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The State of Public Education for Latino Students:

A Qualitative Research Project



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Printed in the United States of America.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report was authored by Patricia Foxen, PhD, UnidosUS's Deputy Director of Research. Thanks to Eric Rodriguez, UnidosUS Vice President of Policy and Advocacy, for providing comments. The author would like to acknowledge Lake Research Partners and Dr. Sonia Acosta, (Centro Multicultural La Familia) for their help in organizing or facilitating the focus groups. Thanks also to Kari Nye, UnidosUS Consultant, and Stephanie Presch, Content Specialist, for editing the publication, and to Kelly Isaac, UnidosUS Design and Brand Manager, and Maxine Morris, UnidosUS Consultant, for the report design.

UnidosUS is grateful to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, whose generous support made this work possible. The views and conclusions of this report are those of the author and UnidosUS alone and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of our funders.

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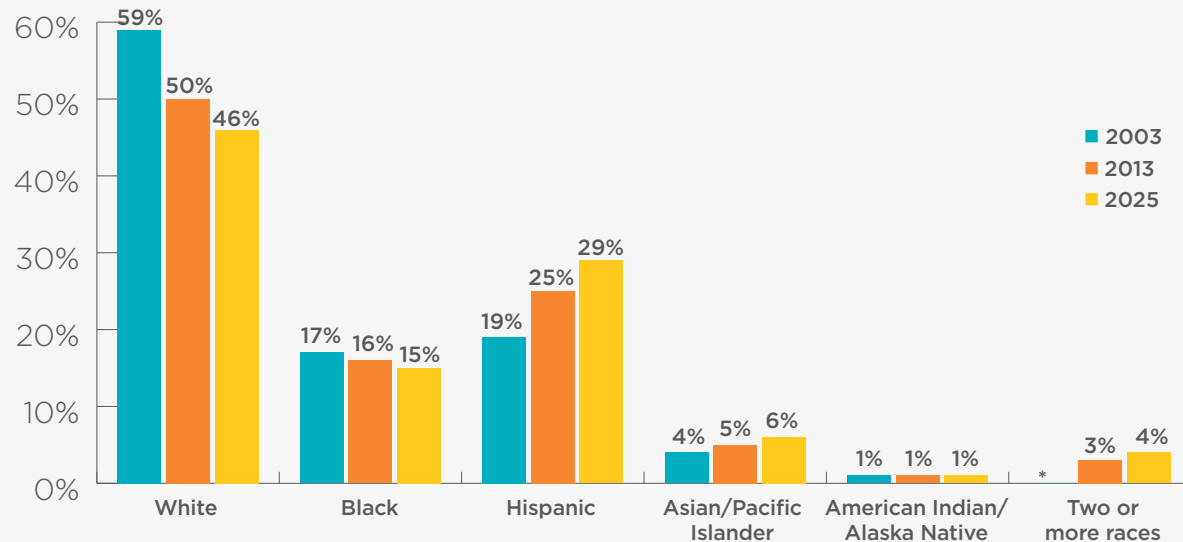


I. INTRODUCTION

Fairness and equity in education have long been core American values underlying the promise of equal opportunity in the United States. In today's environment—shaped by growing social inequalities and fraught racial dynamics—the level playing field promised by public school system has become more vital than ever for our nation's increasingly diverse youth. Despite some educational gains over the past decades for many K-12 students, however, significant barriers in the public school system continue to stifle the ideal of universal quality education, as schools struggle with stubborn disparities that are largely rooted in social and economic obstacles. Today's educational opportunity gap runs the risk of eroding American students' ability to perform in college or careers, perpetuating cycles of poverty and leaving many—especially poor students of color—greatly disadvantaged within our society.

One group that stands to benefit substantially from a quality education experience is the nation's 18.2 million Latino children, 95% of whom are U.S. citizens.¹ The growth in the Latino school-age population has soared over the past three decades; Hispanic youth currently account for nearly one-quarter of all K-12 public school students (compared to only 8% in 1980)² and will comprise one-third of all students within the next decade (*Figure 1*). By comparison, only 10% of private school students, and 30% of charter school students, are Hispanic. In states such as California, New Mexico, Arizona, and Texas, more than half of public school students are Hispanic, and others such as Nevada are rapidly catching up. The Latino student population, diverse within itself, is growing not only in large urban centers or traditionally Hispanic states, but also in rural and suburban areas across the Southeast, the Rust Belt, and other areas of the United States. The academic success of Latino students is therefore critical not only for their own well-being, but for that of our nation more broadly.

Figure 1: Percentage of Public School Students Enrolled in Pre-K through 12th Grade, by Race/Ethnicity

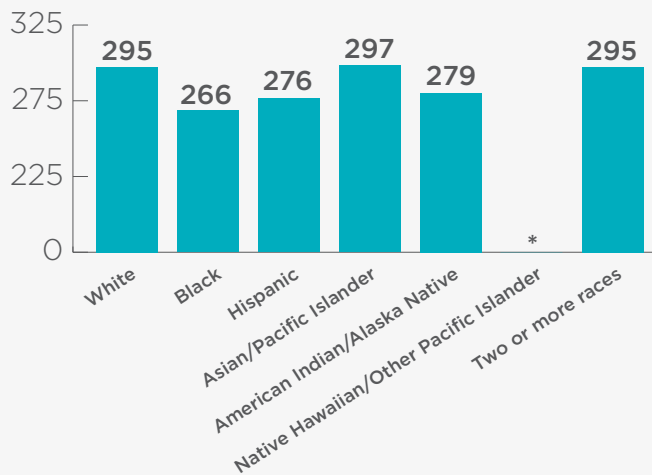


* Not applicable.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), "State Nonfiscal Survey of Public Elementary and Secondary Education," 2003-04 and 2013-14; and National Elementary and Secondary Enrollment Projection Model, 1972 through 2025. See Digest of Education Statistics 2015, table 203.50.

Unfortunately, despite the fact that Hispanics tend to greatly value education as a key pathway to socioeconomic mobility,³ many Latino students are not adequately served by the public school system. This is reflected in the serious disparities in academic performance and outcomes that continue to exist between Hispanic students and their White peers. These disparities start early on in childhood, continue through high school, and have major implications for postsecondary achievement and future economic well-being.⁴ Research shows, for example, that math achievement gaps—that is, the disparity in academic performance that is reflected in grades, test scores, course selection, dropout rates, and other measures of success—between Latino children and their White counterparts are already forming before kindergarten.⁵ This is due in large part to barriers faced by many Latinos such as poverty and a lack of access to center-based child care, both of which affect learning from a very young age.⁶ By eighth grade, proficiency rates in both reading and math among Latino students are still roughly half that of White students.⁷ By 12th grade, the average reading score for Hispanic students is 20 points below that of White students, a gap that has barely changed since 1992.⁸

Figure 2a: Reading Achievement Gaps for 12th Grade, Nationally

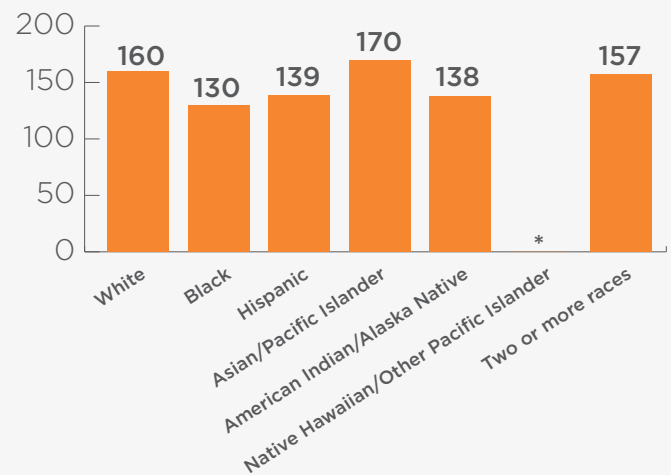


* Reporting standards not met.

