



Research Brief

Hispanic Student Achievement

Question: What are the factors affecting the achievement of Hispanic high school youth?

Summary of Findings:

Hispanic Americans are the largest growing population in the United States. Currently, Hispanic students make up more than 20% of the U.S. school population and, in 23 of the 50 states, Hispanic students outnumber African American and Asian students. During the 1970s and 1980s the gap between the achievement of Hispanic students and white students narrowed; however, since the 1990s, progress in the academic achievement of Hispanic students has virtually stopped. According to information provided by the National Center for Educational Statistics (2003) several statements about the gap in the academic achievement of Hispanic or Latino* students can be made:

- Only 14% of Hispanic 4th grader scored at proficiency or advanced levels on the 2002 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading test and 57% did not reach the “basic” level.
- On the 2000 NAEP mathematics test, less than 10% of Hispanic 8th graders reached the proficient or advanced level and 60% scored “below basic.”
- At all levels, the average achievement-test scores of Hispanic students are lower than white students and by the end of high school, Hispanic students reading and mathematical skills are comparable to those of white 13 year olds.

In addition, Hispanic students are more likely than white students:

- To enter kindergarten under-prepared for learning.
- To have to repeat a grade.
- To be suspended or expelled.
- To drop out of high school (the drop out rate is twice as high as white students).

Finally, Hispanic students are less likely than white students to enroll in and complete college. When they do enter college, they are more likely to pursue a two-year associate degree than a bachelor degree.

Like other minority and low-income students, Hispanic students often face challenges within school which can hamper their success, such as:

- Being enrolled in less rigorous and challenging academic courses.
- Having under-prepared, less experienced teachers.
- Facing low teacher expectations and possible discrimination.
- Encountering a lack of institutional support and knowledge about the processes needed to be academically successful.



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Not a Monolithic Culture

According to Conchas (2001) one of the problems with research on Hispanic student achievement is that not all Hispanic students are alike nor do they achieve alike. It is important to consider the diversity of experience of Hispanic students when discussing their attitudes toward, and participation in, education.

One explanation for the differences in academic achievement of minorities is the “cultural-ecology” theory, which identifies the difference between being a “voluntary” minority (such as Asian Americans, Cuban Americans and others who immigrate to the United States willingly) and an “involuntary minority” (such as blacks, Mexican Americans, Native Americans, and Puerto Ricans who often became U.S. citizens involuntarily). This theory attributes a minority’s perceptions of having an opportunity to succeed in the U.S. to the differences in academic achievement of minority groups.

According to Conchas (2001) the “cultural-ecology” theory does not explain the variations within minority groups; for example, middle-class Mexican American students are less likely to resist schooling than other Hispanic students. Conchas states that there are also differences in the attitudes of one generation of Hispanic students to the next, as well as differences between U.S. born Hispanics and recent immigrants. These variations need to be taken into account when discussing the nature of Hispanic student achievement.

Schmid (2001) also identifies the problem with treating all Hispanic students alike and suggests considering several factors when examining Hispanic student achievement such as:

- Socio-economic status
- Cultural characteristics
- Social reception
- Language proficiency
- Gender

According to President’s Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans (September 2002), the country’s Hispanic population is “much more complex than commonly recognized” (p. 5) and that aggregate data does not provide an accurate picture of Hispanic student achievement.

According to the 2002 U.S. Census, the Hispanic population includes the following groups:

- Mexican American (making up the largest group at nearly 60%)
- Spaniard (0.3%)
- South American (3.8%)
- Central American (4.8%)
- Dominican (2.2%)
- Cuban (3.5%)
- Puerto Rican (9.6%)
- All other Hispanic (17.3%)



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Factors Affecting Success

With the implementation of the Federal Government's No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 which dictates that states should publish achievement test results for separate racial and ethnic groups and makes closing the achievement gap a priority, the academic success of Hispanic students and other minorities has drawn national attention. Research by groups such as the Education Trust (2003), the North Central Regional Education Laboratory (2004), the Center on Education Policy (2001), and the Tomás Rivera Policy Institute (2003) have identified several factors affecting the academic achievement of Hispanic students as well as suggestions for improving their education opportunities:

