EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

School Experiences of Latina/o Students: A Community-Based Study of Resources, Challenges and Successes

A CALL TO ACTION

In 2008, the Ibero-American Action League initiated “a call to action” to mobilize community members in an effort to address the persistent educational underachievement among Latino/a students in Rochester, New York. With support from the Rochester Community Foundation, Ibero-American Action League assembled a Latino Education Task Force aimed at learning more about why students leave or stay in school and, more importantly, what can be done to address the high dropout trends. This mixed-methods research study, examining dropout factors and educational attainment patterns with a focus on Latino/a youth and families, represents a partnership between the Ibero-American Action League, the Latino Education Task Force, and educational researchers at the University of Rochester’s Margaret E. Warner Graduate School of Education.

Although concerns about the low graduation rates and dismal outcomes for Latino/a students in the Rochester City School District (RCSD) have been documented over the last 30 years in the Access for Hispanics to Opportunities Results in Achievement (AHORA) (1986, 1999) reports, there was a significant need to examine schooling experiences from the perspective of youth and their families. Rather than viewing Latino/a youth and families as problems to be resolved, the Latino Education Task Force views them as resources to draw upon. Therefore, the data collection process was aimed at identifying challenges impacting educational opportunities for Latina/o students, solutions to those challenges, and offering recommendations.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This initial report, “School Experiences of Latina/o Students: A Community-Based Study of Resources, Challenges and Successes” is organized into several sections. State of Latina/o Education provides a brief overview of Latino/a education, including demographics and challenges related to educational attainment at multiple levels (nationwide, state, local). The Study provides a description of the mixed-methods, community-based research design process, including the research questions, theoretical frameworks, recruitment, timeframe and locations, participants, data collection methods, and district data. Latina/o Student Departure Trends in RCSD 2003-2007 (grades 6-12) considers statistics related to the reported reasons why students leave school. Drop-Out Trends describes recent dropout trends for the RCSD’s high school classes of 2006-2009, as reported to the New York State Department of Education. Drop-Out Factors reveals findings about school and learning factors related to leaving school, as discussed in focus group interviews with youth and families. This section emphasizes safety in schools, structural and organizational factors, and racial and ethnic tensions. Transition Factors reveals findings about school transition factors that limit progress through the educational pipeline, as discussed in focus group interviews with youth and families. This section emphasizes geographic factors, adaptation, and acculturation factors. Persistence Factors reveals findings about the role of community and/or school-based programs facilitating strong social relationships and support networks and influencing the development of educational aspirations. Recommendations are included for addressing drop out, transition, and persistence factors.
DATA COLLECTION: HIGHLIGHTS

- 31 bilingual focus group interviews were conducted between November 2009 and April of 2010 at nine community locations.
- 95 current or former students and 41 parents/guardians participated in this study.
- Of student participants, 56% were female; 43% were male.
- Of parent/guardian participants, 83% were female; 17% were male.
- The majority of students and parents/families identified as Puerto Rican and over ten students identified as bi-racial or bi-ethnic.
- A variety of schools and programs were represented, including Monroe, Franklin, East, Edison Tech, GED Program, Advancement via Individual Determination (AVID), Upward Bound College Outreach Program (UR), Hillside Work-Scholarship Connection, and the Puerto Rican Youth Development’s Mentoring Program.
- RCSD school record database provides non-identifiable school records to examine grade level transitions for Latina/o students between 2003-2007.

KEY FINDINGS: DROPOUT TRENDS

- Students in grades 9-12 report leaving school mostly for four reasons: to attend another school, to drop out, to obtain a GED, or upon receiving 20 or more consecutive, unexcused absences.
- 57% (518 students) of 898 Latina/o students who were 9th graders in 2003-2004 were no longer enrolled in the RCSD two years later (in 2005-2006).
- It is not clear what practices and policies are in place within the RCSD to track students who are eliminated from school rosters because of 20 consecutive, unexcused absences or those who are “no shows” to a RCSD school where they are expected to attend.
- Although some Latina/o students enroll in GED programs, the use of these services is quite limited. This is an area of development.
- It is of concern that the “unofficial” dropouts found in the RCSD student record database may be rendered invisible (not accounted for) in the official dropout statistics released by the New York State Department of Education.

KEY FINDINGS: DROPOUT FACTORS

“The thing is, when you walk into a school with a scanner, you feel like you’re walking into a jail. You're not walking into a place where it's education.”

- School safety, violence & hostility, in school suspension procedures, and surveillance features and failures were major sources of concern for students and families.
- Issues related to school culture of violence and hostile relations were referenced over 100 times in focus group interviews.
- Students feel unsafe and criminalized. Fighting is an issue, particularly among females.
- Limitations due to space and availability of bilingual programs are resulting in students with high need to be diverted away to high schools with insufficient English language learning support.
- The use of public transportation to get to and from home/school raised numerous concerns for parents and students. Some suggest there are times when it is easy, and arguably safer, to not take the bus and attend school than to go to school.
The restructuring of small schools within larger school buildings creates confusion and inconsistencies for students and their families.

