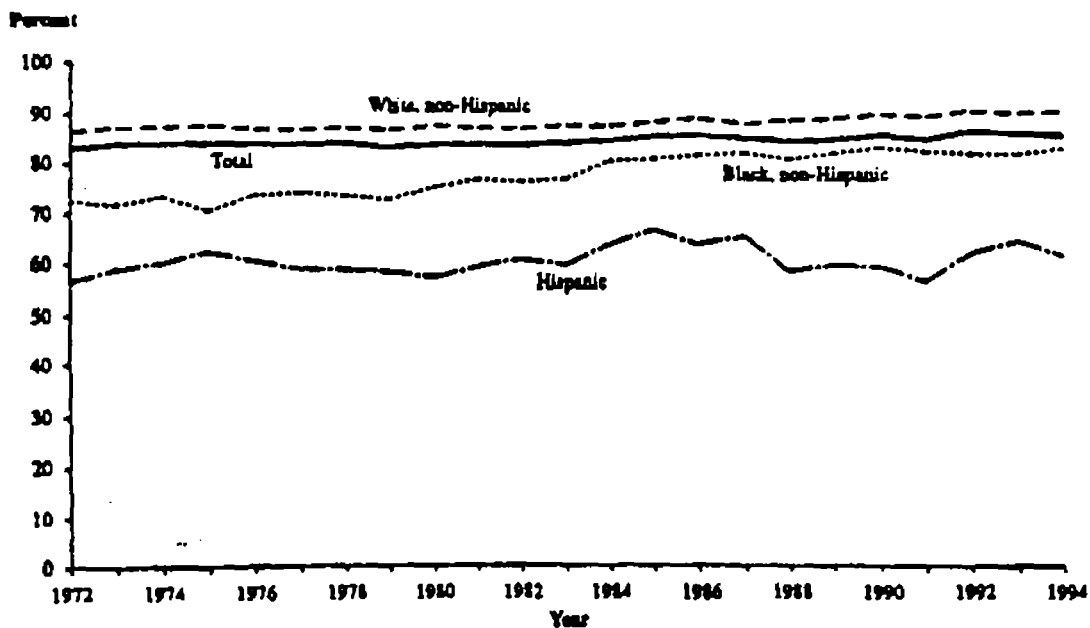
The material in this report that is marked by the icon at left or that is boxed represents the views of those we heard in the field and the knowledge of those whose work we consulted.

BACKGROUND

Nearly one in five of our nation's Hispanics between the ages of 16 and 24 who ever enrolled in a United States school left school without either a high school diploma or an alternative certificate such as a GED, according to the most recently available data from the United States Census Bureau. If we consider all of this nation's Hispanics, including immigrants who never enrolled in U.S. schools, the Hispanic dropout rate reaches a staggering 30 percent. While accounting for just 56 percent of all U.S. immigrants, Hispanics account for nearly 90 percent of all immigrant dropouts.

While the dropout rate for other school-aged populations has declined, more or less steadily, over the last 25 years, the overall Hispanic dropout rate started higher and has remained between 30 and 35 percent during that same time period. As a result, today's dropout rate for Hispanics is 2.5 times the rate for blacks and 3.5 times the rate for white non-Hispanics. Moreover, of Hispanics who have ever enrolled in U.S. schools, proportionately more of them seek alternative high school diplomas than do whites; that is, they may get high school diplomas, but even Hispanics who get diplomas are more likely to leave school in order to do so.¹ The situation is far more serious than any of these odds and rates suggest because they apply to a rapidly growing number of our nation's students.

**High school completion rates for all 18- through 24-year-olds, by race-ethnicity:
October 1972 through October 1994**



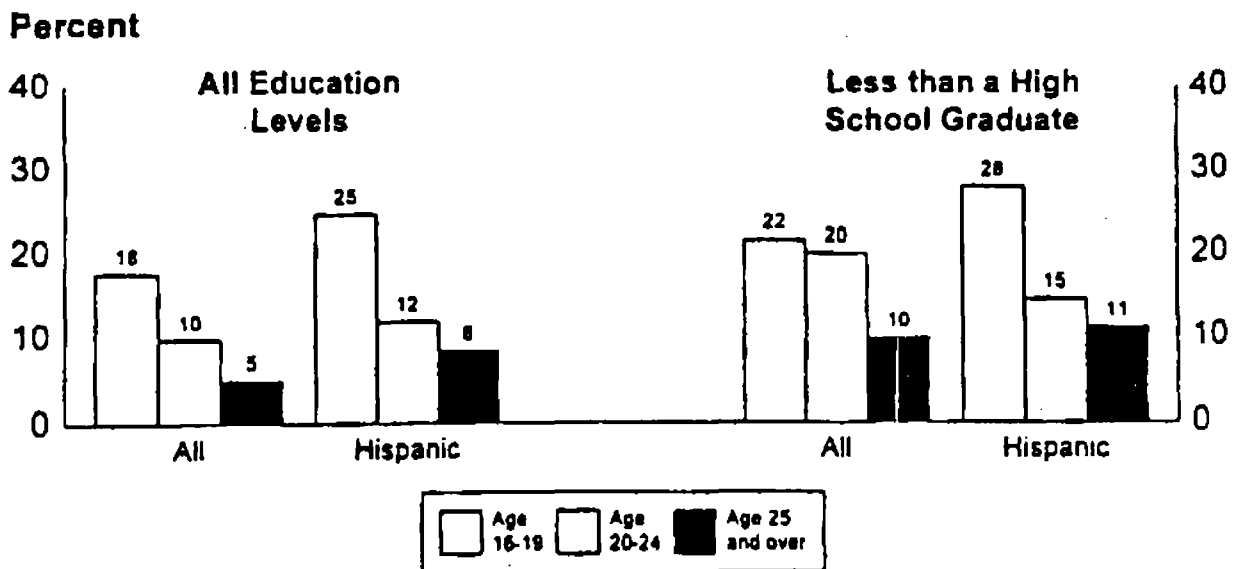
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey, October (various years), unpublished data.

As with other students, the odds of school completion rise for Hispanics with gains in factors such as family income and parent education. Nevertheless, reports and studies document that gaps in school completion rates between Hispanic and non-Hispanic students remain even after controlling for the social class background of students, for their language proficiency, and for their immigrant status. *Regardless of your position in society, if you are an Hispanic student, you are more likely to drop out of school and not earn a diploma than if you are a non-Hispanic American in a similar position.*²

For students, dropping out forecloses a lifetime of opportunities—and in turn makes it far more likely that their own children will grow up in poverty and be placed at risk. For business, this means a lack of high-skilled employees, fewer entrepreneurs, and poorer markets. For communities, this cumulates the risk of civic breakdown. The high-wage low-skill factory jobs that lifted generations of Americans from poverty and empowered them to buy homes, send their children to college, and take care of themselves and their families are little more than a memory in our age of the silicon chip and global economy. In economic progress, as in strategic security, education is truly America's first line of defense. In other words, *the career and employment prospects for dropouts are dismal.*

Hispanic dropouts are more likely to be unemployed.

Percent Unemployment, by Age, Race,
and Highest Degree Attained: 1994



Source: NCES, *Digest of Education Statistics*, 1995.

"Those who do not complete high school face difficulties in making successful steps in other transitions to adult life." In National Center for Education Statistics, *Dropout Rates in the United States: 1994* (NCES 96-863), p. 51. Washington, DC: United States Department of Education

As Thomas Jefferson said, education is the anvil of democracy. More than ever before, democracy depends not on 30-second sound bites from politicians on the cutting edge of rhetoric, but on an informed citizenry who can see through the spin and choose effective options to solve our nation's problems. From toxic waste to environmental protection to economic progress, understanding these issues is fundamental. Dropouts have among the lowest voting rates and among the lowest levels of civic participation. Lack of an informed, active citizenry is dangerous to the American prospect.

According to the United States Census Bureau, Hispanics are projected to become the largest ethnic minority in the United States by the early twenty-first century. If our country stays on its current path, the low rate of Hispanic school completion means that a large segment of the country's soon-to-be largest minority group will be underprepared for employment, for making personal choices, and for engagement in civic life as is required for this democracy to grow and adapt as the founders intended it to. Dropouts diminish our democracy, our society, and their own opportunities.



"Students...see dropping out as wrong; they see it as representing failure, a problem. This is of interest because it tells us that these Latino students (who are still in school) do not want to drop out. This counters the assumption of many who argue that Latinos are not really very interested in finishing school."

In Rodriguez, C. E. (1992). *Student voices: High school students' perspectives on the Latino dropout problem* (pp. 89-90). (Report to the Latino Commission on Educational Reform). New York: Fordham University.

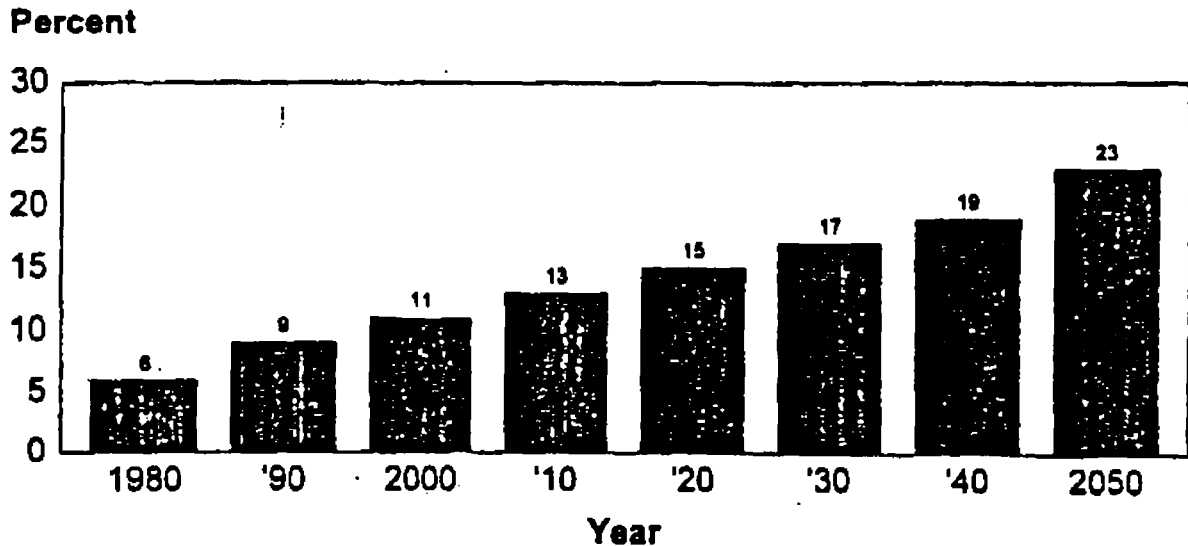
Dropping out is not a random act. According to some observers, school dropout is the logical outcome of the social forces that limit Hispanics' roles in society. Many Hispanic students live in the nation's most economically distressed areas. They attend overcrowded schools in physical disrepair and with limited educational materials. They see the devastating effects of their elders' limited employment opportunities and job ceilings. Hispanic students encounter stereotypes, personal prejudice, and social bias that is often part of larger anti-immigrant forces in this society. For many Hispanics, the United States does not appear to be a society of opportunities. Not surprisingly—faced with evidence of lingering institutional bias against Hispanics—these students figure: *The American Dream is not for me. Why bother?* And, of course, they drop out.

Hispanic school dropout has been portrayed as all of the above, and more. Although various aspects of this crisis have been highlighted by different researchers and writers, all agree on one thing: *The Hispanic dropout rate is shockingly and unacceptably high.*

If the nation does nothing, this unacceptable state of affairs can only worsen. The Census reports that because of demographic growth there will be at least a million more elementary students—many of them Hispanic—in our schools by the end of the decade. Without quick and concerted intervention, technology, trade, and changing policy will increase the number of children, many of them Hispanic, growing in poverty. Without adequate funding that is *effectively* used—particularly in the high-poverty schools attended by many Hispanic children—classes will become

Hispanics were about one of every ten Americans in 1990—and may be one of every five in 2050.

**Hispanics as a Percent of Total Population:
1980 to 2050**



Note: These projections come from the middle of three series of projections.

