

## **Education of Latinos in Los Angeles Earns a “D”**

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Recently, the Tomás Rivera Policy Institute, a contributor to the United Way of Greater Los Angeles' *Latino Scorecard 2003: Grading the American Dream*, analyzed the performance of Latino students in Los Angeles County. Looking at four areas of student progress, the Institute concluded that the education of Latino students earned a “D” grade.

The data speaks for itself. Latinos, who make up 60% of all Los Angeles County K-12 students, have a 40% enrollment loss between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades, compared to 18% for non-Hispanic whites. Only 26% of Latino students in Los Angeles County complete the high school coursework necessary for eligibility to the University of California and the Cal State University systems. Compare this to 44% of non-Hispanic white students and one can see there is a large educational achievement gap facing our students.

This pattern of low performance among Latino children starts even before kindergarten. Just 42% of Latino 3- and 4-year-olds are enrolled in preschool compared to 74% of non-Hispanic white children. Preschool is where some of the most important early learning happens – before children even enter the K-12 system. And early childhood education has been shown to affect success later in life – increasing the likelihood of graduating from high school and enrolling in college.

Test scores for Latino fourth graders are also another indication that our students are well below their non-Hispanic peers. About 36% of L.A. County fourth grade Latino students scored at or above the national average on the 2003 CAT/6 math test, while 67% of non-Hispanic whites scored at that level. Only 29% of Latino students scored above the national average in language, compared to 64% of non-Hispanic whites, and a mere 19% of Latino students were at grade level in reading compared to more than half of non-Hispanic white students.

In an economy in which living-wage jobs increasingly require college degrees, and during a time – over the next decade – in which our Latino youth will become the largest source of the workforce, emerging leadership, and parents in the county, these factors alone should be a wake up call for our community and school leadership. Parents must also look within themselves to find ways to help their children succeed.

There are three basic measures that all parents could take to help their children on the path to academic achievement. First, parents must understand it is critical that children attend school regularly and are not withdrawn unnecessarily, for instance, so that family trips can be taken. Children need routine and they need to see that their parents value school.

Second, parents need to understand that homework is evermore important; it's not unusual for a child to have 1-2 hours each night. Parents can help by providing children with a quiet space to study, seeking district after-school help when necessary, and by always placing value on this task.

Lastly, parents must get involved. Students' success is strengthened when their parents are engaged in their school and their learning. Parents can volunteer at their child's school, become active in the parent-teacher association, and participate in all parent-teacher meetings. Working parents will find it difficult to volunteer during school hours. However, there are other opportunities, such as supporting school bond measures and voting in local elections.

When we read dismal performance statistics, the easy thing to do would be to blame the schools that serve our community. However community leaders and parents should take the lead in working toward the common goal of higher achievement for our children. By actively working together, we will undoubtedly make a difference in the lives of our children and the future of our community.

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