Note: Black includes African American, and Hispanic includes Latino. Race categories exclude Hispanic origin. The NAEP Reading scale ranges from 0 to 500. Some apparent differences between estimates may not be statistically significant.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2015 Reading and Mathematics Assessments.

Figure 2b: Math Achievement Gaps for 12th Grade, Nationally



Although recent data show that the overall Hispanic-White achievement gap has been slowly but steadily narrowing since 2003, this decrease varies widely by state, with several states having worsened.⁹ Income-based achievement gaps, moreover, have steadily increased, contributing to a widening rift between the highest and lowest performers.¹⁰ Moreover, the distance between English learners and their English-dominant peers has continued to grow.¹¹

As is widely recognized, there have also been some important gains for Latino and other students in recent decades, evidenced by the high school dropout rate for Hispanics having plummeted from 34% to 10% between 1996 and 2016.¹² The increase in high school graduates has also led to heightened college enrollment, with 47% of Latinos between 18 and 24 enrolled in a two- or four-year college in 2016, up from 32% in 1999.¹³ Even with this progress, however, K-12 educational disparities spill into the postsecondary years, as reflected in the overrepresentation of Hispanic college students in remedial classes, and contributing in some part to low college completion rates. Only half of all Latino college students, for example, currently complete their bachelor's degree within six years.¹⁴ These disparities are also reflected in poor Latino representation in top quality schools. For instance, in California, more than 50% of K-12 students are Latino, but only 14% of the California public university system class each year is Latino, reflecting Latino students' lack of access to high school course work needed to be eligible for enrollment in these universities.¹⁵

The causes of these educational disparities for young Latinos, which range from societal factors such as poverty and discrimination to significant challenges within public school administration, are complex and will be broached throughout this report. It should be noted that the quality of public schools throughout the country is highly dependent on local conditions, and Latino student experiences vary depending upon state and local geographies, school districts, and tax bases. State and local policies and responses to the education needs of Latino students play a pivotal role in shaping their educational experiences and opportunities. Indeed, while some localities have all but abandoned Latino and other minority students to low-performing, segregated schools, others have implemented highly successful programs that have been proven to work for Latino students. For example, access to early childhood services, rigorous dual-language programs, and equitable investment in support systems such as food security and mental health services have been shown to not only to reduce achievement gaps, but also to improve the quality of life for Latino students.

Unfortunately, what progress has been made over the years through federal and state policies to improve educational outcomes for all students is today under attack. Threats to the public school system include fewer resources for struggling schools and teachers, a dismantling of existing civil rights protections, and a contentious public discourse that promotes negative perceptions and stereotyping of minorities and immigrants. Among Latino students, English learners, undocumented students, and DACA students—those who were brought to the United States as young children, and whose legal standing is uncertain—in particular feel marginalized in this climate, though the anxiety and toxicity produced by such negative rhetoric can also have an impact on the educational experiences of all students.¹⁶

In light of this current context, one of the most important ways to advance educational equity for Hispanics is to elevate the voices and lived experiences of Latino students and parents. Indeed, a major gap in today's landscape is the lack of an authentic narrative around Latino students. Persistent negative stories about Latino students—that they are underachievers, are prone to risky behaviors, or have difficulty surmounting language barriers, for example—are rooted in a faulty assessment of what drives the achievement gap and contribute to perpetuating both stereotypes and ineffective interventions that fail to narrow educational disparities. Building a narrative that is rooted in Latino voices—one that integrates the unique strengths and desire to succeed that motivates young Latinos as well as the real challenges they confront—can help us better work with each other to engage communities, educate policymakers and school leaders, and thereby drive advocacy and substantive policy change for Latino students.



To take stock of the present-day experiences of Latinos in the public school system, UnidosUS undertook 16 focus groups in 2017 with a total of 78 12th-grade Latino students, and 77 parents of such students (roughly 10 participants per focus group), in different parts of the country. Four focus groups were conducted in each of four cities: Orlando, FL; Las Vegas, NV; Nashville, TN; and Pontiac, MI. The project aimed to document the attitudes, perceptions, values, and experiences of diverse groups of Latino students and parents throughout the K-12 public school system. We analyzed key themes that reflect the unique challenges and successes of Latino public school students, and their parents. The overarching goal of this project is to tell a genuine story of Latino students across the U.S. public school system in order to counter negative narratives about these students, their families, and communities, and to point to systemic solutions that must be considered by school administrators and teachers, school districts and states, federal policymakers, as well as community advocates and the Latino community.

II. CHALLENGES

Latino students have gained ground over the past decades on key educational indicators such as high school graduation, college enrollment, and, to some degree, test scores in key subject areas.¹⁷ Similarly, researchers have also found positive patterns of intergenerational mobility in educational and occupational outcomes among young Latinos.¹⁸ However, the broader statistics obscure some important stories, and while many Hispanic students are making sizeable advancements in educational attainment over their parents, most simply do not catch up to their White peers.¹⁹ Moreover, the experience of Latino students is stratified within the Hispanic community itself, with some subgroups and generations facing significantly more struggles and disparities than others. To better understand these diverse experiences and how they play out in educational settings, it is useful to recognize the unique characteristics of our nation's Latino students.

Ethnic and Class Diversity

The Latino K-12 student population has not only grown very rapidly over the past two decades, it has also become increasingly diverse. Like the broader Latino population, the majority of Hispanic children (70%) are of Mexican descent, followed by Puerto Ricans, Salvadorans, Dominicans, Cubans, other Central Americans, and South Americans.²⁰ Subgroup experiences can vary widely. Central American families, for example, have often left situations of deep poverty and violence in their home communities, and they frequently exhibit high levels of trauma and low levels of parental education. Cubans and South Americans, on the other hand, tend to come from a more advantaged class position.²¹ Racial and linguistic differences also shape the Latino student population, which includes Afro-Latinos—many but by no means all from Caribbean region such as Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic—and different indigenous groups such as Maya, Mixteco, Quechua, and others. These differences in class and race are important to consider in the educational realm since factors such as parental literacy or racial discrimination may have a profound effect on a students' educational experiences.

Generations

Generational difference is an important facet of diversity within the Latino youth population. In 2014, 6% of Latino children were first-generation U.S. residents (immigrants themselves), 48% were second-generation (children of immigrants), and 46% were third-generation or higher (children of U.S.-born Latinos). While the majority of Hispanic children are thus currently living in immigrant families, the share of Hispanic youth who are third-generation is expanding as Latino communities mature through time. These generational

differences are important for educators to understand as the needs and experiences of first-, second-, and third-generation children may be quite different. For example, first- and second-generation students tend to struggle more with poverty and language barriers, but third-generation Hispanic youth tend to experience more mental health issues, as well as reduced levels of civic engagement and trust in institutions.²²

Immigrant and Legal Status

Another challenge for many Latino children is that while the majority are U.S. citizens, more than half (52%) live in immigrant families. While these children tend to possess strong resilience attributes such as biculturalism, adaptability, and optimism, they also cope with the challenges of living in immigrant households, including parents who face language and cultural barriers of their own. Parents often lack the kind of social capital—such as background knowledge, language, organizational skills, social networks, and overall ability to provide extra help and resources—that benefit non-Latino children. While supporting their children’s educational goals, for example, they often do not know how to navigate the U.S. school system or advocate for their children.