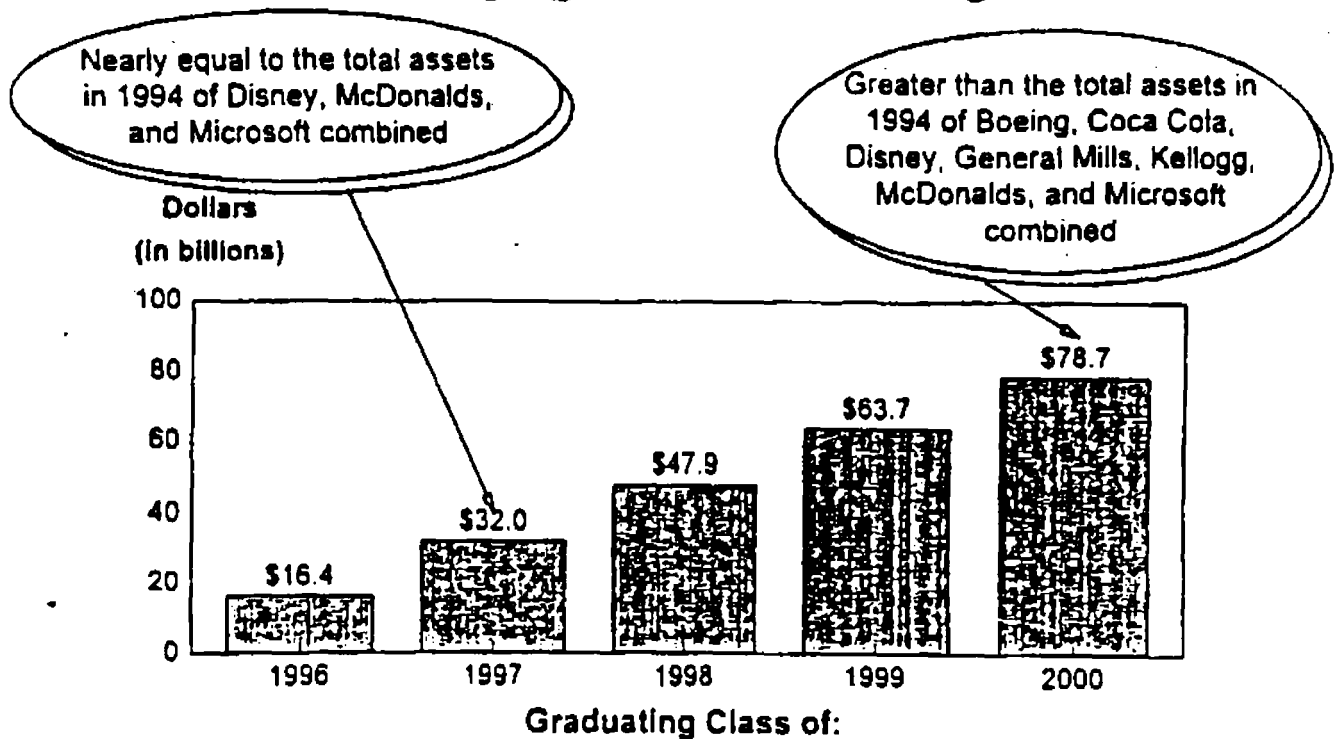
Source: Bureau of the Census, *Population Projections of the United States, by Age, Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin: 1992 to 2050, 1992*, and Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1995, 1995*.

even more overcrowded than we have witnessed recently, instructional materials will be increasingly out-of-date, and schools' ability to attract and hold effective teachers will decrease. Although connection between students and their teachers and role models is important, the number of minority college students entering teaching is declining. There are shortages of teachers with meaningful proficiency in more than English. The retirement of the large proportion of current teachers originally hired to teach the baby boomers will intensify attrition of the teachers with the most classroom experience.

If the same proportion of Hispanic students is still dropping out tomorrow, America will have many more dropouts—at a time when education is crucial for employability. America's young people are not going away. If they drop out at the rates that their older siblings do today, the consequences to this nation and its institutions will be devastating.

This is also an opportunity to make a difference. We know much about what works and can build on this know-how. Effective teaching and schools change lives. Support and professional skills development for today's teachers and for the large number of teachers who must be hired in the next handful of years can make much of the difference.

If all Hispanic students completed high school, the lifetime earnings gain would be large.



Source: Department of Labor, *Report on the American Workforce*, 1994, and the "BusinessWeek 1000," *BusinessWeek*, March 27, 1995.

The Hispanic Dropout Project

In September 1995, United States Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley invited seven individuals to take part in a special project to study issues related to the problem of Hispanic student dropout. The secretary's charge to the Hispanic Dropout Project—as this effort came to be known—incorporated three broad goals: (a) to increase public awareness about the issues of Hispanic dropout; (b) to develop a policy-relevant set of recommendations at local, state, and federal levels addressed to school personnel, families, community, business, and other stakeholder groups; and (c) to support the development of a network of stakeholders interested in this issue to support actions taken after the project ended. Because the Hispanic Dropout Project is not a federal commission, we were not invited to make recommendations addressed to the federal government. In spite of this limitation on the project's scope of work, we realize that many recommendations are more likely to be implemented with supporting action by the federal government, as well as by state and local governments, school districts, businesses, community groups, and other interested parties.

Final Report

This report constitutes the Hispanic Dropout Project's culminating activity. It is intended to raise public awareness of the issues of Hispanic student dropout. This report contains our findings and recommendations at local, state, and national levels, and is addressed to school personnel, families, and community, business, and other stakeholder groups.

Throughout the entire project, we tried to reflect the knowledge and views of the various individuals and constituency groups that hosted our site visits, provided witness to what is happening in our nation's schools, and participated in our open discussions on these matters. With their varied experiences and broad range of views, these students, parents, teachers, volunteers, social service and business representatives, and other concerned citizens have been working on improving the education of Hispanic students. Their actions and words breathe life into the stolid statistics found in so many research studies. They make the facts matter.



"My parents sacrificed a lot for me. That's why I want to make good. For my kids to start somewhere higher than I did." Student leader at HDP student leader forum, New York City

What we saw and what people told us confirmed what well-established research has also found: Popular stereotypes—which would place the blame for school dropout on Hispanic students, their families, and language background, and that would allow people to shrug their shoulders as if to say that this was an enormous, insoluble problem or one that would go away by itself—are just plain wrong.



"I got throwed out, mainly." Arnie (former 10th-grade student). In Cairns, R. B., & Cairns, B. D. (1994). *Lifelines and risks: Pathways of youth in our time* (p.167). New York: Cambridge University Press.

We in the Hispanic Dropout Project developed a new appreciation for Yogi Berra's "*déjà vu, all over again.*" Much of what we have to report to America is *not* new. The roots of our findings run deep through the decades of extensive research gathered in many parts of the nation (see Appendix E for a bibliography). Much of the work on the education of at-risk and disadvantaged students, and dropout prevention applies; but then, so does much of the work on effective schools, school restructuring, school finance, and equity. Over the years, many of our findings have been repeated by Hispanic and non-Hispanic researchers, practitioners, and advocacy groups.

What troubles us and adds to our collective impatience in submitting this report is precisely that so much of this has appeared so often in the research literature and has been urged so often by those who care about student outcomes. Yet the nation has failed to put this knowledge to work in more than a few sites. There are lighthouses and beacons of excellence, yet policymakers and schools keep missing the message, sailing through the daily grind of ineffective and alienating practices, and piling up on the shoals of failure. Our nation's children, its most valuable resource

for its future, pay the price. We have tried to mix research that identifies what works in preventing school dropout with our other activities and to synthesize our findings in a form that can provide a basis for concerted action.



"Dropping out is sometimes a healthy response to an intolerable situation."

Speaker at HDP hearings, San Antonio

We were also struck by the misinformation and myths about Hispanic dropouts. These myths excuse inaction by turning children, parents, and their communities into victims so that educators dare not aspire to Hispanics' achieving educational excellence lest they be accused of blaming the victim. These myths also excuse inaction by demonizing Hispanic students and dropouts, their families, teachers, schools, districts, the state, business, and the community—thereby undermining the basis for teamwork. The stereotype that demonizes Hispanics raises the question: What can be accomplished with a demon who cannot or will not understand, who does not want to learn, who is antisocial and untrustworthy, and who just doesn't care?



"College is for the good, American persons, but not for me. I didn't think that I could have part of the American dream." Student testimony, Albuquerque

One goal of this report is to debunk these stereotypes, myths, and excuses. Published research, the testimony we gathered, and the sites we visited clearly show that something can be done about Hispanic dropout. The nation's task is to ensure that what works for Hispanic excellence in education is not confined to isolated research studies or limited to a few lighthouse programs.

Each of the following sections focuses on the role of key actors in solving the problem of Hispanic student dropout: the students themselves; their parents and families; their teachers; schools; policymakers at the district, state, and federal levels; and business and the extended community. Each section also discusses the excuses commonly used to justify inaction and the ways that our findings contradict the myths on which the excuses are based. We end each section with a list of recommendations for that actor.

Change for the better can begin with the actions of any adult player. But the actions of all the players must work in concert to produce a move forward, to support change in other arenas, and to achieve longer lasting and more extensive improvements in Hispanic dropout rates than can be achieved through solitary action.

HISPANIC STUDENTS



"People need to respect and like children. I have seen teachers say things to kids that no one should have to put up with." Speaker at HDP public hearings, San Diego

Hispanic students deserve to be treated as if they matter—as if they have abilities and talents to contribute to our society and as if they can be responsible for achieving excellence given the chance to do so. The Hispanic Dropout Project has two major findings and recommendations involving Hispanic students:

- Schools and their staffs must connect themselves to Hispanic students and their families, provide Hispanic students with a quality education based on high standards, and provide backup options to move past obstacles on the way to achieving those high standards.
- Students and their families deserve respect. In order to accomplish the first goal, schools, their personnel, policy stakeholders, and the larger society must have respect for these children. In many cases, this means fundamentally changing people's conceptions of Hispanic students and their families. This country's Hispanic students are *ours* and they are *smart*. Hispanic families have social capital on which to build. Hispanic students deserve meaningful opportunities to learn and to succeed in later life. They deserve support in school.



"They treat you with respect here. They talk with you individually. Not just about school, but what's on your mind. I get respect from the tutors. I get it and try to give it back." Student in an alternative placement program, Las Cruces

To think of and portray Hispanic students as poor things who cannot achieve—as "pobrecitos"—is patronizing and wrong. Treating students and their families as deviant or deficient blames the victim and just doesn't work. Neither belief is correct or helpful in designing programs and intervention strategies.



"The respect and value in which students were held was [sic] extremely important in separating the schools with low Latino dropout rates from those with high rates." In Rodriguez, C. E. (1992). *Student voices: High school students' perspectives on the Latino dropout problem* (Report to the Latino Commission on Educational Reform, p. 79). New York: Fordham University.

Some stereotypes that have been used to blame Hispanic students for dropping out of school suggest that they do not care about school, do not want to learn, do not come to school ready to learn, use drugs, belong to gangs, engage in violence, cannot achieve, have cultural backgrounds that are incompatible with schools, do not know English, are illegal immigrants, and in general, do not merit help or to be taken seriously. Alternative stereotypes portray Hispanic students as victims who, unable to do much about their conditions, cannot help but drop out of school.

According to these latter myths, Hispanic students can do little or nothing about their education because they are poor, are the children of drug users, are victims of violence and abuse, do not speak (read or write) English well, encounter cultural barriers in school or in the larger society, or, through no fault of their own, lack some essential ingredient for success.



"My life, my heritage has been a cycle of poverty, of goals that were never achieved. I want to break that cycle. I want to achieve for my family, so that my parents can be proud of me." Student at HDP student leaders forum, New York City

Contrary to both sorts of myths, the vast majority of Hispanic students want to learn. They value education and try hard to do well in school. As is the case for the larger society, there are a small number of Hispanic youth who engage in antisocial behaviors. We do not condone such behaviors: If such youth are to succeed not only in school, but also later in life, they must change, and we must help them to change.



"I want to be a change agent. Things don't have to be like these stereotypes." Student at HDP student leaders forum, New York City

On the other hand, beliefs that paint Hispanics, en masse, as social misfits say more about how whole groups of people can be stereotyped in our society than they do about the vast majority of individuals within those groups. The Hispanic students (and their families) whom we encountered did not give up in the face of the barriers rooted in personal and institutional forms of bias and outright racism that they encounter. Instead, they worked hard to overcome those barriers.



