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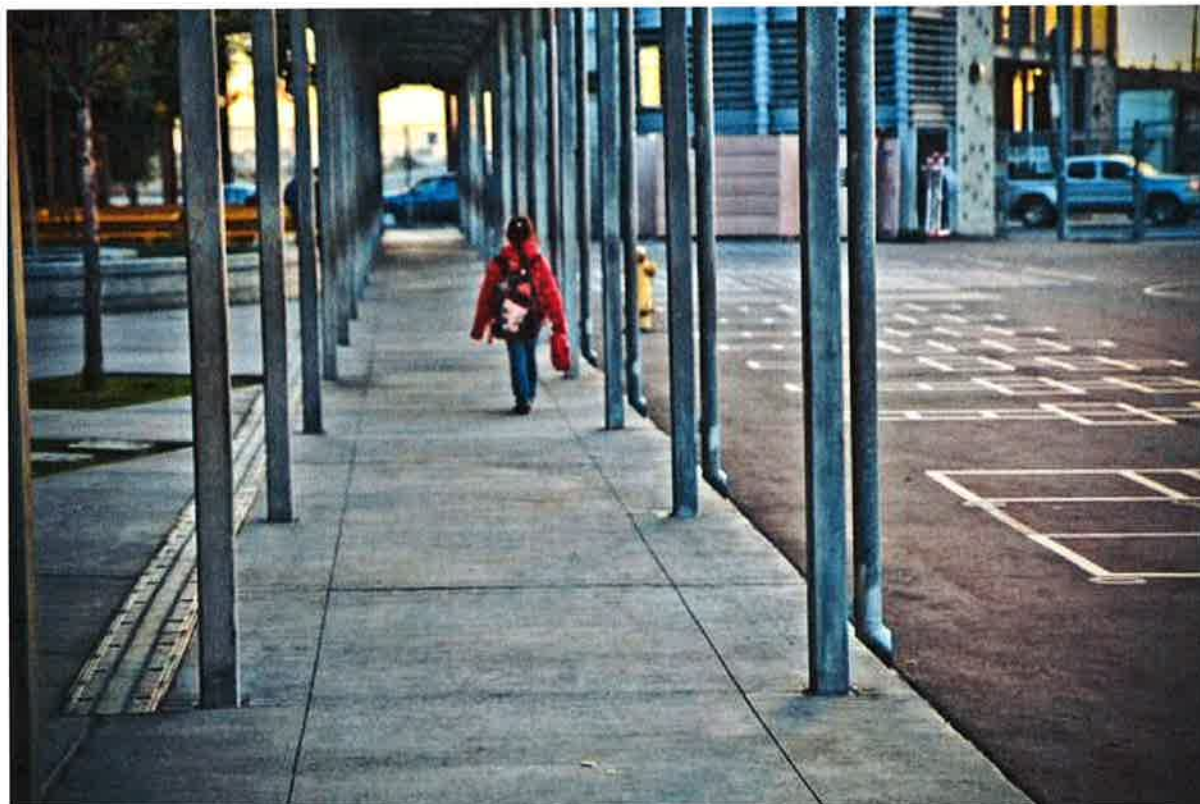
25 January 2012



Bridging the Hispanic achievement gap

As public sector funds for education get the axe, private initiatives are stepping in to help Latino families

By Jens Erik Gould



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Rocio Barrera sat in an elementary school classroom on a rainy December morning in East Los Angeles. Waiting for

class to start, she replayed cell phone videos she had recorded of the previous night's celebration of Our Lady of Guadalupe at a local church.

The long, mostly sleepless night she had spent celebrating the Catholic holiday, and the pouring rain, might have been good reasons not to come to school that morning. But for Barrera, who was born in Mexico, this class was important. She saw it as key to helping her two children do something no one in her family had ever done: attend a university in the

United States. When asked about that goal, Barrera pointed to a handwritten pink slip of paper sitting on her desk that displayed a motto. Each parent had been tasked to choose a "dicho," or "saying," and hers was: "El que tenga hambre, que le mueva la olla." In other words, if you want something, you have to work to get it.