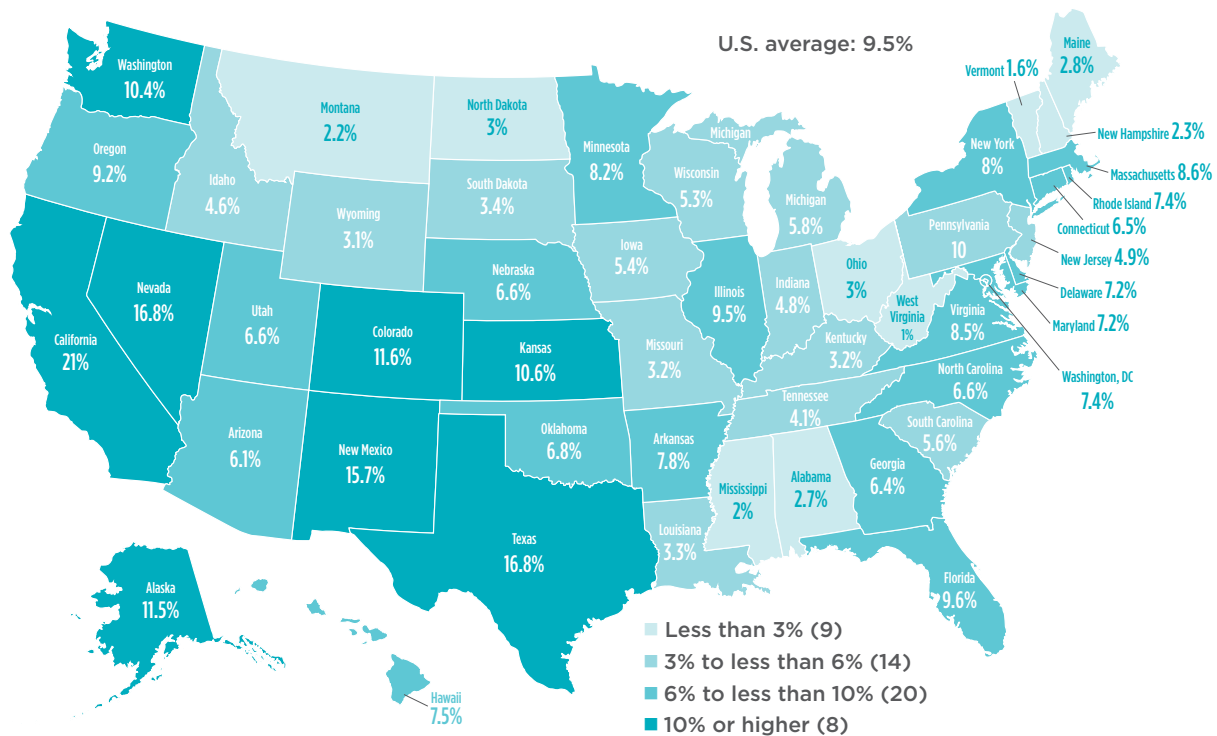


In addition, about 3.9 million K-12 students in U.S. public and private schools (7.3% of all students) have at least one parent who is undocumented.²³ Research has demonstrated that the children of undocumented immigrants have lower educational attainment and face greater barriers to achieving higher education, even when controlling for social capital and other variables.²⁴ DACA students, for their part, who have been able to apply for temporary legal status as of 2012, have lived with the constant anxiety of an uncertain future in this country. Those fears became reality in 2017 when the Trump administration announced that it would terminate the DACA program, thus throwing these students back into a situation of limbo and anxiety. Additionally, more than 450,000 youth are children of immigrants whose Temporary Protective Status (TPS) is due to expire in 2020.

Language

An additional challenge associated with growing up in immigrant families—for both immigrant and U.S.-born children—can be English language acquisition. Currently, about 10% of all public school students are Hispanic English learners (ELs), and more than 75% of all EL students are Hispanic.²⁵ While dual-language learning in and of itself should be an asset for students, many Latino-serving schools lack the resources to adequately prepare and test children for English proficiency, and many ELs have remained stuck in segregated programs and in low-performing schools where they often have poorly trained teachers. In this sense, Latino children are not only held back from acquiring English proficiency but are also deprived of learning their own language. In many states, the share of ELs meeting standards in reading and math falls far below that of non-ELs. In Tennessee and Florida, for example, only 1.6% and 14.1% of ELs, respectively, have passing scores for English.²⁶ On a more positive note, recent research has found that despite persistent achievement gaps between ELs and native English-speaking students, these gaps have been closing in the past 15 years, indicating that schools are doing a better job of serving ELs.²⁷

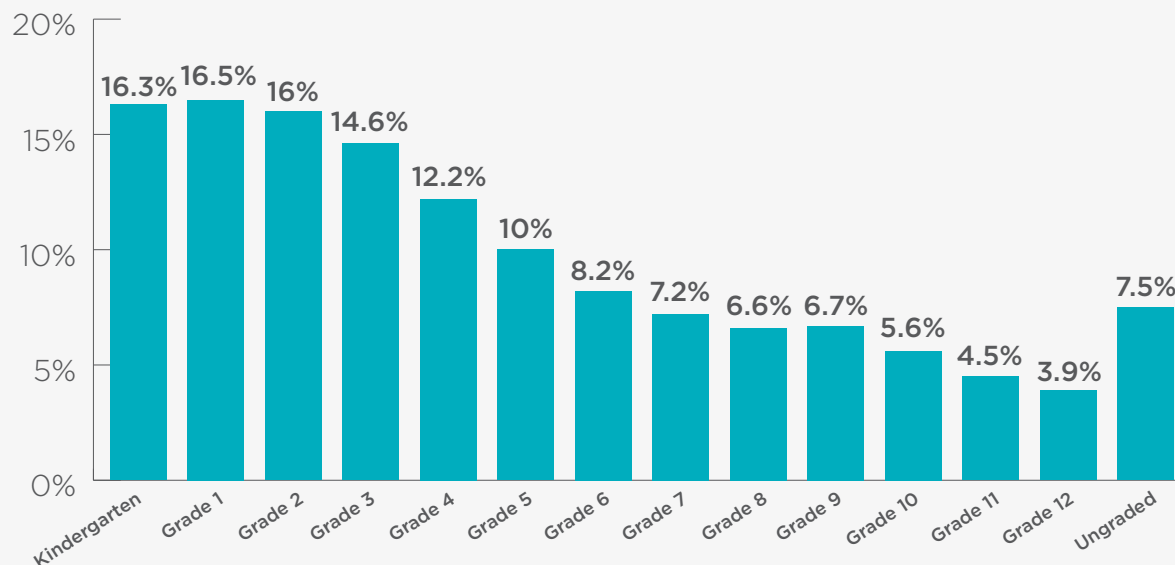
Percentage of Public School Students Who Were English Language Learners, by State: Fall 2015



Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), "Local Education Agency Universe Survey," 2015-16. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cgf.asp

Under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) implemented in 2015 (see Box 2), states must evaluate the English language proficiency of ELs annually, provide reasonable accommodations for them on state assessments, and develop new accountability systems that include long-term goals and measures of progress for ELs.²⁸ Program models for ELs vary, however, from one school to another, and may be based on dual-language, transitional bilingual education, or English-only models depending on the school's approach.²⁹ Moreover, assessment protocols for testing and tracking ELs not only vary but have historically been vague. While some schools have followed established guidelines for the proper testing of students who are not English proficient, many have not. Ironically, bilingual and linguistically integrated dual-immersion programs, which have been shown to work best for ELs, are increasingly being sought out by more privileged non-Hispanic families while pushing ELs out of such beneficial programs.³⁰

Figure 3: Percentage of Public K-12 Students who were English Language Learners, by Grade Level: Fall 2015



Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, ED Facts file 141, Data Group 678, extracted July 21, 2017; and Common Core of Data (CCD), "State Nonfiscal Survey of Public Elementary and Secondary Education," 2015-16. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cgf.asp