"A persistent theme. . . is the observation that our educational system requires failure of some in order to assure success for others. . . . We spend enormous amounts of money and time locating children that we perceive as predestined for failure, often because they do not meet the expectations of the cultural patterns of the mainstream." In Trueba, H. T., Spindler, G., & Spindler, L. (Eds.) (1989). *What do anthropologists have to say about dropouts?* (pp. 2-3) New York: The Falmer Press.

Stereotypes hold that much should not be expected of Hispanic children, as if providing them with challenging opportunities to achieve educational excellence will only drive them out of school in increasing numbers. Quite the contrary: The Hispanic Dropout Project found that Hispanic students are most likely to learn when curricular content is challenging and meaningful. In visits to early childhood, elementary, and alternative high school programs, we observed that Hispanic students were very engaged when working with such content.

In our visits to less effective schools, many older students complained about being bored and not challenged in their classes. They complained of dull, dumbed down, and irrelevant curricula. The clear message they had internalized was one of low expectations, worsened by unpleasant, adverse physical circumstances and overcrowded classrooms. Students and dropouts alike com-

plained that they could not ask questions and get them answered in class, leading them to believe that their teachers did not really care about them.



*"Perhaps the most important step in fostering adolescent development and achievement is the improvement of education. ... Changes in policy are important only if they contribute to more effective school and classroom environments in which students are strongly motivated to work hard at challenging learning tasks." In Panel on High-Risk Youth, National Research Council. (1993). *Losing generations: Adolescents in high-risk settings* (p. 205). Washington, DC: National Academy Press*

The existence of such schools and classrooms raises the question: Why would *any rational person* stay in such a setting? Students' reports to the Hispanic Dropout Project and our own observations during site visits corroborate what is reported in the research on tracking and on the instructional quality of lower tracks—that is, the everyday in-school experiences of too many Hispanic students fail to engage their minds. In contrast to their criticisms of their secondary schools, many students interviewed by the Hispanic Dropout Project praised volunteers and teachers in their schools and in alternative placements who made course work relevant to their lives and, thereby, compelling enough to make them want to achieve.



"What is there to hope for? If I get out of school, what kind of a job will I get?"
Speaker at HDP hearings, San Antonio

Students often complete high school because it promises opportunities—such as a good job, a military career, or postsecondary education. For too many Hispanic students, these futures don't look like realistic options. Hispanic high school students look around themselves only to see that their siblings and older friends who just graduated are earning less than their classmates who dropped out and have been working a couple of years. Many Hispanic students often need to contribute materially to their families, and this need for a paycheck often causes even successful students to respond to daily crises rather than to maintain a future orientation. If students need jobs to meet their responsibilities, schools should help them get part-time job placements and work with businesses to develop effective schedules and learning opportunities that help students, their employers, and the schools. The workplace, in its turn, needs to change from being a threat to a student's learning and finishing school to being an effective part of a high-quality education for a non-traditional student.



*"In general, there appears to be a powerful economic incentive for students to finish high school. But is this economic incentive similar for Hispanics and Chicanos as for Whites and other groups? Recent data suggest that the answer may be no...unemployment rates in October 1985 for White youths who dropped out of high school during the 1984-85 school year were almost twice as high as for high school graduates from the year before who were not enrolled in college. But for Hispanics, dropouts had an unemployment rate only slightly higher than high school graduates." In Rumberger, R. (1991). *Chicano dropouts: A review of**

research and policy issues. In R. Valencia (Ed.), *Chicano school failure and success: Research and policy agendas for the 1990s* (p. 77). Philadelphia: Falmer Press.

The point is that schools and adults can help students envision better lives, help open options, and provide the connections that strengthen learning and build futures that work. To achieve these goals, the Hispanic Dropout Project—based on our observations and research review—recommends the following minimum set of guarantees for students:

1. *Each individual Hispanic student should have someone who understands how schools work and who is willing to take personal responsibility for ensuring that the student makes it in and through school.*

Hispanic students who stayed in school (despite peer pressure, economic pressure, and other factors that pushed out many of their friends) often pointed to someone in that school—a teacher, coach, some other school staff member, someone from the larger community—whose personal interest in their finishing school nurtured their individual sense of self-worth and supported their efforts to stay in school.



"Students often say that one significant person took an interest in them." Testimony at HDP open forum, Las Cruces

2. *Hispanic students should receive a high-quality education that guarantees that all students leave third grade able to read. They should experience curricula that are relevant and interesting, convey high expectations, and demand student investment in learning. They should understand the options that are available to them so that they can make informed decisions about their lives. They should be able to envision their futures with confidence based on an education that provided them with the tools needed to make their visions into reality.*



"The first task should be to determine what kinds of education and training would be appropriate in terms of enhancing their ability to live productive lives within this society. . . . Some of the successful dropouts designed their own curriculum: they enrolled in a training program for mechanics, got on-the-job training in supervising others, took a full-time job in a hosiery mill, but found time to complete a GED. For these subjects, the "school" they created for themselves could tolerate them and they could tolerate the intellectual and attitudinal discipline. One challenge is for schools to create opportunities within the context of the standard curriculum...The second and related comment concerns the school and behavioral problems cited by the dropouts themselves. They typically attribute leaving school to specific difficulties they had with the standard curriculum and/or school restrictions." In Cairns, R. B., & Cairns, B. D. (1994). *Lifelines and risks: Pathways of youth in our time* (p. 186). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Junior high school is too late to *begin* dropout prevention efforts. Successful experiences must begin in the early grades and continue throughout Hispanic students' schooling. On the other hand, early interventions, *by themselves*, are not enough. Later efforts should build on the successes of early interventions.



"The national investment in Head Start and other early intervention programs, while laudatory, constitutes only a first step in the solution." In Cairns, R. B., & Cairns, B. D. (1994). *Lifelines and risks: Pathways of youth in our time* (p. 193). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Older students who had dropped out of school often thought that they had no other choice. School personnel either did not know about or did not tell students about alternative programs because of fiscal pressures to remain quiet about those programs. A former dropout quit his original school because, as he starkly put it, "It was either school or dropping out." He entered an alternative school only because a friend told him about it.



"Interventions must be intensive, comprehensive, coordinated and sustained. Anything less is naive and will show only marginal results. There is no 'cure all' or 'fix the kid' phenomenon. ... When special intervention is stopped before high school graduation, one can expect high-risk youth who have become successful to once again be at risk for school failure and drop out." In Larson, K., & Rumberger, R. (1995). *ALAS, Achievement for Latinos through academic success* (Dropout prevention and intervention project targeting middle school youth with learning disabilities and emotional/behavioral disorders at risk for dropping out of school. Project evaluation: 1990-1995), p. A67.

A former dropout stated that one reason many Hispanics leave school is that they believe that the American dream is for someone else, not for them. The effective dropout interventions that we reviewed included all students in that dream. They provided Hispanic students chances to meet and talk with Hispanic college students and successful Hispanics, and to visit college campuses. Successful interventions also helped students to plan for life after high school in work, the military, or continuing education.

Hispanic youth need to be coached, not rescued. They should be able to take credit for what they achieve. They need encouragement and opportunities to take responsibility for their learning and later lives, to set long-range, real-life goals, and to take the steps needed to achieve those goals. Adults who advocate for students, who encourage students to dream about their futures, who mentor students on how to achieve those dreams, and who hold students accountable for their actions can provide needed support for students to make their dreams come true.

3. *Schools should be responsive to the behaviors and needs of individual children. They should target Hispanic students for pro-social roles.*

When respect, responsibility, membership, and opportunities for leadership are denied to students by their schools, then gangs and antisocial behaviors often fill the gap. The most effective schools that we visited gave students opportunities to assume important roles in school and in helping other students. They expected and often received the best from their Hispanic students. Effective schools also realize that real students have real problems; and hence, they provide flexibility, support, and backup strategies to turn things around when problems arise. For children, schools and effective support networks can make an important difference.



*"Explicit in good practice models is the recognition that young people, like all people, need to feel a sense of comfort and need to be offered a sense of autonomy in order to profit from program teachings and experiences. . . . Consistent demonstrations of caring and high expectations for young people are also a prerequisite. Many programs are also providing young people with choice and 'voice' regarding program operation, and, in response to the racial and ethnic diversity of adolescents, many practitioners incorporate cultural traditions and values into programs." In Panel on High-Risk Youth, National Research Council. (1993). *Losing generations: Adolescents in high-risk settings* (p. 219). Washington, DC: National Academy Press.*

4. *Hispanic students have the right to schools and classrooms that are safe, healthy, free from intimidation, and inviting—that is, where their language and culture are treated as resources.*

National statistics show that many Hispanic students attend some of the most dangerous schools in America. Schools should provide students with positive and appealing alternatives to joining gangs or engaging in other antisocial behaviors. What is more, school should be a place where a student's language and cultural backgrounds are treated with respect.



"I would have been worse off if I had stayed in school. Others have dropped out to try to help their own futures." Testimony at HDP forum, Albuquerque

5. *Hispanics' schools should have the resources necessary to provide safe environments and a high-quality education.*

Troubled schools lack basic resources. From fights breaking out due to jostling in overcrowded halls, to filthy restrooms, to long-ignored fire hazards, the basic infrastructure for effective schooling is too often missing from the schools attended by Hispanic students. Outdated textbooks, laughable lab facilities, antiquated libraries, and the absence of a challenging academic curriculum and the requisite instructional resources all bear the implicit message that these children just don't count. America cannot afford this.



"In Maryland, for instance, the one inner-city district (Baltimore) and five rural districts each spend less than \$4,500 per student, compared with three suburban districts that spend \$6,000-\$7,500 per student. Thus, schools in the poorer Mary-

land districts have about \$45,000-\$60,000 less each year for each classroom of 30 students than schools in affluent districts. Per pupil expenditures directly affect the availability of textbooks, laboratory equipment, resource rooms, library books, and a range of other educational resources. . . . In one national survey, for example, in districts with more than one-third of the students from families below the poverty line, 59 percent of fourth grade teachers reported a lack of resources, compared with 16 percent in districts with no students below the poverty line." In Panel on High-Risk Youth, National Research Council. (1993). *Losing generations: Adolescents in high-risk settings* (pp. 106-107). Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

PARENTS AND FAMILIES

Hispanic parents and families are frequently perceived as being indifferent to their children's education, moving too frequently, not speaking or wanting to learn how to speak (read, or write) English, and being too undereducated to properly educate their children. Likewise, parents and families are often portrayed as victims unable to do anything about the racism they experience and unable to understand American cultural norms. Parents are said to be ignorant, poor, products of bad schools, in conflict with their children, and in general, culturally deprived.

The schools that we saw working effectively with Hispanic parents prove that these stereotypes and descriptions are wrong. Our observations are backed up by the testimony of countless parents, both individually and through the community-based organizations they participated in, and by the extensive research on the importance of effective parent involvement. Large-scale national studies and targeted research show that, contrary to stereotypes, Hispanic parents and families highly value learning and seek to effectively support their children in school. What students told us reinforced the research.



*"There were deep chasms in the relationship and communication between school and home. School personnel had many negative misconceptions about the motivations and values of parents. There was widespread belief that parents did not sufficiently value education and that they were unwilling to give sufficient time to rearing their children and participating in school activities. On the other hand, we found most parents to be fearful and alienated from school authorities while at the same time assigning expertise and responsibility to school personnel for educating their children. However, when parents were approached with a genuine desire to serve them and their family, we found that almost all parents were exceedingly open to suggestion and to becoming more involved in directing their adolescent and monitoring school performance. Parents, far more than school or community personnel, were willing to implement suggestions from project researchers." In Larson, K., & Rumberger, R. (1995). *ALAS, Achievement for Latinos through academic success* (Dropout prevention and intervention project targeting middle school youth with learning disabilities and emotional/behavioral disorders at risk for dropping out of school. Project evaluation: 1990-1995), p. A66 (emphasis added).*

Hispanic students, whether they stayed in school or had dropped out and then returned, almost unanimously reported that they wanted to "make it" as a way to thank their parents and families for the sacrifices that they had made on the students' behalf. These students wanted to make their parents proud of them. They wanted to better themselves and did not want to disappoint their parents by quitting school. In addition, one-time dropouts spoke about their parents' disappointment in them as well as the love, support, pressure, and encouragement that they received from their parents at first to stay in school, then to return to school, and always to try hard and to learn.