- **Teacher Quality and Professional Development:** Like all students, Hispanic students deserve highly qualified, experienced teachers. Teachers should have ongoing professional development to foster academic achievement such as English as a Second Language (ESL)/Bilingual training and certification.
- **Teacher Expectations:** Hispanic students need teachers who have high expectations, work with students in a supportive environment, and encourage students to achieve.
- **Extended Learning Time:** Programs need to be implemented to reduce school absenteeism, truancy, and tardiness of Hispanic students. Uniform procedures for transitioning students from one school to another would also help students who frequently move. In addition, schools that are successful in closing the achievement gap for Hispanic students often have implemented before and after school programs and summer programs to provide additional learning time which may focus on building and improving academic skills.
- **Parent and Community Support:** Research emphasizes the importance of establishing strong links between schools, parents, and the community. Schools need to establish several methods of communicating with parents and parents should be made aware of the importance of challenging coursework and curricula and the procedures for entering post-secondary education. Research suggests that students will be more inclined to achieve in school if there is evidence that people they care about think academics is important. Successful schools often invite parents to enter a contract with the school, pledging support for extended learning opportunities and/or help with homework.
- **Social Support:** Secondary schools can increase social support for their students by expanding assistance beyond parents to peer partners and community mentors.
- **A Rigorous Curriculum:** Perhaps the most cited factor for improving Hispanic student achievement is to provide all students with a rigorous and challenging curriculum based on clear goals and standards. Too often Hispanic students are placed in courses with low level curriculum and are not encouraged to enter into the more challenging courses.
- **Knowledge about and Access to Higher Education:** There is concern that Hispanic students and parents do not have knowledge of the procedures necessary to enter into and be successful in post-secondary education. Hispanic students who achieve less well often cite a lack of institutional support, such as help with transitions from one stage of education to the next and knowledge about



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the curriculum needed to enter into post-secondary schools. Access to rigorous academic courses such as Advanced Placement courses can encourage students to enter into higher education as well as provide them with additional institutional support. Parents and students need procedural knowledge about entering into and completing post-secondary programs. In addition, secondary schools can provide students with knowledge about career training opportunities outside of college.

- **Learning Resources:** Hispanic students need access to the traditional tools of education such as books, buildings, labs, and materials as well as newer tools such as computers, the Internet, and other technologies. Technology equity issues such as the home-based digital divide need to be addressed.

There is a myriad of factors outside of school that can affect Hispanic student achievement such as parental support, school readiness, health care, and socio-economic issues, many of which schools cannot control. Nevertheless, factors that affect the academic achievement of Hispanic students are often the same factors that affect the achievement of all students. All students deserve high quality teachers, rigorous and challenging curricula, communication with parents and the community, and institutional support. However, too often the needs of Hispanic students go unrecognized and unsupported. Low expectations, a low-level curriculum, and a lack of institutional support can discourage students from finishing secondary school or pursuing post-secondary educational opportunities.

*For the purposes of this report Hispanic and Latino are used interchangeably.

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Online Resources:

The NEA Foundation

http://www.neafoundation.org/closingthegap_resources.htm

The foundation of the National Education Association. Provides Resources including articles and web sites on the achievement gap.

Minority Student Achievement Network

<http://www.msanetwork.org/>

A coalition of 25 school districts across the U.S. dedicated to “to discover, develop and implement the means to ensure high academic achievement for students of color, specifically African American and Latino students.”

Aspira Association

www.aspira.org

“ASPIRA is a nonprofit organization dedicated to encouraging and promoting education and leadership development among Hispanic youth in the United States.”

The Education Trust

<http://www2.edtrust.org>

A multitude of resources on the achievement gap including research articles and power point presentations.



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Education Commission of the States

<http://www.ecs.org/html/issue.asp?issueID=194>

Research and current issues meant to inform state policy makers on education. Contains information about issues related to the achievement gap.

North Central Regional Education Laboratory

<http://www.ncrel.org/gap/>

Research articles, publications, and information pertaining to the achievement gap.

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