Poor Neighborhoods

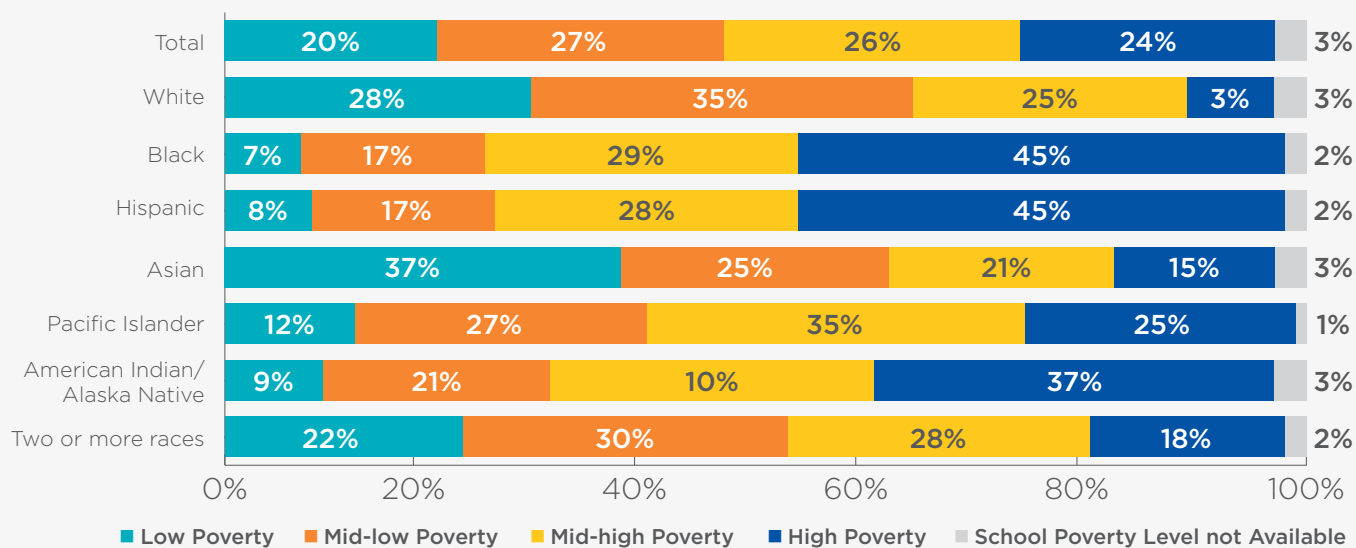
Close to a third of Latino children live in poverty, and 62% live in low-income families. Living in poverty affects a range of circumstances such as housing, nutrition, and neighborhood environment, all of which may impact student performance. Additionally, students in poor families often miss out on opportunities such as educationally enriching summer activities, which exacerbates the achievement gap between rich and poor children.³¹ Moreover, close to half (48%) of Latino children live in high-poverty neighborhoods (compared to only 16.5% of White children).³² Property taxes in such neighborhoods—which are generally used to generate revenues for local public schools—are insufficient to fund quality schools and programs. While school districts around the country spend an average of \$11,066 per student each year, this amount varies considerably from district to district, contributing to major inequities between poorer and wealthier neighborhoods.³³ Children who live in poor neighborhoods confront a host of additional disadvantages such as unaffordable or poor-quality housing and residential segregation, income inequality, lack of access to services and social capital, food deserts, violence, and more. Growing up in low-income neighborhoods or ZIP codes has been found to be one of the most accurate predictors of educational outcome, employment, income, and intergenerational mobility.³⁴

School Segregation and Underperforming Schools

The “ZIP code effect” negatively impacts access to quality education for children who are already at a disadvantage. School segregation, which means low-income children of color find themselves in low-performing schools, is another major—and growing—problem for Latino students. In 2014, more than half (60%) of Latino students nationwide attended schools with at least 75% minority enrollment, compared to 57% and 30% of Black and White students attending such schools, respectively.³⁵ School segregation has been found to be a top predictor of the racial achievement gap, and research has clearly shown that students of all races who attend more diverse schools achieve higher scores in core subjects such as math, reading, and science.

Under-resourced schools in turn struggle to adequately prepare students, lacking the programs, curricula, and staff that can meet the educational and social needs of Hispanic children. High-poverty schools struggle to attract and retain qualified and experienced teachers, often due to low salaries, which results in high teacher turnover.³⁶ In addition, many schools around the country lack a diverse teaching staff and therefore have a deficit of culturally competent role models or mentors who can address the needs of Latino students and help their parents navigate the school system. Indeed, 25% of the K-12 population is Hispanic, but only 8% of teachers are Latino.³⁷ Under-resourced schools are also less likely to orient Latino students toward college prep and AP classes, scholarships, and other programs that can push them to succeed.³⁸ At the same time, the system of quasi-private schools (public schools in wealthy neighborhoods) reinforce inequality by ensuring that those schools’ students maximize their wealth and social capital, while low-income students struggle to catch up.

Figure 4: Percentage Distribution of Public School Students, by Student Race/Ethnicity and School Poverty Level: School Year 2015–16

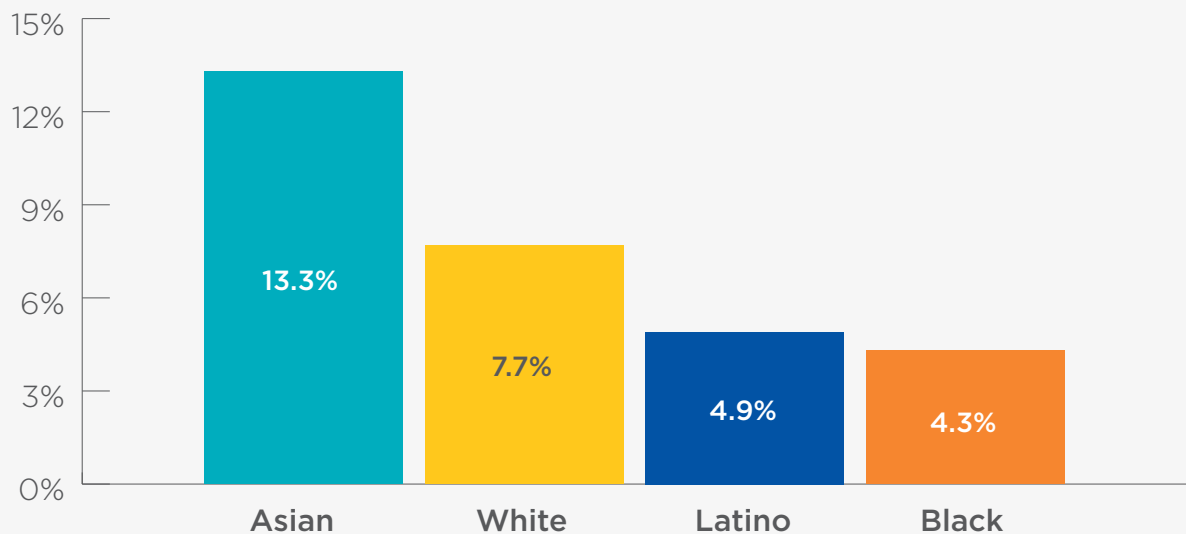


Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2018). The Condition of Education 2018 (NCES 2018-144), Concentration of Public School Students Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch. <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=898>

Racism and Discrimination

Finally, perhaps one of the most ubiquitous challenges for Latino students is the spectrum of discrimination they experience both within and outside the classroom. From the unconscious bias that leads some teachers and administrators to simply expect less from Latino and Black students,³⁹ to more overt forms of racism and ethnic bullying that are clearly on the rise,⁴⁰ this type of negative stereotyping or outright psychological aggression can become internalized by youth, who sometimes respond by believing they will not be able to achieve or who act out through self-defeating behaviors. For those who are surrounded by violent neighborhoods or gangs, such behaviors may lead to life-altering consequences such as contact with the criminal justice system. Discrimination is thus one additional systemic hurdle that can be very difficult to overcome, particularly for students attending schools that lack equitable access to rigorous or supportive programs, technologies, teachers, and coursework.

Figure 5: Percentage of Public School Students Enrolled in Gifted and Talented Programs by Race/Ethnicity 2013-14



Source: U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, Civil Rights Data Collection: 2004, 2006, 2011-12, and 2013-14.

U.S. Public Schools

While some of the challenges faced by Latino students stem from demographic circumstances including economic, language, and immigration-related barriers, perhaps their biggest obstacle is the fact that the public school system's responses to their needs has, in many cases, not been adequate. Schools clearly cannot be responsible for solving social challenges such as poverty, changing demographics, and immigration, but they can offset some of the effects of social inequality, thereby improving the chances that their students have an equal chance at success. Indeed, federal programs such as Title I (*Box 1*) and ESSA (*Box 2*) have been specifically designed to neutralize these disparities, thus forming a crucial part of both anti-poverty and civil rights legislation implemented through the public education system. Through these policies, schools can ideally establish systems and programs that make up for Latino and other minority students' lack of access to the various opportunities afforded their higher socioeconomic status peers—such as, for example, having parents who pay for tutors and college-prep classes, or access to opportunity-enhancing social networks and cultural capital.