The Hispanic Dropout Project's hearings were attended by Hispanic parents who were anxious about their children's educational futures. Many of them had found out about the hearings by word of mouth. Their testimony demonstrated their readiness to be involved in their children's education.



"Many high-risk children and their parents are blamed and not treated with respect by educators. Highest risk students and their parents are very responsive to genuine and meaningful offers of help despite cultural, language, and economic barriers."

In Larson, K., & Rumberger, R. (1995). *ALAS, Achievement for Latinos through academic success* (Dropout prevention and intervention project targeting middle school youth with learning disabilities and emotional/behavioral disorders at risk for dropping out of school. Project evaluation: 1990-1995), p. A69.

Parents said that, in order to be involved, they must often overcome school resistance and hostility to that involvement. At almost every site that we visited, Hispanic parents said that their children's schools did not take them or their concerns very seriously. One mother recounted being told of her child's suspension hearing just 30 minutes before it was held. Risking her job, she rushed to the school, only to wait all morning in the school office and to be told abruptly that the meeting had been postponed. One father did, in fact, lose his job because of the time he spent trying to keep his daughter from being, in his words, pushed out. Another mother, in flawless English, reported how her child's principal would not speak directly to her, supposedly because her accent made it too difficult for school personnel to understand her.



"Schools also differ on the extent to which parents are involved in school decision making, conferences with teachers, and home-school instructional programs.

Over the past decade, studies consistently demonstrate the positive effects of such programs on student achievement, yet parents from low-income neighborhoods, especially racial and ethnic minorities, are least likely to participate. The reasons for this lack of participation include not only the lack of funds, but also different levels of school commitment, cultural and language barriers, and time constraints and stress on poor working families." In Panel on High-Risk Youth, National Research Council. (1993). *Losing generations: Adolescents in high-risk settings* (p. 108). Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

Although community groups and activists expressed anger—sometimes bordering on rage—at how schools treat parents, they also expressed determination to press on with their efforts to ensure that parental concerns would be heard. What is more, parents found help and strength by joining and working with such groups.

Hispanic parents spoke eloquently about their dreams and wishes for their children's futures, and the roles that schools must play in educating their children. In a Head Start program, in community and recreation centers that provided social services for students, and in community action groups—all visited by the Hispanic Dropout Project—parents volunteered as tutors, instructional assistants, fundraisers, program implementers, and in many other roles.

2. *Schools should recruit Hispanic parents and extended families into a genuine partnership of equals for educating Hispanic students.*

The most impressive schools visited by the Hispanic Dropout Project aggressively recruited parents to work with them in educating their children. Parent roles were authentic and appropriate. For instance, school personnel helped graduating students and their parents to understand and to fill out various financial aid forms for college. At the same school, parents whose children engaged in inappropriate behaviors were helped to recognize how their own behaviors enabled their children to avoid responsibility. When those parents knew what to look for, they monitored their children's behaviors and held them accountable for avoiding antisocial activities and for getting to school on time. These parents' behaviors show that they understood that their advocacy for their children and their partnership with the school continued at home by the parents' fulfilling their side of the bargain.

Conversely, schools that were less successful or seemed to be actively pushing students out were also those schools which, by their messages and practices, seemed to actively blame parents and families for their children's failures. Parents bitterly complained about such schools.



"The bottom line: the local school board and local power brokers should not disenfranchise parents. They should give them the power to run their schools for their neighborhoods." Testimony at HDP hearings, San Diego

3. *Hispanic parents should be helped to envision a future for their children and a reasonable means by which to plan for and achieve that future.*

One of the most powerful incentives mentioned by Hispanic students was their parents' and families' determination that these students have better lives than the older generation had. Parents want better lives for their children; schools should help parents learn what is available for their children and help parents provide these opportunities for their children. That parents can motivate their children and that schools can provide information about opportunities for students should provide the basis for the aforementioned partnership.



"My mom was always supportive of me. She pushed me to go to school. She wouldn't let me stay home. So, I ditched. Finally, she saw the problem and took me out of the school. But she pushed me to go to another school until this place [an alternative school setting] helped me to graduate." Former dropout at HDP open forum, Albuquerque

TEACHERS

Teachers and other school staff can and must make a difference in students' lives. In spite of this imperative, many teachers feel powerless. Excuses such as "The problem is too big for one teacher. How can I, a single teacher, hope to overcome the effects of students' backgrounds?" are common. This particular excuse portrays teachers as helpless when dealing with students who are not ready or do not want to learn. Hispanic students are said to lack something (usually English); their aspirations or those of their parents are said not to support schooling.



"Teachers only want to teach from 8:00 to 3:00. They just follow the contract."
Testimony at HDP student leader meeting, New York City

Teachers' overcrowded classrooms are said to be the reason that they can attend to just so many students. Hence, a type of academic triage results: Some students must be sacrificed so that others can be taught. Not surprisingly, those who are sacrificed are portrayed as uneducable.



"There is no support from teachers for the students. Teachers don't believe in the students. One of the main problems I saw in high school is that teachers don't want to pay attention." Student in alternative placement, Las Cruces

On the other hand, Hispanic students at project hearings across the country leveled the most damning charge possible against some of their teachers: "They just don't care."

Neither extreme is the rule. During Hispanic Dropout Project open hearings and visits to schools, we encountered many teachers who made a difference in their students' lives. These caring individuals were trying their hardest to help Hispanic students succeed. Some had developed teaching practices designed to engage their students. Others provided counseling and mentored students. All constantly worked to improve how they taught their students. All communicated a deep sense of caring, high expectations, respect, and commitment to their students.



"I saw how teachers invested in me. I felt like a person. The teachers' personal investment in me meant so much to me." Testimony at HDP student leader meeting, New York City

Excellent teachers are very aware of the challenges that their students face. They are very realistic about students' individual situations. What seemed to distinguish teachers who made a difference from those who did not was that the former teachers used knowledge of Hispanic students' academic, social, and psychological characteristics as a foundation and a source of competence on which to build. These teachers passionately believed that, because of their teaching and personal concern for their students, they made a difference in their students' lives. Students and parents agreed.



"I got to know them [personnel at an alternative setting] as family. They showed

me different things that I could do besides drop out. So I went back to school and finished in three years." Former dropout at HDP public forum, Albuquerque

Students reported that teachers who really cared about them as individuals often provided them with the inspiration and personal support needed to get through hard times. When asked why they stayed in school, students (many with friends who had dropped out of school) pointed to a teacher or other school person as having taken a special interest in them and nurtured their dreams for the future.

Less successful teachers do not really understand their Hispanic students' lives. They do not use what they know about their students as a foundation on which to build. Instead, they use what they know about their students to explain away failure.



"The school staff was extremely resistant to change and to being challenged by change. School problems were perceived to be caused by deficiencies on the part of students and parents. The need for fundamental change was believed to reside within students and parents." In Larson, K., & Rumberger, R. (1995). *ALAS, Achievement for Latinos through academic success* (Dropout prevention and intervention project targeting middle school youth with learning disabilities and emotional/behavioral disorders at risk for dropping out of school. Project evaluation: 1990-1995), pp. A65-A66.

Students know the difference and respond positively to the good teachers that they encounter. Instead of scurrying out of class as soon the bell's ringing marked its end, students with effective teachers would stay to ask a question, to discuss a new insight about the day's work, or simply to share something that had happened outside of school with the teacher. We saw such student behaviors in secondary mathematics classes, in alternative school settings, and with middle-school generalist teachers.



"Even when a school was not particularly sensitive to Latino cultural differences — as was the case at School B — the critical difference was whether the school's staff thought the student was worth teaching." In Rodriguez, C. E. (1992). *Student voices: High school students' perspectives on the Latino dropout problem* (p. 79). (Report to the Latino Commission on Educational Reform). New York: Fordham University.

Hispanic students and their parents expect teachers to engage students in challenging content. In contrast to their complaints about low tracks, low expectations, and dumbed-down, boring and irrelevant curricula, Hispanic students and their parents who were interviewed by the project praised teachers who made material interesting and relevant. The students craved being challenged by their teachers.



"At School D, students would begin by hiring teachers who care and by making classes more fun. They would remove a large number of the faculty and replace

them with teachers who are patient and interested in the needs of all the students, not only a select few. Importantly, they would provide the school with more bilingual teachers." In Rodriguez, C. E. (1992). Student voices: High school students' perspectives on the Latino dropout problem (p. 86). (Report to the Latino Commission on Educational Reform). New York: Fordham University.

Students expected teachers to help them with the subject matter. Many students complained about not getting help when they needed it and, as a result, becoming frustrated. They talked about raising their hands or calling for help during class but not getting assistance because the teacher was busy with someone else. Students realized that large class size and the fact that secondary teachers teach many courses militate against teachers being able to help them.

Teachers may send unintentional messages to students when they fail to respond directly to requests for help. Some students interviewed by the project, for instance, reported that their teachers suggested that they get academic help from a tutoring service which met during breaks and after-school. Such help is too little and too late for a student who, because of frustration, has given up trying to understand. To the student who recounted that "My teacher told me she was too busy and that I should get help from the school's tutoring service," the teacher had simply dismissed her request.



"Student preferences are viewed by school staff as non-essentials, which contributes to student alienation." In Larson, K., & Rumberger, R. (1995). ALAS, Achievement for Latinos through academic success (Dropout prevention and intervention project targeting middle school youth with learning disabilities and emotional/behavioral disorders at risk for dropping out of school. Project evaluation: 1990-1995), p. A68.

When asked about the features of alternative schools or programs that they most appreciated, almost every student pointed to the personalized relationships that they developed with their teachers and the individualized attention that they received. Many students realized that this attention was possible because of the smaller class size. These students also spoke about the mutual respect and caring that developed between themselves and the schools' staffs. This respect was communicated to the students in countless ways by adults who provided mentoring. A volunteer at a social service agency would tell students that, like them, he too had dropped out of school but had later achieved his goals by believing in himself and being persistent. A retired teacher insisted that all of her students could learn to read, and she provided them with the support to do so.



"Many disadvantaged youth feel ignored or unimportant in school—as if no one at school cares about them. . . . [Intervention] efforts [typically] rely upon three broad strategies: (1) strategies to link students to adults in the school, including mentor programs and efforts to reorganize school schedules to promote closer contact between teachers and students; (2) strategies to link students to other students in the school, including extracurricular activities and orientation pro-

grams; and (3) strategies to link students to the school as an institution, including fair and equitable policies and greater student choice over their school programs." In Natriello, G., McDill, E. L., & Pallas, A. M. (1990). *Schooling disadvantaged children: Racing against catastrophe* (p. 136). New York: Teachers College Press.

1. *Teachers should teach content so that it interests and challenges Hispanic students. They should help 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.*

Effective instruction requires knowing the student and tapping into her or his strengths and interests to trigger learning. Effective teachers use parents as allies to extend learning outside the classroom. They provide parents with a stream of timely feedback and help parents see concrete ways of extending their children's learning outside the classroom. Teachers who are not familiar with the lives of their students, their words, and their backgrounds find it hard to be highly effective.



"Make class interesting." Testimony at HDP student leader meeting, New York City

As project members have seen, under schoolhouse pressures, harried teachers may find themselves unintentionally sending the wrong message. Teachers need to monitor themselves or receive inservice training to ensure that Hispanic students and their families receive the message that they are really wanted in the classroom and in school, that excellence is within their reach, and that success depends on working together.

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.*

Ongoing professional development should help teachers learn about their students' backgrounds and interests, curriculum adaptation, and other instructional strategies for heterogeneous student populations. Teachers should be familiar with the implications of second language acquisition for student learning and how to adapt instruction for students of varying levels of English language proficiency. Teachers' knowledge of their students' cultural heritage and the implications of language loss are important for effective teaching and the creation of well-functioning home-school linkages.



