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## **THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.**

WSJ.com

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U.S. NEWS | March 5, 2013, 7:46 p.m. ET

# Hispanics Get Help Giving Their Kids a Boost

*Program Teaches Hispanics Learning Techniques to Narrow Achievement Gap*

By MIRIAM JORDAN

BELL, Calif.—The chart projected on a screen painted a grim reality for the Hispanic parents in the classroom: Latino children nationally lag behind white and African-American children in reading and math; only 42 out of 100 Hispanic students complete high school; Hispanic children have the highest obesity rate.

"Look at these statistics and think about what role you can play in changing them," instructor Angie Cantu, speaking in Spanish, told the mainly immigrant mothers at Woodlawn Elementary School in this working-class Los Angeles suburb.



David McNew for The Wall Street Journal

Latino parents attend a series of free classes to learn ways to assist with their children's education at Woodlawn Elementary School in Bell, Calif.

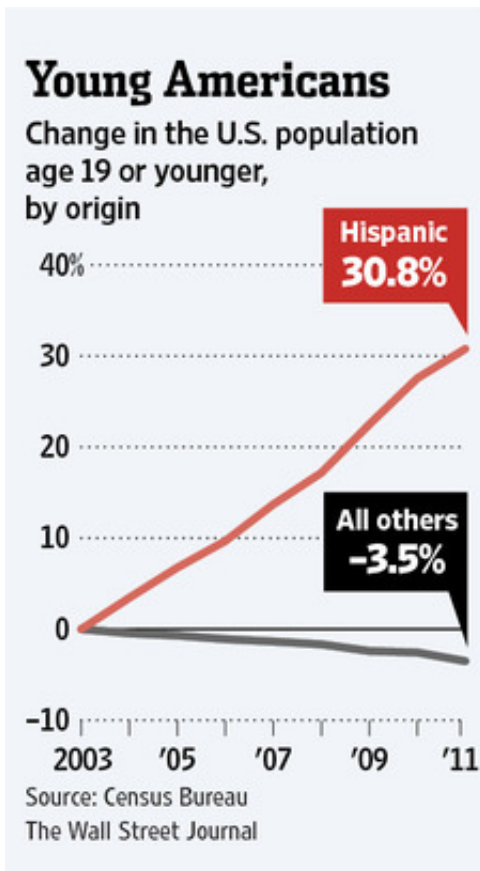
The women had gathered for a session of *Abriendo Puertas* (Opening Doors), a nationwide course that helps Latino parents improve the educational outcome of their children. Lesson 1: "I am my child's first teacher; our home, my child's first school."

The number of Hispanic children grew more than any other group by far over the past decade. Hispanics account for more than half of all students in the public schools of California, Texas and New Mexico—and they face big educational challenges.

"It is exceedingly important to invest in this population because of its enormous size," said Ruben Rumbaut, an immigration scholar at the University of California, Irvine.

Of the 47 million new workers set to enter the labor force between now and 2050, 80% will be Hispanic, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Their share of the overall workforce will double to 30% by 2050 from 15% in 2010.

The Hispanic demographic surge coupled with research on the benefits of investing in poor families during their children's early years has



prompted some corporations and policy makers to back programs like Abriendo Puertas. Another program, Avance, from a Texas-based nonprofit group, offers parenting classes similarly designed to encourage involvement in children's schooling.

The majority of Hispanic children are born healthy and in two-parent homes. But by the time they are toddlers, they begin to fall behind other groups in cognitive proficiencies while exhibiting robust social skills, researchers say.

"Their social agility wins over the hearts of their first teachers but can't fully offset relatively weak preliteracy skills," said Bruce Fuller, a professor at the University of California, Berkeley, who studies the group.

Among factors believed to hold back Hispanic children are poverty, parents' lack of formal education, language barriers and the general belief among Latino families that learning will take

place mostly in school.

Abriendo Puertas aims to narrow the achievement gap, starting with parents. "A lot of parents think their kids' cognitive ability is set at birth," says Sandra Gutierrez, a Los Angeles educator who led the program's development. The free course, which is offered in weekly two-hour sessions over 10 weeks, uses Spanish proverbs, a card game called *loteria* and culturally relevant materials as learning tools. Participants who complete the course receive a certificate.

In a recent session, 25 Woodlawn Elementary parents gathered to learn about early literacy, social-emotional development and nutrition. The group discussed how to find "teaching moments" in day-to-day life, such as using a visit to the supermarket to learn names of produce and colors. Later, the parents were given tips on how to navigate the school system to better advocate for their kids.

In an activity to visualize how interacting with children helps their brains develop, parents standing in a circle tossed a ball of yarn across the room to each other. As it unfurled, the yarn formed a web representing connections made in the brain when a child receives stimulation from activities such as reading, storytelling and playing.

Still, for some parents the course's advice can be difficult to implement.

"One of the real-life responses we get from parents is that it's hard to devote quality time every day to their children when they work two or three jobs to make ends meet," said Ms. Gutierrez.

Since starting on a pilot basis in 2008, Abriendo Puertas has reached about 25,000 families in 31 states. The National Head Start Association, which represents hundreds of early-education programs, began offering it in 2010.

[Boeing](#) Co.'s foundation supports the program in Los Angeles; the George Gund Foundation is active in Ohio and the Pritzker Children's Initiative and the Robert R. McCormick Foundation support it in Chicago.

Across the U.S. there are waiting lists. "The response has been overwhelming," said Adrián Pedroza, executive director of Partnership for Community Action, which runs the program in Albuquerque, N.M., where it is offered in 10 schools with support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.

In Los Angeles, about 7,400 parents have participated in the program out of the elementary-school enrollment of 271,577 students, said administrator Ruth Yoon.

But taking Abriendo Puertas to more families would cost millions of dollars, said Ms. Gutierrez, adding that it is a difficult goal in an era of tight budgets.

Back at Woodlawn Elementary, Elena Bautista said, "I want to be 100% involved with my kids' education. I don't want them to be those ugly statistics."

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*A version of this article appeared March 5, 2013, on page A6 in the U.S. edition of The Wall Street Journal, with the headline: Hispanics Get Help Giving Their Kids a Boost.*

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