Education advocates, policymakers, and researchers have, broadly speaking, depicted the ideal public school experience as one that balances a rigorous learning environment with strong social and emotional supports designed to meet the needs of the school's student populations. Some have pointed to specific school-level solutions that have been proven to work for Hispanic students, including:

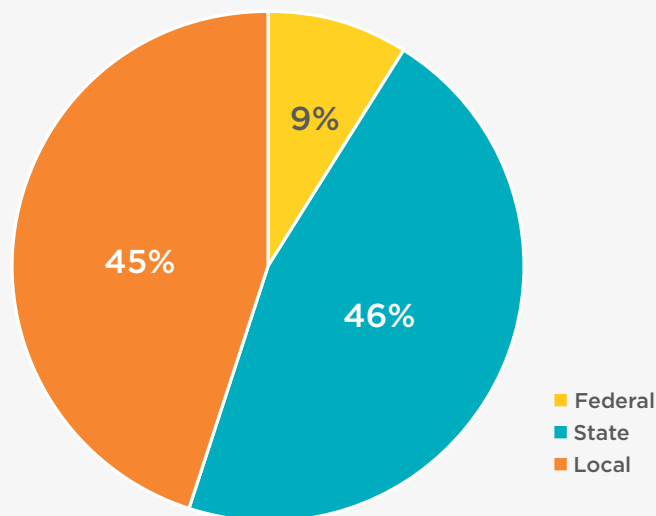
- High standards and expectations
- Rigorous, culturally competent teaching
- Supportive teachers and administrators
- Resource-rich environments that ensure access to quality materials and learning opportunities
- Supports and resources that assist students in being college-ready, including college-credit-bearing course work
- Access to advanced placement and gifted programs
- Bilingual curricula and programs
- Interventions that give students the academic and socioemotional supports they need
- Extensive extracurricular activities
- Learning experiences such as travel/study abroad
- Programs that meet basic needs of poor students (nutrition, transportation, etc.)
- Programs that help students and their parents feel safe, healthy, included, and engaged
- Trauma-informed staff
- Environments that leverage the strengths of Latino students⁴¹
- Culture of equity, accountability, and community engagement⁴²

BOX 1: Public Schools in the United States

Public education in the United States is ideally designed to provide equal opportunity through education to all children across the nation. The system has historically been largely driven and financed at the state and local level. Federal contribution to elementary and secondary education is currently only around 8%, including funds from the Department of Education, Health and Human Services, and the Department of Agriculture's School Lunch Program.⁴³ A major role of the federal government in public schools has been to advance equality and civil rights through federal legislation, since entire population groups have historically been excluded from or made invisible within the education system. A landmark piece of legislation, for example, is Title IV of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which prohibits discrimination in public schools on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin.

Today, there are 100,000 U.S. public schools, across 13,600 school districts. Close to half of all schools—47,000—are Title I eligible schools. Title I is a federal program that provides funding to schools that serve primarily low-income students (at least 40% of the school population). The program includes both targeted assistance for special groups and disadvantaged students, and school-wide support. Funding per student averages only about \$500 to \$600 per year; these funds are spent on programs such as teacher professional development, after-school programs, and class size reduction.⁴⁴ Some critics argue that Title I funding is insufficient to closing achievement gaps and should be more clearly linked to better guidance and best practices for effective school programming.⁴⁵ Moreover, a recent report has shown that Title I funds are not reaching students who most need them: because of complexities of the Title I funding process, states with higher percentages of low-income students—southern states in particular—are in fact receiving less per-pupil Title I funding. Spending per child in poverty also varies greatly within states and even across districts with similar poverty rates.⁴⁶ Thus, while Title I funding is absolutely critical to leveling educational disparities between wealthy and poor schools, there is much room for improvement in funding levels, funding distribution, and programming expectations.

Figure 6: Percentage of Total Revenue for Public Education in the US, 2014



Source: U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, Public Education Funding Inequity, Washington, DC, 2018.
<https://www.usccr.gov/pubs/2018/2018-01-10-Education-Inequity.pdf>

Unfortunately, despite existing knowledge and policies, policymakers and administrators at federal, state, and local levels have not always invested in and prioritized programs that can help Latino students, and many Latino students continue to be deprived of a quality education. This has led to a highly uneven state of education for Latino students across the country, whose opportunities in secondary education and beyond have remained largely reliant on local geographies, school boards, and administrators.

Beyond taking stock of the broader trends and statistics in educational outcomes, or existing knowledge about both challenges and solutions that can help improve educational opportunities for Latino students, it is critical to know what Latino students and parents themselves have to say about their experiences with the K-12 public school system. This information will not only give us a more textured understanding of their lived experience and enable Latino students and parents to see their experiences reflected in a larger pool of voices, it can also help Latino advocates, communities, and other stakeholders advocate on their own behalf by elevating the common threads of a broader narrative.

BOX 2: The Every Student Succeeds Act

Another key federal intervention intended to promote equity in the public education system has been the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, originally authorized in 1965, and designed to promote equal access to education and establish high standards and accountability. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act was reauthorized in subsequent years under different names, such as No Child Left Behind (2001) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), signed into law by President Obama in 2015. ESSA advances equity by requiring that all students in the United States be taught to high academic standards that will make them college-ready, and by upholding critical protections for disadvantaged and high-needs students. ESSA also supports local innovations—including evidence-based and place-based interventions—and, importantly, expects accountability and action to effect positive change in our lowest-performing schools. ESSA aims to improve Latino achievement through the following goals:

- All students must be held to challenging academic standards at a minimum in reading and math.
- Latino student and EL academic progress must be measured and reported annually.
- Action must be taken when students are not succeeding academically.
- New funds are authorized for after-school programs.

ESSA also aims to raise the academic achievement of nearly five million ELs by adopting provisions to better track and improve their educational performance by:

- Authorizing increased funding for EL programs.
- Requiring states to standardize the process for identifying and placing students in EL programs, and for exiting students from these programs.
- Requiring states to set goals for increasing the percentage of students making progress in achieving English language proficiency.
- Keeping track of ELs with disabilities to ensure their progress.
- Calling for reporting on long-term ELs.
- Taking into account English language proficiency for school ratings systems.



III. METHODS AND RESEARCH SITES

To explore the attitudes, perceptions, experiences, and stories of a diverse range of Latino public school 12th grade students and parents of such students, a total of 16 focus groups (with 78 students and 77 parents in total, or roughly 10 participants per focus group) were conducted in Orlando, Las Vegas, Nashville, and Pontiac. Of the four focus groups per city, two were conducted with students and two with parents; both student and parent groups were separated by English- or Spanish-language preference, which was meant to capture both language and degree of acculturation/generational differences. We aimed to explore both similarities and divergences between the perspectives of different groups.

In Florida and Nevada, recruitment of participants was conducted through telephone screening; in Michigan and Tennessee, recruitment of focus group participants was facilitated through local community-based organizations that have strong ties to the Latino community. Focus group facilitation was executed by trained bilingual moderators with experience conducting such discussion with Latino youth groups.

The focus groups broadly reflected the ethnic and class composition of each state's Latino population. For example, groups in Orlando included more

Puerto Rican and Cuban participants than other groups. Las Vegas groups included a diverse mix of Mexican, Central, and South Americans. Pontiac groups were predominantly Mexican, while Nashville included a mix of Mexican, Colombian, and Central American participants. Most focus groups included a mix of U.S.-born and immigrant participants, though student groups tended to include a higher proportion of U.S.-born participants.