"Teachers were asked to organize their classrooms into small groups which eventually became cohesive work teams with full control of their own writing activities. They would explore possible topics, research them, develop data gathering instruments such as surveys and interview protocols, conduct interviews with peers and adults, discuss findings and finally write cooperatively extended

and complex essays. The students discovered that writing was no longer a futile school exercise designed by teachers for their own purposes, but a meaningful activity and a means of exchanging important ideas and specific audiences and for expressing their own feelings. Students realized that their individual and collective voices can make a difference in public opinion and in the quality of life at school. Thus Chicano high school students not only significantly sharpened their communicative skills but realized that these skills are a powerful instrument in voicing individual and collective concerns. Teachers would often express their surprise: 'I am impressed. Look!', they said as they shared their students' compositions. A teacher wrote in her diary: 'This [the unexpected high performance of students] was a very successful lesson for me in many ways. It furthers my belief that if what is taught is important in the mind of the learner, much more will truly be learned.'" In Trueba, H. T., Spindler, G., & Spindler, L. (Eds.) (1989). *What do anthropologists have to say about dropouts?* (p. 34) New York: The Falmer Press.

Often, teachers in high-poverty schools are the last to receive high-quality professional development on new instructional approaches, curricula, and unbiased ways of assessing students. They should be the first to get these opportunities.



"Why should I want to be a teacher? Look at the conditions we're taught in."
Testimony at HDP student leader meeting, New York City

SCHOOLS

Schools are the most important focal point for dropout prevention. The research on dropout prevention, effective schools, and restructuring schools, and the Hispanic Dropout Project's commissioned papers—all conclude that schools do, in fact, matter in students' lives. In the course of our explorations, we found powerful and personalized evidence that schools matter *positively* in keeping Hispanic students in school and in helping them to achieve academically. The most impressive schools that we visited were those where teachers and staff worked together to personalize each student's school experience. Teachers collaborated to ensure that no Hispanic student fell through the cracks, either academically or psychosocially. Spanish-speaking staff were respected for their ability to communicate with students' parents; indeed, many of these schools aggressively recruited multilingual, multiethnic staff who could relate to their students and parents.



"The key finding from our research is that effective schools provide at-risk students with a community of support. School as a community of support is a broad concept in which school membership and educational engagement are central. School membership is concerned with a sense of belonging and social bonding to the school and its members. Educational engagement is defined as involvement in school activities but especially traditional classroom and academic work . . . Schools successful at dropout prevention created a supportive environment that helped students overcome impediments to membership and engagement."

In Wehlage, G. G., Rutter, R. A., Smith, G. A., Lesko, N., & Fernandez, R. R. (1989). *Reducing the risk: Schools as communities of support* (p. 223). London: The Falmer Press.

The Hispanic Dropout Project saw secondary schools and an entire school system in which Hispanic students graduated in greater numbers than in similar schools; these examples challenge the myth that secondary schools are doomed to be cold and impersonal places for students or that they are too difficult to change into personalized and caring places. We also visited elementary and middle schools that made special efforts to ensure that all their children learned how to read, achieved academically, and became better connected to their school. Recognizing the real-world challenges that their students faced, principals, teachers, and other school staff spoke with determination about Hispanic students learning, about not losing students, and about always trying to do better. Teachers at one elementary school, for instance, said that they were relentless in ensuring that all of their Hispanic students—even students who did not speak English—could read by third grade.

Moreover, out-of-school alternative programs for students who could not attend regular school used the latter as reference points by providing a curriculum that mirrored what was offered in regular schools, by tutoring and helping students with their homework, and by helping to return students to their original schools. Their services, therefore, were linked to the school and its education programs.



"Latinos at these schools 'know the deal.' They know when they are getting a good education and when they are not. They also have some pretty good ideas on how to improve education. . . . The bottom line in this report is that: good neighborhoods or bad: good schools = success, bad schools cause dropouts."

In Rodriguez, C. E. (1992). *Student voices: High school students' perspectives on the Latino dropout problem* (p. 99). (Report to the Latino Commission on Educational Reform). New York: Fordham University.

On the negative side, the research literature paints an unflattering portrait of schools that do nothing to improve their dropout rates, that use some subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) means to encourage Hispanic students to leave school, and that deny Hispanics educational opportunity. The staff at such schools behave as if the students (and their parents) are so rife with social problems that there is nothing that they can do. The Hispanic Dropout Project heard some school and district staff claim that schools could do very little to reduce the Hispanic dropout rate because of student poverty, lack of student readiness or desire to learn, language, excessive student mobility, excessive costs, lack of qualified staff, lack of knowledge about the real causes of the problem, lack of parental concern, parental aspirations that do not include school, and earlier efforts that have failed. Schools, according to these individuals, can do very little about the larger social ills that befall their students. The literature is clear: Schools where such beliefs are the norm are not likely to be very successful either in ensuring that large numbers of their Hispanic students graduate or in educating many of their students very well.

The Hispanic Dropout Project heard from students, parents, and community activists who said that school conditions made dropping out an inevitable outcome and logical choice for students. In these schools, staff were said not to care about Hispanic students; policies involving discipline and grading were applied in a biased manner; tracking and other forms of ability grouping were used to write off whole segments of the student body, not to improve educational opportunities; and the general attitude seemed to be: "Ignore the problem and it will go away." Schools may in fact *try* to make the problem go away. For instance, we heard about schools using Hispanic students' excessive absences to suspend students rather than to conduct formal suspension hearings on more serious charges. Many Hispanic students and parents charged that rules were being enforced unfairly.



"I was absent 27 times in one class, 36 in another. They only checked things out when I was dragged into the principal's office with red eyes. 'Look at these absences.' [they said]. Well, it's about time you noticed!" Testimony at HDP open hearing, Las Cruces

Overcrowding and the quality of a school's facilities affect a school's ability to keep its students. One mother complained that the building code had been waived for the city's schools. This meant that dilapidated schools—located primarily in the inner city—would not have to be brought up to code. According to this mother, the district's newer schools, which were being built in its wealthier neighborhoods would, of course, be built according to code. Another parent noted that her son was one of over 2,000 students in a building designed for 1,500. She talked

about the heat, noise, and deteriorating conditions at this school where large males could not help but jostle one another as they went from class to class. Because of the heat and noise, tempers would flare, fights break out, and students would be suspended. As this mother observed, the step from suspension to dropping out is very small. The Hispanic Dropout Project heard about secondary schools enrolling 40 students in a class, but having 30 chairs. In at least one case, teachers were told not to worry because not all the students would show up. "What sort of a message does this send to the school's students?" asked a graduate from such a school.



"We need smaller classes. With 34 students in a class, teachers don't have time to listen to you. During my freshman and sophomore years, my math classes were small. During my junior year, I was put into large classes. Things got harder for me to learn and the teacher couldn't help me. I was an honors student; remedial classes are even bigger. My sister was in a class with 40 kids. There are 4 to 5 kids for a microscope. We don't have enough books, so they tell us, 'Go to the library [to get books].' We don't have enough chairs in our classrooms, so we have to sit on the floor. We can't even Xerox a poem by Shakespeare. This sends a strong message to the student: 'You're not important'" Testimony at student leader meeting, New York City

There are too many wrongheaded solutions to the issues of low student achievement, retention, excessive student absence, and eventually, student dropout. Tracking, grade retention, and remedial coursework are too often used to write off students considered too difficult to handle. Too many schools focus their efforts on students' acquiring English to the detriment of their learning content. Schools seldom help Hispanic students develop a sense of their own future or provide them with information needed to make informed decisions about their education programs.

The Hispanic Dropout Project found five characteristics of schools that make a difference in their students' education. *First*, these schools have very high academic and behavioral standards for their students. *Second*, they communicate those standards clearly, and they provide access to and support students in meeting those standards—that is, they provide students with many opportunities to succeed in meeting these high standards. *Third*, schools that make a difference connect their students in meaningful ways to adults. In spite of their size, secondary schools can adopt strategies—such as a school within a school, a group of teachers accepting responsibility for the same students, everyone on staff agreeing to "adopt" some students, older students mentoring younger students—to increase the personalization that students need to experience. *Fourth*, these schools connect their students to possible futures in college and the work force. *Fifth*, they provide families with useful information about how their children are doing and about their futures. Rather than accepting the myth that parents do not care, good schools adopt the position that parents need information in order to make informed decisions that affect their children. Aspirations are not enough. For schools to make a difference, they must provide ways for students and their families to achieve those aspirations.



"Educational engagement is a complex process that involves more than simply 'motivating' students. Promoting engagement requires attention to student char-

acteristics, the tasks students are asked to perform, the school environment in which work takes place, and the external environment that influences the student and the school itself. . . . In spite of conditions outside the school that weaken student engagement, there are practices that educators could implement to substantially strengthen it. The level of engagement. . . could be increased if specific impediments under the control of educators were addressed. . . . (1) Schoolwork is not extrinsically motivating for many students because achievement is not tied to any explicit and valued goal; (2) The dominant learning process pursued in schools is too narrow in that it is highly abstract, verbal, sedentary, individualistic, competitive and controlled by others as opposed to concrete, problem-oriented, active, kinesthetic, cooperative and autonomous. Because of these qualities, the dominant mode of learning stifles the likelihood of intrinsic rewards for many students. (3) Classroom learning is often stultifying because educators are obsessed with the 'coverage' of subject matter; this makes school knowledge superficial, and also intrinsically unsatisfying, thereby preventing students from gaining the sense of competence that ideally accompanies achievement." In Wehlage, G. G., Rutter, R. A., Smith, G. A., Lesko, N., & Fernandez, R. R. (1989). *Reducing the risk: Schools as communities of support* (p. 179). London: The Falmer Press.

Although we were impressed with the preschool and early childhood education programs that we visited, we would caution that, by themselves, these programs are not enough. First, Hispanic access to high-quality early childhood education programs is limited. According to Head Start data, there simply are not enough programs to meet demand. Second, the research has failed to produce substantial evidence that the effects of early childhood interventions persist very long after the program ends. Schools need to provide consistent and ongoing support throughout grades K-12.

We were impressed with the quality of the alternative programs that we visited; however, we caution that alternative programs can become little more than holding pens for their students and that these programs cannot replace schools. Schools could learn from the quality programs that we visited. Students recounted that they were treated with respect and warmth in their alternative settings. Just as important, staff at such places accepted their students' experiences yet encouraged students to consider the *consequences* of their actions. To the staff, that a student had skipped school a lot, been suspended from school, or had dropped out did not mean that the student was fundamentally flawed. Rather, that a student had behaved inappropriately meant that there were consequences. Personnel in alternative settings helped students learn from their actions, and overcome, avert, or reverse the worst of those consequences. The challenge is for Hispanic students' regular schools to become more like these alternative placements and other schools that do a good job at retaining and educating their students.

Actions the Schools Need to Take [To Keep Latino Students In]

1. Focus on student learning
2. Meet basic needs
3. Use a variety of teaching techniques
4. Make material meaningful to students
5. Make scholastic standards clear to all
6. Allow no student to fail
7. Use tests as milestones
8. Make participation in school work more rewarding than skipping
9. Make skipping difficult
10. Value persistence and hard work
11. Make schools accessible to parents
12. Assume responsibility for educating all students
13. Mobilize resources to link school and work.

In Romo, H. D., & Falbo, T. (1996). *Latino high school graduation: Defying the odds* (pp. 15-19). Austin: University of Texas Press.

The most shocking of our findings is the rarity of outstanding schools and programs like those we visited. Although the project visited many sites that featured impressive programs, those programs served a very small number of Hispanic students, and they are at variance with the average educational experiences of Hispanic students. However, there was little about those schools and programs that could not be replicated elsewhere.

1. Schools should emphasize the prevention of problems. They need to become more aggressive in responding to the early warning signs that a student may be doing poorly in, losing interest in, or in some other way, becoming disengaged from school.

Elementary schools should ensure that all children know how to read by third grade and that they are learning mathematics with understanding. Middle and secondary schools should build on the successes of elementary schools.

Schools should be alert to early warning signs of student disengagement. If, for example, a student has two unexcused absences in a row from school, parents should be contacted by a live person—by phone or even by a home visit. The immediacy and personalization of the contact make a difference.

1. Schools should be held accountable and should hold themselves accountable for growth and progress of all students.
2. School procedures, practices, and policies must be individualized and personalized for high-risk youth.
3. Effective middle-school interventions for high-risk youth must address simultaneously the three contexts of family, school, and community through an independent, school-based, case management approach.
4. System reforms of schools must not only change organization structures and practices, but more importantly, must change adult attitudes and behaviors to be more compassionate and nurturing toward high-risk youth.