It soon became apparent that Barrera's classmates felt the same way: within minutes, the room was full with dozens of parents eager to learn. The class was part of a workshop called Abriendo Puertas, or "Opening Doors," a parent-leadership training class for low-income Latino parents of children, from newborn to 5 years old, run by the L.A.-based non-profit Families in Schools.

Most of the participants were immigrants, many didn't speak English and one didn't know how to read. But they were determined to better educate themselves so they could create a better learning environment for their children, and give them opportunities no one in their families had ever had.

"I want my son to go to college," one woman said in Spanish after facilitator Maria Morales opened the class at Maywood Elementary School, by asking parents what dreams they had for their children. "My son wants to be a doctor, a father replied. "I want my daughter to be happy," another mother responded.

Over the next two hours, parents debated the characteristics of leadership, discussed how to develop a better relationship with their children's school, and learned about Hispanic historical figures relevant to education. The class has taught Barrera how to cook healthier food at home and how to play flashcard games to help her daughters improve their vocabularies.

"This class has opened our eyes about our children and how we can help them with their academic level," says Barrera, who has a daughter in first grade. "I don't want my daughter to be just another statistic of someone who couldn't do it."

Abriendo Puertas is one of many programs that aim to address a trend that spells trouble not only for Latinos, but for the future of the United States: While Hispanics are the fastest growing segment of the population, their performance in school is significantly worse than their Anglo counterparts.

Some of the programs are privately funded, some are run by non-profit organizations and others are larger state and federal efforts. All of them know it's a crucial endeavor because Hispanics play an increasingly important social, economic and political role in the country, meaning their

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underperformance could diminish the academic standing of the United States and negatively affect the quality of the workforce and the nation's economic health.

In Los Angeles, L.A. Unified School District Superintendent John Deasy is trying to help Latinos do better, recently announcing a plan supported by the federal government to revamp the district's program for English-language learners and increase its focus on curricula that help prepare kids for college.

The district is also supporting privately funded programs like Abriendo Puertas to help assist more families. But funding cuts and a lack of coordination among programs has kept the impact of both public and private efforts too small to significantly reduce what is known as the "achievement gap" between Hispanics and their white counterparts. "Everybody's well intentioned, but the coordination isn't there most of the time," says Ruth Yoon, administrative coordinator of early childhood programs for L.A. Unified. "We have great, promising programs, but due to a lack of resources, they don't go to scale and we don't have the impact we'd like to see."

NUMBERS TELL THE STORY

The reality is quite jarring. Hispanics accounted for more than half of the country's growth last decade, and will make up 30 percent of the population by 2050, according to the Pew Hispanic Center. Yet at the same time, a report released this year by the National Assessment of Educational Progress showed that the achievement gap between white and Hispanic students remained largely unchanged over the past 20 years, even after the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act tried to improve achievement for disadvantaged students.

"If these people aren't brought into the American dream, we're not going to be able to maintain our status in the world," says Jim Taylor, a professor, education blogger and former member of the board of directors of the San Francisco Education Fund. "It's a waste of human capital. Some of them could be the next Bill Gates, but they're just being lost."

There are a number of factors that contribute to the underperformance of Hispanics, and there isn't a consensus among experts about which are most important.

More Latinos live in poverty than their Anglo counterparts, meaning they often attend worse schools in poorer neighborhoods. Many Hispanic children are undocumented or second-generation Americans, and often aren't as proficient in English as are their white peers, putting them at a disadvantage. Latinos' performance may be affected by negative stereotyping against them by other students. Also, low-income Latino parents often provide fewer educational resources at home, and don't foster reading at an early age as much as do Anglo parents, and can sometimes provide poor health care and nutrition. That has led experts to refer to the problem as an "opportunity gap" instead of an "achievement gap," highlighting that it's not an equal playing field.

All of these factors make dropouts more common and can lead to a vicious cycle: some who drop out can't find a job, or they get involved with drugs or gangs, and then fail to help their own kids get a good education.