The discussions lasted between one and two hours, and gift cards were distributed at the end of the session to thank participants for their time. Informed consent for the study was collected from both youth and parents to ensure confidentiality. Focus group discussions were translated, if necessary, and transcribed; all quotations in this report were taken directly from these transcriptions, and the names of individuals have been removed to protect their anonymity. The last focus groups, which took place in Nashville, were conducted in the days immediately following the Trump administration's decision to repeal DACA. Moreover, there were more DACA students (and parents of such students) in the Nashville groups than in others, perhaps due to the more recent nature of migrations to this state. For this reason, discussion regarding DACA was expanded for these groups as students and parents—many who reported feeling devastated by the reversal—wanted to discuss what it might mean for their lives.

The four cities and states selected for this research were chosen to represent different settings for Latino integration in the country. Orlando and Las Vegas are sites with larger and longstanding Latino populations, where school districts have had experience serving a significant portion of Latino students over the years. Nashville represents a “new gateway” site, where the Latino population is relatively younger and poorer, but where the growth rate for Latino children students has been very high over the past decade. Pontiac, which is not far from Detroit, represents a Latino community in the Midwest that, like many Hispanic communities in this geographic region is rarely highlighted in research or literature, but where Latino students in the public school system experience particular challenges such as serious racial and geographic segregation.

IV. RESULTS

Aspirations and Barriers

The Latino students and parents who participated in this research leaned strongly toward viewing education as essential to their social and economic mobility. For many, this belief is rooted in a strong immigrant narrative that positions education and hard work as the ticket to social and economic advancement and stability.

- **The majority of student participants had high aspirations, were optimistic, and desired to be engaged in their education. They generally aimed for careers in medicine, nursing, law, sciences, education, the arts, entrepreneurship, and military service.**

"I would like to be a human rights lawyer." —**Spanish-speaking student, Orlando**

"I am not sure, but I am thinking about either majoring in business or majoring in a law field and then get[ing] a job in social justice."

—**English-speaking student, Pontiac**

"My goals are to graduate high school hopefully with a scholarship in volleyball and start working towards getting my license. I want to do nursing. I want to study nursing to become neonatal nurse."

—**English-speaking student, Las Vegas**

"Attend a military academy. And then become a United States Air Force fighter pilot." —**English-speaking student, Las Vegas**



- Many of the youth described these goals in the context of a strong family ethos, whereby youth are encouraged to make a better life than their immigrant parents and give back to their community. Parents backed their children's goals to achieve at least a college education, stating that they are supportive in the ways they can be, but also want their children to be happy and well-rounded.

"I would like for them to have a different life than mine. I want my daughter to have the opportunity to be able to study and learn and involve herself in a community of different people and life. I would like for her to graduate and have her career in order for her to have a better level of life...because if not, she is always going to be just like me or how the majority of the Hispanics are."

—Spanish-speaking parent, Pontiac

"The closer you are to an immigrant, as in your parents were one, then you might have a different mentality. Not saying everyone has, but you might have a different mentality of how important your education is and you see your parents struggling, therefore you want to be higher than your parents and you want to just be successful rather than those who have come from later generations who haven't fully experienced that or haven't seen that firsthand how a lack of education will be."

—English-speaking student, Las Vegas

"My parents are like very supportive. They don't know anything, honestly, about education. And it's funny, but like they really didn't graduate—they only went to elementary because we were really poor back then. We still are right now, but we're better. But like they're always asking me about like, 'Hey, what are you doing with school? Do you want me to talk to your teacher? Do you want me to go to the office?' When it's school-related, my parents, all they want for me to do is like have a career, have a life, have a better life than they did."

—English-speaking student, Nashville



- **Commitment to family is a Latino value that parents impart to their children. Just as many parents expressed support for their children's education as did students express their obligation to the family's financial well-being. Their strong, mutual sense of responsibility and solid work ethic are clear.**

"Well, on the weekends I work a lot so like 10:00 to 7:00, so I just wake up, eat something, go to work, come home, maybe do a little bit of homework, I have alone time, and then sleep. Then I start the whole week, and sometimes they give me like three or four hours in the afternoon weekdays, but I'm like always pressuring them to give me more hours because I'm always thinking about my future. I started working last year because that's when I got my DACA. Right now I have a lot of money saved up, but that few thousand is not going to pay much for college." —**Spanish-speaking student, Nashville**

"You know growing up...there was a certain time where we always couldn't pay our light bill or our water bill... and like sometimes we would have to go and shower at [her mother's] job and you know eat from our grandparents or other things like that. Like it was never easy. And now I have a job. My stepdad does flooring and so I work with him. And if my mother ever needs anything, I give her whatever she needs." —**English-speaking student, Orlando**

- **However, some stated that financial commitments toward their family can take focus away from their education or perhaps cause them to reign in larger aspirations and dreams.**



"I mean I have both of my parents, but I feel like because my dad is the only person that works and there are like seven or eight of us inside that house and so his job doesn't pay that great. I am the one that needs to get the job to help pay bills as soon as possible." —**English-speaking student, Las Vegas**

"I hear a lot of stories about just dropping out of high school to help their family out. Once they get that money for their family, they don't want to stop. They have to struggle for a few years." —**English-speaking student, Pontiac**



- While parents are supportive of their children's goals, many are limited in their ability to be engaged with their education, in large part because they are too busy with work and sustaining the family.

"My mother doesn't have time. She is alone with just me and my sister and she doesn't have time to be with me and help me with school. She is always working." —
Spanish-speaking student, Orlando

"My parents work. My father works in Miami. I have two siblings one of them is three years old, and she has to watch him. My parents did not learn enough to help me with school." —**Spanish-speaking student, Orlando**

"The family does not make enough money therefore both parents need to work, and one does not stay home to encourage you and push you to study."
—**Spanish-speaking student, Orlando**

- Parental educational and language barriers, particularly for immigrant parents, impede parents' ability to engage fully with their children's education, leaving them to fend for themselves with homework or planning for college.



"My parents tried their best, because like at this point, me, I'm like—I have my mom, you know, she didn't finish high school. Then my dad got into a little bit of college, but right now I'm at a point basically where I'm teaching them about my school, you know what I mean? Since they didn't know English I totally understood that part, but sometimes I just like kind of wished they kind of knew something more." —**Spanish-speaking student, Nashville**

"I think if your parents are born here they can help you more. My parents do not speak English 100% but they do understand it a little bit, so I remember when they would have meetings at school or something, my parents wouldn't really go because they don't understand and for college, I kind of did everything on my own because my parents don't understand anything."
—**Spanish-speaking student, Las Vegas**



- **Despite the desire to set high educational goals, both students and parents described specific challenges that they believe will limit their success. The main barriers toward future aspirations such as college and professional careers revolved around financial concerns and immigration status. Very few students had parents who could help with college tuition, and many stated that they did not know how they would finance college.**

"I don't think that and I am speaking for everyone but...going to college at private or public is very expensive. It is almost \$35,000 [per year] so it is very difficult to go to college because of the money. I mean, there are scholarships and a lot of opportunities, but there are things, the grants and everything there are a lot of things that you need to find." —**Spanish-speaking student, Orlando**

"Sometimes it's hard to go to college especially like with time and money because my mother just had a child too, she has a three-year old and a year-old and so I am the oldest...she needs help around the house and so it's quite hard. I will be starting this fall and so I am just worried if I am going to have enough time to go or have enough money to pay my tuition."