In Larson, K., & Rumberger, R. (1995). *ALAS, Achievement for Latinos through academic success* (Drop-out prevention and intervention project targeting middle school youth with learning disabilities and emotional/behavioral disorders at risk for dropping out of school. Project evaluation: 1990-1995), pp. A69-A70.

Minorities are overrepresented in special education programs. Schools should ensure that their assignment practices are valid; more importantly, they should emphasize the interventions that prevent such placements.

2. *Schools, especially high schools, need to personalize programs and services that work with Hispanic students.*

Strategies that could be adopted by a high school trying to personalize its programs and services include the reduction of individual class size, reduction in the number of different classes that teachers must teach, creation of schools within schools or of a smaller high school for all but a few highly specialized classes, the creation of houses or academies within a large high school, team-teaching involving fewer students, teachers serving as counselors for or "adopting" a few students, and older students serving as mentors for younger students.

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.*

School restructuring needs to attend to the nature of the curriculum that is provided to students so that all students encounter a curriculum that is demanding, interesting, and engaging.



"A positive school climate—one in which students feel 'membership' in their schools and in which they perceive that teachers care about them as individuals—

*is considered a prerequisite for student engagement in either academic or vocational learning. The large size of many high schools is seen as a strong institutional barrier to a positive school climate. In large schools, teachers are most likely to form close supervisory relations with only the most accomplished students, while others (most often minority students and low achievers) remain isolated from ongoing adult attention. . . . Available evidence indicates that low-achieving students are most likely to prosper in smaller schools. Accordingly, some districts have created alternative schools and schools-within-schools to make schools feel smaller." In Panel on High-Risk Youth, National Research Council. (1993). *Losing generations: Adolescents in high-risk settings* (p. 207). Washington, DC: National Academy Press.*

Secondary and junior high schools should eliminate their lowest tracks. Relative to advanced placement tracks, low-track classrooms are overcrowded, have the least qualified teachers, have the fewest resources, and experience a low-level curriculum focused on remediation to the virtual exclusion of any new or interesting content. If tracking is to be anything for large numbers of Hispanic students other than the final stop en route to being pushed out, these conditions must change.

Hispanic students should be recruited actively into the highest tracks and provided with the support to succeed. In addition to placing students in more demanding curricular settings, schools should provide added support for students such as libraries, after-school programs, individualized tutoring, counseling, and social service referrals.



"Those programs that are most effective are the ones that are least like school. They meet the needs of the learner according to when the learner needs to learn. They provide flexibility. High schools need to become more like this." Testimony at HDP open forum, San Antonio

The changes that we recommend above are not difficult nor are they expensive. What they require is a commitment by school personnel to provide educational opportunities to all their students.

4. Schools should replicate programs that have proven effective. In addition to using new funding, schools should redeploy existing resources to run these programs.

The Hispanic Dropout Project found programs and efforts that have proven effective or show promise for improving Hispanic student achievement and lowering the dropout rate. Schools do not have to reinvent these programs. They should be prepared to adapt existing programs to the needs of their students and to local conditions. Appendix F provides a list of programs identified as effective in the project's commissioned papers.

Effective Dropout Prevention Strategies

Counseling services and adult advocacy for students are key elements of any particular dropout prevention initiative.

At the elementary level, providing after-school tutoring and enrichment that are directly related to in-class assignments and having in-class adult friends (e.g., trained volunteers or helpers) appear to be effective approaches.

At the middle level, team teaching strategies, flexible scheduling, heterogeneous grouping of students, and provision of as-needed counseling assistance are especially useful strategies.

At the secondary level, paid work, embedded in activities that prepare and monitor students' on-the-job experiences, appears to be a critical component to keeping students in school.

In programs where dropout recovery is an emphasis, flexible class schedules assist students who need to work or meet personal commitments during regular school hours.

In Rossi, R. J. (1995). *Evaluation of projects funded by the school dropout demonstration assistance program: Final evaluation report* (Volume 1: Findings and recommendations) (p. 7). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

Although any program has start-up costs and schools are strapped for resources, many programs visited by the project and reviewed in its commissioned papers can be implemented through a combination of new and old funding, and a reconfiguration of existing roles and responsibilities.

5. Schools should carefully monitor the effectiveness of their programs and continuously try to improve them or to replace them with more reliable strategies.

School effectiveness in reducing Hispanic dropout rates or in increasing student achievement will not be accomplished overnight. The most impressive programs visited by the project had been developed and improved over the years by their staffs. Over the years, these schools and programs had carefully recruited staffs who supported their mission and respected their students; they fine-tuned their strategies for teaching students and for preventing dropout; they recruited parents into partnerships; they developed credibility and support within the Hispanic and business communities; they were entrepreneurial in raising funds to support their efforts.

In talking with members of the Hispanic Dropout Project, school personnel and concerned community people highlighted many well-meaning efforts. Yet they were unable to provide convincing, research-based evidence that their programs were reaching targeted students or that the programs were effective. Schools and others should monitor their efforts, keep what works well, modify what could be improved, and discard what does not work.



*"Our recommendations for restructuring schools have called for greater coordination of educational resources and their delivery to students. Restructuring schools must lead to improved management of the educational experiences of students, whether at the classroom, school, district, state, or federal level. Restructuring the relationships among schools, families, and communities must result in the same type of improved management of the educational and social resources delivered to disadvantaged youth. At a time when the gap between available resources and needs is growing, we must obtain as much leverage as possible from all of the resources at our command. The coherent, mutually reinforcing mobilization of school, family, and community resources may be our best hope for addressing the problems of disadvantaged students. We simply cannot afford duplication, lack of coordination, and piecemeal approaches if we wish to have an impact on the problem." In Natriello, G., McDill, E. L., & Pallas, A. M. (1990). *Schooling disadvantaged children: Racing against catastrophe* (p. 197). New York: Teachers College Press.*

6. Schools and alternative programs should be better coordinated.

Students noted they often had a hard time making the transition from an alternative program back to school. Personnel working in alternative programs had similar concerns about schools' lack of cooperation with their efforts to provide students with a meaningful education until they could return to school.

DISTRICT, STATE, AND NATIONAL POLICIES

School districts, states, and the nation as a whole influence whether Hispanics drop out or stay in school. School districts' influence is felt through their governance of schools, recruitment of a workforce, and the professional development that they provide to teachers. States exert influence through their education policies, assessment and accountability programs, and teacher certification requirements. The nature and quality of national debates involving education influence funding and other forms of legislation.



"If we're the future, I don't see why we [funding for schools] have to be cut. It's the future of the whole country." Speaker at student leader meeting, New York City

The project heard some individuals link Hispanic education to debates about immigration—both legal and illegal—and to language policy. As a result, debates about what to do to solve a problem turn into debates about deeply held beliefs involving noneducational matters. Such unrelated beliefs interfere with the development of a coherent education policy at all levels. The following is a sampling of beliefs that are obstacles to solving the problem of Hispanic dropout: (a) until we really understand the full extent of the problem, we can do nothing; (b) this is a local school problem that does not lie in the domain of state or other policy levels; (c) there are a few successful programs, but they cannot be scaled up; (d) these are not our children, hence, it is not our problem; (e) the problem is short term and will go away when something else (typically, immigration policy) is taken care of; and (f) serious efforts to solve this problem cost more than the public is willing to spend.

Once again, our findings contradict such wrongheaded beliefs. For instance, at the most impressive sites that the project visited, language policy and immigration issues had been depoliticized for the cause of education. Districts decided that, in order to educate their students, they had to recruit teachers who could communicate with them and with their parents, that is, with the district's ever-changing clientele. These districts hired teachers and administrative staff who spoke Spanish and who were familiar with Hispanic culture. Their schools developed programs that built on students' native language and their real-world knowledge in the various subjects in order to prepare them for life in America—for higher education, jobs, careers, and citizenship. There were no questions about using and, in many cases, developing children's native languages and home cultures because this was what the children brought to school with them. Also, there were no questions that children would become literate in English and learn to high standards.



"Chapter 1 and dropout prevention programs are the traditional means for providing extra assistance to the most needy students. However, they are often de facto lower tracks for students who have been retained." In Panel on High-Risk Youth, National Research Council. (1993). *Losing generations: Adolescents in high-risk settings* (p. 206). Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

Schools and programs were very creative in finding new sources of funds and in redeploying existing monies for dropout prevention and education improvement efforts. Although the project was impressed by the sheer amount of volunteerism and creative funding employed by every site and program that its members visited, every single program and alternative school was severely underfunded and living a hand-to-mouth existence. Programs had waiting lists. Alternative schools—with their relatively small student-to-teacher ratios—felt that they were always on the chopping block due to their costs and their districts' ongoing budget problems.

On the other hand, the conditions that we witnessed at many sites recalled for us what many of those we interviewed told us—that dropping out under such conditions is a healthy response. Children and their families should never be subjected to such unhealthy conditions that they would feel they had no other choice but to drop out in order to protect their well being. Classrooms and schools where instruction and proper attention to children's needs are inhibited due to overcrowding, lack of equipment and supplies, rundown buildings, and overused, out-of-date textbooks are all unhealthy conditions that no country with high expectations for learning for all children should expect any of its children to tolerate.

Likewise, given the few resources that are available for professional development to upgrade teachers' skills for working with changing populations of students, it is not too hard to see why some school personnel respond to their Hispanic students with neglect if not actively push them out.



"When a student fails a class or two, some people want that student to drop out. He's taking space that someone else who wants to succeed could have." Speaker at student leader meeting, New York City

The project heard from parents, teachers, and other school personnel about contradictory guidelines and policies that are too complex for parents to understand and too time-consuming for them to follow. For instance, one district often informs parents about their children's educational problems and possible program options by using a multi-page check-off form that includes special education, Title 1, bilingual education, English as a second language, socio-psychological and behavioral problems and counseling, achievement, and excessive absence or tardiness. Though convenient for the district, these forms confuse parents who are too overwhelmed to ask for clarification about what the form means. Confronted with such forms, policies, and guidelines parents feel discouraged from participating in decisions that affect their children's schooling.



"Another surprise was the readiness of school administrators to administratively transfer students to another school for behaviors associated with school disengagement and dropout—high absenteeism, disruptive non-conforming behavior, or poor academic work. Case studies in other schools have documented how often and in what ways school administrators actively 'got rid of troublemakers.' . . . Special education law and due process were frequently ignored by either blatant noncompliance or by conforming to the letter of the law but not the intent or spirit of the law. . . . There was deep resistance by the school to provide more than 45 minutes of resource help despite youth's failing multiple classes. Most often it

was 'regular' education personnel who were responsible for making suspension and disciplinary referrals about special education youth. In general, these personnel were more exclusionary and alienating in their approach than inclusionary and engaging. Frequently, the 'letter of the special education law' framed actions as opposed to the 'spirit' of the IEP process. . . . Frequently, when a youth was having difficulty in school, especially in terms of behavior problems, the school would place the students on home or independent study. . . . Unfortunately, we found that almost every single youth placed on independent study, where they came to a center to receive and turn in assignments completed at home, did not produce enough school work to earn any credits toward graduation." In Larson, K., & Rumberger, R. (1995). *ALAS, Achievement for Latinos through academic success* (Dropout prevention and intervention project targeting middle school youth with learning disabilities and emotional/behavioral disorders at risk for dropping out of school. Project evaluation: 1990-1995), pp. A66-A66.

District and state policies can provide incentives for schools to ignore student difficulties—if not to actively push students out. For instance, many states provide funding based on a one-time student count that takes place early in the year. Parents and school personnel reported that prior to the student census, schools actively try to keep students. After the schools have their monies, they can simply ignore student tardiness, absence, truancy, and other behaviors that lead to dropout. Not only are there no sanctions when schools rid themselves of such "bad" students, there are positive consequences, especially for overcrowded schools. When students leave overcrowded schools, the benefits include smaller classes, additional resources for the "good" students who remain, improved performance on mandated assessments and on other indicators of school productivity, less stress on the overall climate of the school, and a reduced administrative burden. Moreover, safe in the knowledge that a new crop of students will enter in time for next year's census, the school has no reason to recruit students who leave into already overcrowded alternative programs.

Districts and states also provide incentives for schools to exclude Hispanics from their accountability systems by focusing solely or mostly on achievement as the major accountability item and then allowing schools to exclude students who are identified as limited English proficient, in need of special education services, or through some other categorical marker. The exclusion of such students and the sole focus on test data allow, if not encourage, schools to hide many of their lowest-achieving students.