Countless studies and statistics have detailed the problem. But what is the solution? How can the nation reverse this troubling gap before its negative effects worsen?

Some experts say programs that focus on early education and helping parents are the best investment because they offer a preventative approach. It's a more effective long-term strategy, the idea goes, to help children get off to a good start in preschool than to try to rescue them from dropping out or turning to a criminal life when they're older and struggling in high school.

As it is, while white children often begin their education before the age of 5, many Hispanic children don't attend preschool because they don't know it exists, don't live in a place where it's available, or can't afford it. This has Hispanics playing catch up from the very beginning, a considerable disadvantage. And parents' ability to foster early education is crucial because of the important role that the home environment plays in early child development.

"You need to understand if you're going to make a huge difference for Latinos, you've got to start early," says Eugene Garcia, a professor of education at Arizona State University who has published extensively on bilingual development. "The evidence suggests a pretty good return on your dollar."

What is the evidence? Studies show 3-year-old children who participated in Early Head Start, a federally-funded parent education and childcare program for low-income families, performed better on a range of cognitive, language and emotional development measures than a control group. Hispanic children in Oklahoma's universal pre-kindergarten program showed marked improvements in reading, writing and math skills, according to a Georgetown University study.

According to a study of Abriendo Puertas by professors at UC Berkeley and UCLA, parents who participated reported an increase in their confidence about parenting skills, knowledge about available health services, and better social support and community involvement. "Most people think to be ready for kindergarten you need a coat and a lunch pail," says Sandra Gutierrez, national director of Abriendo Puertas, which operates in 28 states. "But what they need is to be ready socially and emotionally, have a healthy diet, exposure to a rich vocabulary, and have their parents involved in school."

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That's not to say that programs targeting elementary, middle and high school Hispanic student aren't effective too. On a

recent afternoon, tears flowed from 18-year-old Tomas Robles' eyes when he recounted how his family lived in a garage and could barely afford food to eat when his parents went broke several years ago.

Robles, who was born in Mexico and immigrated as a child, says a mentorship program at his school helped him resist the urge to drop out of school during those tough times. Now a senior at the Cesar Chavez Learning Academies in the heavily Hispanic L.A. suburb of San Fernando, he gets straight As. "Knowing that someone else has gone through something hard and that it's not just me, that's a big thing," Robles says.

His classmate Angela Carmona, whose parents were born in Mexico, says the mentorship helped her end her addiction to ecstasy and marijuana, and pull up her grades from a C average. Now, she's applying to colleges and she'll be the first in her family to graduate high school. "I gave up so many times in school," she says. "This program actually helped me to think about what I want to be in life."

The program they attend is called Humanitas. Supported by the non-profit Los Angeles Education Partnership, it offers a special, interdisciplinary curriculum to low-income, minority high school students. The model includes a mentorship program in which older students offer advice to younger students. LAEP also offers college counseling, and created an early prevention strategy after drug use increased at nearby Sylmar High School.

It's not an easy place to work. The area is plagued by gang activity, heavy drug use and poverty. "Most people know more people who have gone to prison than to college," says Jennie Carey, a program coordinator. "There's no college-going culture." Still, those in Humanitas at Cesar Chavez have achieved higher test scores on average than students who weren't in the program, and there haven't been any suspensions or expulsions of students there, Carey says. "The results are pretty good," she adds.

Not everyone succeeds, however. Jose Velazquez, 17, says Humanitas and its mentorship program haven't helped him get on a path to college. He's currently failing four classes and his grade point average is less than 1.0. His home environment has been hard, as he struggled with a natural mother he says abused him and took drugs when he was little, and a foster family he doesn't feel a part of. He says Humanitas hasn't helped him become more motivated in school, and that he doesn't have a good relationship with his mentor.

There are a myriad of programs nationwide like Humanitas and Abriendo Puertas. And many are quite effective. A campaign called Grad Nation launched by the group America's Promise Alliance aims to significantly lower the drop out rate. The Parent Institute for Quality Education, or PIQE, provides parent engagement and early childhood development programs, while the non-profit group AVANCE offers parent education and support programs. The non-profit organization Raising a Reader exposes children to books and helps parents promote reading.