“\textit{And they'd pay more attention to the White people or the Black people instead of the Hispanic people. Sometimes we feel, you know, ignored, year and we feel like ‘oh, they don’t get along with us because we’re Hispanic.’ Because that happens a lot.”}

- Students experience racial and ethnic tensions that need to be addressed. For example, students felt that some teachers displayed racial-ethnic biases against them because they are Latina/o. Students also described existing conflicts between Black and Latina/o students.
- Parents are concerned that programs and services mostly cater to Black students, thereby neglecting Latino/a student needs.
- Overall, Latina/o students confront significant challenges in meeting the demands of schools and schools seem to be unable to adequately address their educational needs.
- Although factors related to the dropout process are complex, our findings point to factors that complicate students’ schooling experiences and can lead students to leave school or feel like they are being pushed out of school.

\textit{Recommendations} from drop-out findings include: 1) conducting a review of in-school suspension and school surveillance policies; 2) establishing active and passive programming addressing school violence; 3) assessing current bilingual education program policies and practices, and 4) providing ongoing and consistent social justice, inclusion, and race sensitivity workshops to staff and students.

\underline{KEY FINDINGS: TRANSITIONS FACTORS}

“I was born in Puerto Rico, came to live in Rochester when I was four. Around when I was eight I moved to Syracuse and then two years later I came back when my grandma died. And then ever since I’ve been living in Rochester.”

- School records show that as Latina/o students progressed between the 2003-2004 and 2006-2007 academic years, greater number of students did not move onto their expected grade levels.
- Latina/o students and families experienced school transition factors related to relationships with peers and adults; new schools with new instructional styles, grading policies and settings; organizational, policy, and/or structural changes; and changes in school diversity.

“\textit{Lo unico que pedimos es pues que lo del comedor que traten mejor a los nenes, y ellos no tienen la culpa que sean Boricua…The only thing we ask for is [to improve] the lunch staff situation—that they treat the children better [in a more respectful way]—and the children are not to blame because they are Puerto Rican.”}

- Latina/o students and families also experienced geographic transition factors related to mobility and (im)migration patterns (“back and forth”), as well as accommodation and acculturation factors related to changes in language, culture, racial constructions and prejudices, and economic resources.
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Both students and families acknowledged the importance of English language learning. Some parents talked about making transitional progress “poco a poco” (little by little) and having “survival” English, “pa’ defenderse.”

Recommendations from transition factors include: 1) providing greater access to culturally responsive counseling services and support staff; 2) making assessments and student test results available to students if/when they move to another school; 3) providing increased opportunities for parents to participate in transition programs such as the Family Literacy Program that include advocacy and English language learning; 4) enhancing the bilingual staff available at schools and ensuring that interpreter services are available; and 5) increasing access to individuals who serve as community advocates for students and families.

KEY FINDINGS: PERSISTENCE FACTORS

Interviewer: “So what would school be like without PRYD?”

Female Student: “Hell. School would be hell without PRYD.”

Male Student: “I would drop out. To be honest, I would drop out of school if PRYD wasn’t here.”

- Community and/or school based programs, referenced over 150 times in focus group interviews, were significant sources of academic and social support networks for Latino/a student and families.
- While schools were often portrayed as uncaring, unwelcoming, and even unwilling to support Latino/a students’, programs and staff within them such as AVID, Upward Bound, Hillside Work-Scholarship, and the PRYD Mentoring Program were seen as key resources for Latina/o student persistence and educational aspirations.

“Like, a lot of my friends were in gangs and what not, doing horrible things, and for a long time, I felt like that’s what I wanted with my life. So, that was like my life at one point in time until like I met my mentor, and he sorta changed my perspective on life...Yeah, so I met my mentor…So, he sorta like showed me like there’s nothing wrong with being a smart guy.”

- Our data revealed that if such community and school-based program were removed, students would feel profoundly lost, with “nadie” (no one) to talk to, and therefore less likely to be successful in school.
- AVID and Upward Bound programs were important for developing college readiness skills and positive educational aspirations beyond high school.
- Despite the evidence that Latina/o students and families have high aspirations for high school graduation and college, there is a disconnect between educational aspirations and expectations.

Recommendations from persistence factors include 1) creating programmatic opportunities for Latina/o students and ensuring visible space and support for community-based programs; 2) providing school-based programs during accessible time periods for students; 3) establishing collaborative partnerships and programs between community-based programs and initiatives in an effort to provide more accessible resources to students and parents and to preserve human and financial resources; 4) creating
partnerships with local higher education institutions to have consistent representatives in high schools; and 5) researching successful college outreach programs for parents/families so that college knowledge can begin in the home during elementary school when students are first developing educational aspirations.

CONCLUSION

The trends and factors presented in this report represent a problem the entire community must address. The educational issues facing Latina/o students are not just a school problem or a family problem. Changes in the opportunity structure for Latina/o students will require a commitment from the entire community. Thus, it is our objective with this report to not only document the trends and factors influencing Latina/o student drop-out and transition, but to inform and to move you to action.

Our recommendations attempt to create safe and nurturing environments for Latina/o students to learn and become successful scholars. Such environments should work in collaboration with Latina/o communities, organizations and families. Therefore, we stress that all recommendations should include students and families in the planning and implementation processes. This report marks the beginning of many community forums, discussions with students, policy briefs, and additional reports that will occur over coming years. It signals a starting point for the Latino Education Task Force and the researchers at the University of Rochester. We expect to collaborate with the Rochester City School District and the larger community so that we can shift practices and policies to prevent Latina/o students from having to work “contra la corriente.”

A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

We use the term Latina/o to represent this racial, ethnic, and language diverse population that include Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Dominicans, as well as others from the Caribbean, Central America and South America. Hispanic is another term that is also used to describe our population.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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