—**Spanish-speaking student, Las Vegas**

- **Financial goals such as saving for college or other postsecondary education lead some Latino students to work during high school, and to plan on working during college. Several stated that they will take a few years in between high school and college to work for tuition money. For others, the costs of college are simply too daunting.**



"There are not a lot of opportunities such as, for example, my daughter wants to be a nurse, but she already is worried because she has to pay \$1,300 if she wants to do class. She tells me, 'How can I do that if I just graduated?' She is already frustrated, and so in her mind she wants to get any kind of job. I feel that sometimes the kids are pushed to quit because they see it as an impossibility, unreachable." —**Spanish-speaking parent, Las Vegas**





Closer Look: DACA Students

Policy changes that affect immigrants and their families can have a major impact upon the future outlook and goals of Latino students. For example, the Trump administration's decision to repeal DACA created high levels of anxiety for both DACA students and for teachers who have such status.⁴⁷ As Nashville DACA students expressed:

"I'm personally worried just because it's kind of difficult to see a life without DACA just because that's everything. Like you have a social that way, you have a job that way, you have like an ID that way. It's just like your whole life. You can't just go get a regular job anywhere. Now you'll have to work harder or find a way to make money under the table. You're not able to do things anymore, and what are you supposed to do?"—Spanish-speaking student

"We don't have memories of where we came from. So all our future plans, we make them here, and now the government identifies us aliens instead of other human beings. That's just wrong. It's injustice. Most of us are doing something with our lives, we're doing something for our future, and also giving back to the community, to the government, and also helping our families—and for the doors to be closed without us having done anything wrong, it's heartbreaking."—English-speaking student

"I'm worried now about not having a job because I take care of myself. Like my gas for my car, my phone bill, and then all of that's going to go on my parents, so that's why I worry about it. How am I supposed to help now that I won't be able to have a job?" —Spanish-speaking student

- **Despite the trauma of the DACA decision, some students described a supportive environment in their schools that has helped them cope with the anxiety and limbo of their situation and given them hope for the future.**

"Something really positive about my school is that everybody is like super worried about us. Anytime anything happens that's against Hispanics we always have a meeting, everyone's really, really supportive. Like they'll always be there asking us, 'What do you guys want us to do? Do you guys just want to talk?' They'll just let us like sit around in a room and just talk. Because we get really sentimental sometimes, just because of everything—it's just like a lot to take in." —English-speaking student

"I feel hopeful because I know there's a lot of great people out here fighting for the rights we believe we deserve and we know we deserve, and I know that's going to have a fruitful ending, or at least I hope it will." —Spanish-speaking student

Perceptions and Experiences of Public School Education

- Students described a high-quality education as one that fosters a balance between self-motivation and receiving support/opportunity from school; promotes strong communications between teachers, students, parents; and allows students to proactively pursue different interests and to prepare for the future.

“A good education, you feel like you have accomplished something and you met your goal. Everyone has helped you and pushed you so you can try and meet that goal. You have done everything on your own, and they have just guided you along the way.” —Spanish-speaking student, Orlando

“A good education will give you the opportunity to have better goals and succeed better in college. A not-so-good education will cause us to fail and not be able to have any opportunity.” —English-speaking student, Pontiac

- More specifically, students believe that a good education is one that prepares students to pursue their interests after high school, in college, and beyond, and that gives them the opportunity to discover their interests through the availability and access to a high-quality curriculum. Some of the positive aspects of the public school education that contribute to a quality education were described as follows:

► **Creative Curricula, Programs, and Pathways:** Those that push students to their full potential and allow them to get hands-on, practical experience—e.g. business programs, engineering magnet programs, medical/nursing/dental assistant programs, International Baccalaureate—were viewed positively. For students who are expected to be relatively independent adults upon high school graduation, vocational programs are especially attractive.

“My school offers a lot of programs in the health science field. They offer nursing, and then the dental program that I did, it’s open to anybody because I’m Hispanic and I know a couple of other Hispanics that got into the nursing program. It’s not like discriminating or anything, so I like that. At the end you can take a test and graduating high school you automatically become a dental assistant.” —English-speaking student, Nashville

- **Clubs and Extracurricular Activities:** These enabled students to learn skills, get information, and network.

“Well, my school did offer clubs for Latinos and stuff, so I did like that about them, and our principal, she was very encouraging and everything towards the Latino community, so I really appreciate that from her.”

—Spanish-speaking student, Nashville

“They offer some really good like extracurricular activities. The band and color guard at our school is award-winning in three states. Two of my daughters participated in the band and color guard for a couple of years. They traveled to several different states.”

—English-speaking parent, Las Vegas

- **Diversity of Teachers and Student Body:** Students often discussed how diversity within public schools exposes students to different points of view and allows all students to feel a sense of belonging.



“I like the diversity, culture. Culture is what we need. You know there is this fear of cultures. It is amazing to me. Every school should be like that.”

—English-speaking parent, Orlando

“I look back at the schools that I’ve gone to, the middle school, elementary, and all I see is diversity, and I feel very happy that I got that chance. That’s what I want for my college.”

—English-speaking student, Nashville

- Despite these positives, students had mixed views about high school, and many expressed that they saw it as a stressful and challenging experience. Participants mentioned a wide range of challenges that often negatively impact the quality of education received. While some of these experiences are similar to those of high school students more generally, the combination of these varying obstacles is unique to Latinos and to students from immigrant families. Challenges included:



- **Funding and Resources:** Students discussed the economic basis for educational funding disparities in schools. Participants in all groups were highly aware of the fact that schools in poorer communities are underfunded, and that Latino students live in poor neighborhoods and by extension attended poorly funded schools. The results of poor funding for schools include problems such as large class sizes, lack of resources or extracurricular activities, poor food quality, and underpaid teachers, all of which affect student’s experiences and perceptions of school status.

"In Detroit, I think a lot of people like minorities live there and so the education is just adequate. I feel like it is an economic gap between people. I mean some people do go to college, but mostly a lot of people aren't going to college and so therefore they are taking the jobs that are lower or minimum wage and the lowest paying jobs and therefore the families are poorer."

—English-speaking student, Pontiac

"My school? I feel like my school is one of the poorest schools...Most of the students there don't really care about their education and so they don't make good grades. I would say because of the environment that they are in. Their parents didn't go to college and so it's like they do the same thing and so it makes it harder for them to go."

—English-speaking student, Pontiac

"I am privileged enough to go to one of the schools that they do have all the textbooks and we do have computers and we have everything that you really need. But I know that problems exist in other schools and I think it is unfair. My cousin goes to Valley and he says it is terrible there. He said like everything is old and just dirty."

—English-speaking student, Las Vegas

"There are too many students to one class size. I feel that if teachers would get better pay, there would be more qualified teachers."

—Spanish-speaking parent, Las Vegas

"Class sizes. They are too large. Too many students. And then there could be a group of students that are not understanding, and the group of students that are understanding have to wait...because the teacher needs them to catch up and so we are stuck like two lessons behind while they are still trying to figure it out."

—English-speaking student, Las Vegas

"Can I start off by saying the food? They serve pizza every day and it is Papa Johns and usually it is like cold or nasty. Or if they give you nuggets, they give three little pieces. It's like I am not going to get full with three little pieces."

—English-speaking student, Las Vegas

- **Poor Motivation:** Participants discussed some of the factors that lead to low motivation in the classroom. Some students and parents were specifically concerned about the focus on standardized testing, worried that it hinders real learning in the classroom.



"Now schools are more like tests, tests, and then tests, one after the other, and it doesn't allow us to be creative or process stuff. Either you learned it or you didn't. That's how they grade us now." —**Spanish-speaking student, Nashville**

"How about getting rid of the standardized tests? It is not written for all cultures." —**English-speaking parent, Orlando**



More broadly, students discussed how academic performance and grades affect their levels of motivation. Those who fall behind run the risk of becoming defeatist, as they do not see a path toward academic success in school.

"When you do good in school—you get an A on a test—that motivates you. There are certain kids who can't and it is difficult for them, but they are still given the same curriculum and the education system doesn't adjust to them. So basically, here is a paper of transcript and every grade you've gotten, and if your grades are poor, then that doesn't motivate you at all and you are basically put in the situation where you know I am not smart and I am not going to succeed in school and so either let me drop out or let me just go to down to another path with often drugs or alcohol or anything else and that affects your life and your future." —**English-speaking student, Las Vegas**



On the flip side, some students and some parents mentioned that the bar for Latino students in particular is set too low: tests are too easy, there is little homework assigned, and rather than trying to teach them, schools just seek to get them through to the next year. These participants were cognizant of the importance of high standards to prepare students for life, not just passing tests or moving to the next grade level.