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However, often such programs aren't part of a coordinated, large-scale effort, and can be too small or isolated to make a significant dent in the achievement gap nationwide. Also, there isn't enough research showing that programs that specifically target Hispanic students are yielding results, says Grover Whitehurst, a senior fellow at The Brookings Institution. That means the best approach, he says, is a large-scale strategy that focuses on improving the quality of schools for all students across the board.

"Making better schools available for kids is a pretty good solution for a variety of problems, including the Hispanic achievement gap," says Whitehurst, who is a former director of the Institute of Education Sciences at the U.S. Department of Education.

The Obama administration is making efforts to improve schools. The government has allocated billions of dollars to school improvement grants that aim to turn around failing schools and decrease the dropout rate. The federal government also provides Pell grants, which help make college more accessible to low-income students, even though in December Congress reduced the number of semesters that a student can qualify for support. The "Race to the Top" fund offers more than \$4 billion in grants to states and districts willing to implement education reform. Obama and Congress have also approved funds to help prevent teachers from losing their jobs. The administration says these efforts, along with the work of smaller programs, have helped Hispanic students perform better.

Indeed, according to the Pew Hispanic Center, the percentage of Hispanic high school graduates attending college grew to 44 percent in 2010 from 39 percent in 2009. The share of Hispanic 18- to 24-year olds who completed high school also increased during that period. "One of stories that doesn't get told is that we've made some significant improvements within the Latino community," says Jose Rico, director of the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics.

Still, there are failures with some government programs such as Head Start, which provides grants to local agencies to provide child development services for young children from low-income families. While some of the program's services are successful at preventing disadvantaged children from falling behind, others don't offer high quality education because the certification requirements are low, Rico says. And that hurts Hispanics because one in every four Head Start children is Latino.

Of all the obstacles to reducing the gap, perhaps the biggest are the teacher layoffs and funding cuts triggered by budget deficits and cuts to government-funded educational programs, Rico says. In California, for example, lawmakers have approved billions in cuts to K-12 schools and public colleges and universities. Gov. Jerry Brown announced another round of cuts in December that included eliminating funding for free school-bus service. In other words, the public sector won't be eager to funnel more money towards programs that help low-income Hispanic children anytime soon. "The states are trying to balance their budgets on the backs of elementary education and higher education," Rico says. "It's having a terrible impact on every student, but it's hitting Latino students especially hard."

Local school districts are feeling the heat. "We've had to reduce the number of children we serve," Yoon says. "They're really tough times right now. It means fewer children will be able to go to preschool." The district received an 11 percent cut in funding from the state for early childhood

programs this school year, Yoon says. And programs that encourage parent involvement are likely to be cut more, she warns. That's bad news because as it stands, only half of children who enter kindergarten in L.A. public schools have gone to preschool. That statistic may get even worse given the funding cuts.

For now, given the lack of government funds, more of the onus may be on the private sector and donors. Companies may have an incentive, since a more educated population will earn higher salaries and therefore have more money to buy their products. That's the reasoning of Octavio Pescador, associate director at the UCLA Center for Community Learning, who works with Latino students. "Strategic investment by the private sector is needed to close the educational gap," Pescador says. "The leaders of the post-industrial economy should invest in preschool education, especially for Latinos."

Abriendo Puertas, for example, is funded by private donors such as the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and companies such as Boeing. And the program has certainly helped Oscar Lopez and his children. In the program, Lopez, who came to the U.S. as an illegal immigrant and is now a citizen, learned that kids' brains start learning at a very young age. That has helped him provide a better educational environment for his 14-month-old daughter. He also posted vocabulary words on the walls of his house for his son Matt, who is in kindergarten, and learned to play educational games with him, such as guessing the names of the presidents and the states. "Now he's very far ahead in his class," Lopez says of Matt.

To hear Lopez tell it, programs like these certainly work. Now, the challenge is to spread them to Hispanics throughout the country.

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