"The city, state, and others allow bad conditions to continue. They set the codes and allowable noise levels in schools. The district gets waivers from the state so that untrained teacher aides can become teachers." Testimony at HDP open forum, San Antonio

Districts may overenroll high school students, under the presumption that not all students will come to class. Such a practice sends strong messages to students that they are not expected to attend. Teachers also receive the message that some students are not expected to come to class

and that they are not expected to teach all of their enrolled students. It should not be surprising when students and teachers comply with these messages.

Recommendation 1: Districts should establish strong permanent alternatives as part of a comprehensive strategy of dropout prevention. Alternative schools should be high-status organizations receiving resources commensurate with the tasks they undertake and the success they demonstrate.

Recommendation 2: Districts, in cooperation with state departments of education, should establish special alternative schools for at-risk students with a clear mission that includes experimentation, curricular innovation and staff development.

Recommendation 3: State policy should require each school system to establish a Management Information System that provides basic and common data on all students.

Recommendation 4: State policy should require schools to examine the effects of course failure, grade retention, out-of-school suspension and other practices that appear to impact negatively on at-risk students.

Recommendation 5: State and local policy should encourage the decentralization of large schools and school systems, creating smaller units characterized by site-based management.

Recommendation 6: State and local policy should encourage the development of new curricula and teaching strategies designed for diverse groups of at-risk students.

Recommendation 7: State and local policy should develop mechanisms to hold schools accountable for their dropout rates through a system emphasizing outcomes and results.

Recommendation 8: Cities should develop broad-based community partnerships aimed at serving at-risk youth.

In Wehlage, G. G., Rutter, R. A., Smith, G. A., Lesko, N., & Fernandez, R. R. (1989). *Reducing the risk: Schools as communities of support* (pp. 225-236). London: The Falmer Press.

- 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, nor should administrative procedures discourage parental participation. Parents should be warned, well in advance, when their children's behaviors are deemed unacceptable to the district. Districts should enforce their policies fairly and equitably. If a student is charged with a serious infraction, districts should not bypass due process by also charging the student with something that is unrelated but easier to substantiate.*

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2. *States should analyze their policies to remove incentives for schools 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.*

Report cards of school effectiveness and other efforts by districts and states to hold their schools publicly accountable should not be limited to overall levels of achievement. They should include information about students who were excluded from the tests, student completion rates, attendance statistics, and student enrollment in various tracks. Schools and Hispanic parents should know how Hispanic students are doing.



"We recommend four strategies for moving decisions to levels where information on student performance and behavior is available: (1) revising rules and programs to promote flexibility; (2) using goal setting to enhance the discretion of local educators; (3) creating self-contained teaching/learning units, to allow educators to make decisions about deploying resources to meet student needs; and (4) providing educational resources above those thought minimally necessary, thus allowing educators some discretion in addressing emerging needs."

In Natriello, G., McDill, E. L., & Pallas, A. M. (1990). Schooling disadvantaged children: Racing against catastrophe (p. 161). New York: Teachers College Press.

3. *In light of the ongoing standards movement, districts and states should develop standards for school conditions, class and school size, and in general, student opportunity to learn. Districts should restructure schools that are too large and impersonal into smaller-sized units. Districts' and states' oversight and accountability mechanisms should ensure that Hispanic students participate in the ongoing reform agendas. Reform agendas—especially 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.*
4. *Districts and state education agencies should design comprehensive strategies for dropout prevention that are tied to the states' standards and that take account of students' differing needs at different points in their lives.*

Well-meaning advocates for one or another intervention targeted for a specific age-group often seem to promise more than they can accomplish. No single strategy—be it early childhood intervention, Title I, bilingual education, alternative education, curriculum reform, student tutoring and mentoring—can by itself solve the problem of student dropout. The most successful schools visited by the Hispanic Dropout Project used multiple approaches across pre-K–12, and even provided support for older people to return to school to obtain a high school certificate.

5. *School districts and state education agencies should evaluate currently funded dropout prevention efforts against curricular and student learning standards, and they should provide support for those efforts to continuously improve.*
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6. *As schools become better able to respond to their diverse student populations, programs should be redirected so as to (a) reconnect students who have been placed on the borderline between success and failure and (b) provide alternatives for students who, for whatever reason, prefer to take alternative pathways to a high school credential.*
 7. *Districts and state education agencies should provide lifelong learning opportunities so that people past school age can still acquire a high school credential.*

Society cannot afford to give up on people who, for whatever reasons, have dropped out of school. They should be encouraged to and provided with multiple opportunities to return to school and to graduate.



"Prior policy has always been focused on prevention. What about people who have dropped out? What should we be doing about the people who are the victims of previous policy and inaction?" Testimony at HDP open hearing, New York City

8. *Districts, state education agencies—indeed, all of society—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.*

Because existing resources need to be directed more strategically, schools and districts should carefully evaluate their programs and engage in continuous improvement of their best practices. School districts should redirect monies strategically from programs that are not working (and that seem unable to work) to implementing and improving school-based programs that do work.

Schools—especially urban schools in conditions of poverty—need additional resources. There is no way to improve the physical plant of run-down schools, to reduce class size, to target much-needed resources, to purchase basic supplies and new books, to reform curriculum, and to provide professional development for teachers without an increased investment in those schools that educate our poorest children.



"The formal institution that directly affects virtually all adolescents is school. Schools are critically important because education is the means by which individuals from economically or socially disadvantaged backgrounds can build the skills and credentials needed for successful adult roles in mainstream American life. . . . Because of residential stratification, most of these adolescents attend schools with the fewest material resources. In 1991, for example, per pupil expenditures in the 47 largest urban school districts averaged \$5,200; in suburban districts, the figure was \$6,073. Although an \$875 per pupil funding gap may not appear significant, in an average class of 25 students, the difference is almost \$22,000—enough to hire an aide, provide special instructional materials or computers, pay significantly higher teacher salaries, or improve a dilapidated classroom. When the relatively greater need of urban chil-

dren for special services is taken into account (for health needs, language instruction for non-English-proficient students, etc.), the resource differences are even more critical. Differences in funding of this magnitude can make a clear qualitative difference in the total educational experience. Traditional education practices contribute to the high rates of failure for low-achieving students. Historically, schools have addressed the diversity of student achievement by tracking students into homogeneous ability groups and by retaining students who fail courses because of poor attendance, grades, or test scores. Contrary to expectations, these practices have consistently shown negative academic and social consequences for low-achieving adolescents."

*In Panel on High-Risk Youth, National Research Council. (1993). *Losing generations: Adolescents in high-risk settings* (p. 7). Washington, DC: National Academy Press.*

Districts and school personnel may balk, at first, at the idea of redirecting existing resources. The larger society might have concerns about investing more money than is currently the case in the education of poor Hispanic children. Yet, if monies could be invested strategically in order to provide Hispanics with high-quality education programs in the first place, then schools and society would save on the long-term costs of their failure to have educated these children properly.

9. Schools, districts, and state education agencies need to develop better management information systems that follow students more accurately and efficiently.

In order to plan, monitor, evaluate, and improve dropout prevention programs, people need information about students who leave school. Such information is simply not available. Current policy is focused on students who stay; hence there are few incentives for schools or districts to worry about dropouts. Without such basic information, it seems impossible to envision the development of any comprehensive set of interventions.

Knowing annual dropout rates of high school students is a start, but ultimately inadequate for planning and monitoring programs. Where possible, districts should follow groups of students from first through twelfth grades.

10. Schools and districts must diversify their teaching workforce to include people with the knowledge, language skills, and backgrounds that will enable them to better connect with Hispanic students and their parents.

Beyond having role models, Hispanic students need to encounter teachers who communicate trust and confidence, who can understand what students are experiencing, and who can guide and support students. Hispanic students reported establishing mutually respectful relationships with Hispanic teachers, with non-Hispanic teachers and volunteers who themselves had dropped out of school but still managed to further their education, with retired teachers who communicated a sincere confidence in students' intelligence and ability to succeed, and with other adults whose own life experiences validated them in the students' eyes. Such teachers were in short supply in these children's schools.



*"In contrast to Coleman et al.'s 1966 finding of no consistent differences in the quantity and quality of school inputs for predominantly majority and minority schools, the analyses presented in this paper reveal substantial within district variations in four types of school inputs: teacher test scores, years of education, teacher experience and class size (student-teacher ratios). The statistical models presented in this paper document a sorting of school inputs based on campus racial/ethnic and socio-economic composition. In particular, the models suggest that teacher ability, measured with both verbal and written proficiency scores, decreases with campus percentage black and Hispanic and increases with the campus percentage of higher income students. . . . Texas teachers employed in schools with high fractions of disadvantaged minority students have fewer years of education and less experience and have more students in their classes." In Kain, J. F., & Singleton, K. (1996). *Equality of educational opportunity revisited*. (Paper presented at the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston Symposium.) Cambridge: Harvard Institute of Economic Research.*

In addition, schools need teachers who can understand and talk to Hispanic parents. Parents respond best to people they know outside of school such as their neighbors and other parents, to people who treat them with respect, to people who speak Spanish or at least do not denigrate their accents, and to people who clearly show that they care for their children's academic success.

Diversifying the teaching workforce will occur only when people with broad experience, knowledge, and dispositions to work with Hispanic students are recruited into and successfully complete certification programs. Schools of education, school districts, state education agencies, state boards of education, and postsecondary education's governing bodies have important roles in diversifying the teacher workforce.

11. Schools and Colleges of Education should recruit people into the teaching profession who will diversify its ranks. They should develop course work, practica, student teaching, and other experiences that will help all preservice teachers to succeed with Hispanic students. The governing bodies of postsecondary education institutions should require that their faculty be able and willing to prepare teachers to teach Hispanic students.

Recommendation 1: Put the services in rather than pull students out.

Recommendation 2: Deliver the services without calling attention to the fact that special services are being provided.

Recommendation 3: Deliver the services within a supportive climate that includes adults as student advocates.

Recommendation 4: Provide students with substantive incentives to participate.

Recommendation 5: Carefully select, train, and support the staff persons providing the services.

In Rossi, R. J. (1995). *Evaluation of projects funded by the school dropout demonstration assistance program: Final evaluation report* (pp. 8-10) (Volume 1: Findings and recommendations). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

12. Teacher certification bodies should insist that entering teachers have the knowledge and skills needed to work with a diverse student body.

Because it is within the power of state boards of education to set minimal requirements for entering teachers, they should use those requirements to pressure universities to update their teacher preparation programs so that new teachers will be better able to, in the long run, teach Hispanic students. In addition, the certification bodies should update their rules and regulations so as to encourage the creation of a diverse teacher workforce.

13. Bilingual education, the education of Hispanics, and the education of immigrants should be depoliticized.

Many schools that were successfully keeping Hispanic students in school relied on bilingual education and incorporated Hispanic culture into their functioning. On the other hand, schools can also use programs for limited English proficient students to deny such students access to a mainstream education. In other words, bilingual education, English as a second language, and sheltered English instruction are but the means to an end—keeping students in school in one case, denying them educational opportunity in the other. Schools and districts should choose among program models and adopt those characteristics that best suit their unique situations.



"There is a need for broader recognition that the achievement of educational and social potential is not just an individual affair. It also involves the constraints of the peer groups in which the youths are embedded, and the constraints of the schools they attend. When schools segregate or cluster individuals who share low standards of accomplishment (or expectations for school dropout), they explicitly help bring about those outcomes. To keep educational opportunities open, there should not only be challenges for achievement, but ample assistance and support to ensure that each student will reach adequate standards.

The curriculum should include information that is not only preparatory for subsequent accomplishments; it should place the information in the context of living.

In plans to prevent serious problems of behavior, at-risk youths should be kept in the conventional system, not excluded from it. Exclusion serves to exacerbate problem behavior by the selective isolation of the individuals from the rules and standards of conventional society.

*In the inner city and elsewhere, schools and the values they represent constitute safe havens for many students. In cases of children of privilege, the school is more typically an extension of the rest of the individual's life experience. For seriously disadvantaged youths, the haven might serve a unique function. This function must not be compromised, and society must ensure that access to schools remains open and safe, including zones around schools and places within it." In Cairns, R. B., & Cairns, B. D. (1994). *Lifelines and risks: Pathways of youth in our time* (pp. 191- 193). New York: Cambridge University Press.*

COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS, BUSINESS, AND THE LARGER COMMUNITY

Community-based organizations, the business community, chambers of commerce, and other agencies can play mutually reinforcing roles in reducing the Hispanic dropout rate. Businesses and chambers of commerce—which are rightly concerned about the productivity and quality of the local workforce—should provide work experiences that support students' staying in school, provide incentives for students to continue their education, and encourage their employees' participation in all facets of the community's schools. Community-based organizations—which are concerned about the overall quality of life for Hispanics in the local community—should advocate for their members' concerns in the schools and seek support from business for the education programs that they provide to students.



"We [schools] can't do it alone. We have a hard time educating the kids who are staying in school." Speaker at HDP open hearing, San Diego

The thoughtful comments that we heard at the project's hearings and the activities that we witnessed provide ample counterevidence to those who would assert that groups outside the school have little or no role to play in addressing issues of Hispanic dropout. Latina businesswomen became active friends, role models, and mentors to younger Latinas. Chamber of Commerce members mentored and tutored students, volunteered in schools, and served on advisory boards and committees. Community-based organizations advocated on behalf of parents and provided education services that paralleled and supported Hispanic students' school experiences. Representatives from across the local community participated in local self-study efforts to improve the schools' responsiveness to their Hispanic clientele. We visited some alternative, out-of-school programs that were financially supported by local businesses. Some businesses and chambers of commerce provided scholarships for Hispanics to go on to college. These individuals and agencies maintained long-term, personal commitments to students.



"We should encourage businesses to help link parents with schools." Speaker at HDP open hearing, San Diego

However, we also heard of cases where the conditions of employment interfered with Hispanic parents' ability to participate in their children's education. Parents often noted that more of them would have come to the project's open hearings, but friends, family, and neighbors could not get off from work. Similar to earlier stories of parents who risked, and in some cases lost, their jobs to take an active role in their children's education, one parent testified about leaving his daughter at school every day at 8:30 a.m. If anything happened before he left work in the late afternoon, that parent could not go to the school without risking his job.

1. *The local business community, chamber of commerce, and community-based organizations should work together to help to keep students in school. Coalitions of community-based organizations and businesses should monitor local conditions to ensure that Hispanic*

students receive the high-quality education that they deserve. These same coalitions should advocate at local, state, and national levels for the improvement of the educational conditions of Hispanic students.

In addition to in-school tutoring and out-of-school mentoring programs, financial assistance, and other forms of volunteerism, businesses should offer school-to-work apprenticeships and internships that integrate productive work and schooling for Hispanic students who wish to stay in school but feel pressure to contribute to their families. Businesses could also provide space and financial, managerial, and other forms of continuing assistance for school- and community-based alternative programs.



"Increase the credits that are offered to corporations for kids who are adopted and given the opportunity to work. Corporations should get involved. They should help with parent training and provide teacher training." Speaker at HDP open hearing, San Diego

- 2. Businesses where students work should provide incentives and support for their students to complete and to continue beyond high school.*

Many Hispanic students work out of basic economic necessity. Carefully designed school-to-work programs that balance between academic demands and the needs of the workplace can help students meet their economic and educational responsibilities by strengthening the connections between what students study and how it is applied in the workplace. Businesses must avoid encouraging or allowing students to work excessive hours that would endanger their school completion. Instead, employees of older secondary school students should provide flexible work schedules, tutoring, study time during work hours, mentoring, individual and family referrals to social service agencies as needed, incentives, and other supports so that students can finish high school. If a person cannot finish high school, then the business should encourage that student to obtain a GED.

Businesses where Hispanic students work should also develop scholarship and other financial assistance programs that encourage students to pursue postsecondary education.

- 3. The business community should implement policies that encourage parents to take time off, as needed, to go to parent-teacher conferences, to participate in school governance activities, and the like.*

Businesses should include paid leave for participating in school activities as part of their overall compensation package for workers.



"The majority of projects offered academic skills and counseling, and many offered a wide range of additional services, combined in a variety of ways within and across 'project components' (i.e., discrete programmatic activities for specific groups of students. Many projects were considered to offer comprehensive

*services...academic, counseling, social support, and, for components serving grades 6 and higher, vocational/career)." In Rossi, R. J. (1995). *Evaluation of projects funded by the school dropout demonstration assistance program: Final evaluation report* (p. 2) (Volume 1: Findings and recommendations). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.*

4. *The business community in conjunction with community-based organizations should support schools in their missions.*

Businesses and community-based organizations have expertise to share with schools on fund raising, needs assessment, strategic planning, and day-to-day management. They should study the physical plant and other resources of their local schools. As necessary, these organizations should press for increased financing of schools that is targeted to the identified needs and for ensuring that Hispanic students receive high-quality programs. They should also help schools to design and implement continuing improvement programs.

5. *Community-based organizations should continue to include the concerns of Hispanic parents in their service and advocacy activities.*

We visited adult literacy programs, early childhood interventions staffed by parents, out-of-school tutoring offered by adults in the community, social service referrals, and mentoring efforts initiated by community-based organizations. In addition, many of these organizations encouraged parents to visit their children's schools and advocated for the school to take their parents' concerns seriously.



*"We point out the need within communities to develop comprehensive, clear plans for delivering services to the disadvantaged. Most communities lack a coherent policy on what services are needed, who should be receiving them, and who is responsible for delivering them. An explicit policy with clearly stated goals, that takes into account the bureaucratic and administrative complexities characteristic of contemporary social service delivery, can help insure that individuals do not fall through the cracks in the social machinery." In Natriello, G., McDill, E. L., & Pallas, A. M. (1990). *Schooling disadvantaged children: Racing against catastrophe* (p. 196). New York: Teachers College Press.*

6. *Businesses should band together to support local research, development, and the dissemination of effective programs for enhancing student achievement and graduation rates.*

Businesses at sites visited by the Hispanic Dropout Project supported the development of dropout prevention programs. At a few sites, local businesses and the Chamber of Commerce also supported systematic research into those efforts. One national corporation supported the dissemination of a program that it had helped to develop.

RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

The Hispanic Dropout Project heard from representatives of many programs whose developers and staff showed an impressive commitment to improving the educational opportunities of Hispanics and to reducing the Hispanic dropout rate. Unfortunately, many of these programs found themselves in constant financial turmoil, in part due to their inability to provide convincing evidence that they were accomplishing their goals. The innovative ideas found in these programs are seldom tested; and hence, they face the skepticism of schools, the public, and funding agencies. Although we made the conscious decision to solicit the input of program developers and others involved in Hispanic dropout prevention in crafting these recommendations, we believe that they too should be subjected to rigorous empirical testing.



Student 1: "The differences between us and them [friends who have dropped out]? They haven't had the opportunities I've had—in life or in school. They're still young, still partying, acting like teenagers. I'm getting on with my life. They're struggling."

Student 2: "Well, it's okay to party. You just have to take responsibility for your own life." Testimony at HDP meeting with students, Albuquerque

1. There should be sustained evaluations of promising programs and dropout prevention practices.

Many programs and sites visited by the Hispanic Dropout Project did not have adequate research-quality evidence of their effectiveness. Given how these programs emphasize helping students, it is not surprising that scarce resources were not diverted into collecting and analyzing program-effectiveness data. On the other hand, it is difficult to recommend programs to others without empirical evidence that they make a difference. Moreover, such performance data are fundamental to continued program improvement. Program funders and designers should include evaluation components to identify effective programs that could be replicated elsewhere and to support ongoing improvement.



*"Another community influence on dropout behavior is peers. Recent research reveals that peers exert a powerful influence on children, especially teenagers. Although the influence of peers on dropout behavior has not been the subject of much study, ethnographic studies report that dropouts of all ethnic backgrounds are more likely to associate with other youth who drop out or have low educational aspirations." In Rumberger, R. (1991). *Chicano dropouts: A review of research and policy issues*. In R. Valencia (Ed.), *Chicano school failure and success: Research and policy agendas for the 1990s* (p. 76). Philadelphia: Falmer Press.*

2. There should be coordinated, sustained, and systematic programs of research that investigate the times and the mechanisms through which students of different backgrounds disengage from school.

Much research on student dropout is fragmentary, based on a single study, and seldom links purported causal agents with the evaluation of an intervention. For instance, we do not fully understand the complex relationship between pregnancy and a female's decision to leave school. Research can help schools to understand the mechanisms by which dropout occurs and to take steps to remove barriers to student engagement.



"The relationship between Latino children and the schools is a disconnect."

Testimony at HDP open forum, New York City

- 3. *Research and development should focus on identifying and developing Hispanic students' knowledge and interests, and on working with and strengthening the supportive social networks found in these students' extended families.***

Much of the at-risk and dropout literature is based on assumptions that Hispanic students and their families do not know very much, are missing some important competencies, lack certain traits, or have some fundamental flaw that needs fixing. The recommendations growing out of such research are predictably bereft of helpful ideas: Fix the flaws; if the flaws can't be fixed, despair.

On the other hand, the schools we visited and the more relevant and recent research literature try to identify what students know and what their families can do to support their education. Student knowledge (including knowledge of their cultures and bilingualism) and interests (including problems that are relevant to them) provide the basis for research and development in pedagogical practices (curriculum, teaching, and assessment), teachers' professional development, and school reform. Parental concerns about and caring for their children should be the basis for the research and development that seeks to build vibrant home-school partnerships.



"The most effective thing is contact between students and the institution on a regular basis. Systematic, deliberate, ongoing contact with kids." Testimony at

HDP open forum, New York City

- 4. *Dropout prevention programs that are proven to work should be sustained and disseminated. The education research and development infrastructure should include a component for transferring such programs from development to widespread implementation.***

Increasing America's Hispanic school completion rates cannot be a stop-and-go operation. In view of the urgency for proven dropout prevention programs, it is shocking to note that one of the most impressive programs found in the research literature no longer exists. This program was based on solid research, and had shown strong and sustained effects. Too many programs are developed to demonstrate a point and subsequently cease functioning when the developers or program funders move on to other tasks and priorities. The support for dropout prevention efforts that are shown to work should no longer come from demonstration monies but from the basic funding for the nation's schools.



*"Three factors importantly affected the replication activities at various of the sites and may have inhibited the effectiveness of projects for students. These factors included: the fit of models to the replication sites; the extent of principal buy-in to the replications; turf considerations." In Rossi, R. J. (1995). *Evaluation of projects funded by the school dropout demonstration assistance program: Final evaluation report* (pp. 13-14) (Volume 1: Findings and recommendations). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.*

5. *The population of Hispanic students who are limited English proficient should be taken into account in local, state, and national efforts to (a) improve and reform the education system, (b) evaluate the impact of schools and of categorical programs, and (c) implement accountability systems for schools.*

As noted above, the exclusion of Hispanics from such efforts contributes to their being invisible and, by extension, to schools not being held accountable for their educational success. One strategy for including Hispanic children that should be explored is the use of their native language for gathering information in those efforts.



"I knew of no alternatives. Either you go to school or you don't. Or you go for a GED, and that's not as good. I was never told of the alternatives." Former dropout at HDP open forum, New York City

6. *Research is needed on preservice and in-service teachers' beliefs, knowledge, skills, and professional development as related to the education of Hispanic students. Moreover, research should include attention to issues surrounding the diversification of the teacher workforce.*

Teachers are central in reducing the Hispanic dropout rate. Teachers themselves, schools, and policymakers need to better understand the processes by which teachers can make a difference in their students' education.

7. *Better data on student dropouts should be gathered at all levels: local, state, and national*

Although available data clearly document the crisis of Hispanic dropout, one of the most common complaints we encountered involved the quality of data on student dropouts. The nation needs clear, commonly accepted, and stable definitions of dropout that allow for comparisons across states, that allow schools to decide if they should adopt a program that was effective elsewhere, and that provide policymakers and parents with a clear sense of how many students are dropping out of school and when they begin to drop out. Such information is fundamental to improving education at all levels. Hence, it should be systematically gathered, analyzed, and reported at local, state, and national levels.



"I want to give back to my family. As a Dominican woman, I am going to make it. Make my parents proud that their sacrifice was worth it. I'm going to go back to my community and show them, I made it." Speaker at HDP student leader forum, New York City