"The education that is provided in school is not sufficient to give her a life that is good for her. The education in this school is very lax. The kids are tired of it. The generations are different. They are not like how we were that we did everything that we were told. I have had my daughters in therapy because they are so frustrated with the school, she is not motivated. The teachers are not motivating, the atmosphere in the school is not what they want and not what they like." —**Spanish-speaking parent, Pontiac**



"We have a 50%, minimum wage thing, where even if you don't do the test, you get 50% [of the grade]. So literally, in the whole semester all you have to do is two projects and you will pass. Things are just handed to you and that is what is wrong with our society nowadays because I feel like when we grow up they are going to think that everything is so much easier and high school is hard and that is not the real world." —**Spanish-speaking student, Las Vegas**



► **For many Latino students and other first-generation, college-bound students, there is little support or quality advising for college preparation.**

This includes access to advanced coursework, AP credit, college application processes, or financial aid/scholarship information. Students often learn about requirements and scholarships when it's already too late.

"Sometimes it's hard to get scholarships because you are like not qualified enough for it, or like academically don't have what those requirements are, and sometimes it's not even your fault, it's just you weren't prepared for those things. Or you don't have the proper resources to get to the scholarships."

—**Spanish-speaking student, Nashville**

"I think that there should be more programs that are teaching the different opportunities that are available. I know at least in my school that we have these opportunities, but not a lot of people know about them. Things like college preparedness and teaching about scholarships and the ways that you can pay for college so you don't feel as discouraged to not going to college. I feel that the school should like encourage [students] to seek help."

—**English-speaking student, Pontiac**

"For example, the ACT; I know that at my school they never really thought about, talked about it, and even from elementary school all the way up to high school, up until my last year, which is this year, no one's even really mentioned it or tried to prepare us for it, and I know I've been to visit schools in Knoxville and they start in Pre-K to worry about things like the ACT or SAT and other things that would prepare you." —**English-speaking student, Nashville**

- **The lack of guidance regarding scholarship options for college was particularly problematic for DACA students. In some cases, teachers did not even know or acknowledge that there are DACA students in classrooms.**



“Like in the school it was mostly—I guess people didn’t realize that there were undocumented students in their school—and like for me it took me two years to find out about Tribeca [scholarship] because they don’t acknowledge that there is undocumented students at their schools. It’s very segregated.”

—Spanish-speaking student, Nashville

“I remember them telling me, ‘Oh, you should apply for Tennessee Providence [scholarship],’ and then I find out that I didn’t qualify for it, when I tried to apply for it, that’s when he told me that I was considered as an international student. So yeah, for me it was hard to look for options to go to college.”

—English-speaking student, Nashville

- **Some students stated that they craved more materials and course work that is inclusive of their Latino identity.** The lack of course material on Latino history or culture felt alienating.



“Like even in World History...they focus on like Asia and Africa and all that stuff and not like South America. South America is part of the world too.”

—English-speaking student, Orlando

“They forget that we are here and that we came from somewhere else.”

—English-speaking student, Orlando

“I ended up deciding to do my senior capstone on the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement, because all this time from we never really talked about Mexican American civil rights, and we know that’s something that happened, but every time we talk about civil rights the person that comes to mind is African Americans. So I thought it was important to highlight that Latinos—like Mexican-Americans also went through that. Many Latinos don’t know about it, and we don’t know that we actually had to fight against civil rights as well. So I think that’s something that should also be taught in schools.”

—Spanish-speaking student, Nashville

Conversely, students who had had access to course work and teaching that promoted Latino identity described that experience in very positive terms.



“Our Heritage Spanish teacher, she was also the AP Spanish teacher. If you did really good in the other Spanish classes you could be in that class. So it was really, really close. We had kind of like a home environment. And she knew exactly—she was strict but she also knew how to have fun in a very Hispanic way. All the major holidays, we would celebrate them, like Day of the Dead, she would make sure to have a little celebration because sometimes our holidays, we don’t have them off, which other cultures do.” —**Spanish-speaking student, Nashville**

- **Students lamented the absence of preparation for “real life.”** They equated the focus on testing with a lack of practical education such as financial learning about taxes and loans, socioemotional skills such as coping with life pressures, acting with respect, and so on. As many Latino students take on adult responsibilities soon after high school, and because their parents often do not have the social capital to teach these skills, such “real life” preparation is seen as a glaring omission in their education.



“They do not teach things that we are going to use in real life. For example, how to do your taxes. How to balance a checkbook. How to manage your money.” —**Spanish-speaking student, Orlando**

“Things like cooking, plumbing, how to communicate, respect, I don’t know, how to be in a professional setting without making a fool of yourself, or making a mistake, stuff like that.” —**Spanish-speaking student, Nashville**

Teachers and Administrators

- **Students had mixed feelings about teachers.** Several complained that many teachers see students as interchangeable burdens rather than unique individuals; others stated that teachers often seem to expect them to fail. These teachers are viewed as being “burned out,” doing the minimum amount of work, and simply passing students rather than trying to make sure they know what they are learning.



“They [teachers] do not help you go towards your future. Some teachers they only care if you pass because that way they will get paid.”
—**Spanish-speaking student, Orlando**



"They don't really pull you over and ask you what you are going to do to make sure that you are on track." —**Spanish-speaking student, Las Vegas**

"They should hire better teachers. Some in my school, I don't learn the stuff they teach because of the way they teach. They are just putting stuff on board and giving out a work sheet." —**Pontiac, English-speaking student**

- **Some parents and students complained that schools assign teachers who are not competent in the subject they teach and that there is a high teacher turnover, which means often being taught by substitute teachers.**



"Sometimes the teacher doesn't know what they're talking about. We had some teachers that taught calculus, pre-calculus and calculus, but they left. So then my algebra teacher, she became the calculus teacher and it was just terrible, and my GPA went down and I was really disappointed because my GPA was up. I think they were putting random teachers into random subjects. I don't understand it, and they don't understand what they're teaching, so I don't do well."

—**English-speaking student, Nashville**

"I am worried with my daughter. She passed the classes and I think they passed her at the end because in reality there are no teachers for the semester. They use substitute teachers who are not familiar with the materials, so there isn't a teacher who can explain the material to her. So in reality, they are not learning as they should. The kids have three or four months of substitute teachers."

—**Spanish-speaking parent, Pontiac**

"Some teachers just give you the work and they expect you to already know it, but they forget they're there to teach it, so then when you ask a question some teachers get annoyed. 'Why don't you know this? Why can't you understand?'"

—**English-speaking student, Nashville**

- **Students complained that some teachers are racially insensitive, are biased, and discriminate against Latino students, or allow other students to make hurtful comments without any consequences.**



"Teachers sometimes discourage you and tell you to not come back to school and just get a job and don't come to school anymore. They will tell you not to come to class anymore. They say that it is easier on the streets than here.

That is how it is. I heard a teacher tell one of my friends, 'Are you planning on graduating?'" —**Spanish-speaking student, Las Vegas**

"I feel like I am stereotyped, especially at school. I feel like there are just some teachers that stereotype you. For example, like if I am late to a class or I had to go to a college career center or a meeting from a college and I come late, sometimes there are some teachers that just don't give you a pass and they always assume I ditched. Like they assume things already before you speak."

—**English-speaking student, Las Vegas**

"My son was excellent in math and he would come home crying and I couldn't figure out why and then I found out. He had friends that were Latino—one from El Salvador and one who was Mexican American. And I found out the teacher was targeting all the Latino kids. My son he was excellent and she would like give him a hard time for just going to sharpen a pencil and he had every right to."

—**Spanish-speaking parent, Pontiac**

- **At the same time, students and parents sometimes stated that they do not blame teachers for poor pedagogy, as they perceive that teachers themselves are limited by structural issues such as large classrooms, assigned curricula, the emphasis on testing, and low salaries.**



"There is a lack of time on behalf of the teacher because of the volume of students. The school requires testing for the kids and makes them turn in reports and that takes away time from the teachers which in turn...well, with my kids, I see the teachers have that pressure and tests. If the students do not have the test scores where they should be, the teachers will be fired. And so, that stresses out the teachers." —**Spanish-speaking parent, Las Vegas**

- **Counselors, like teachers, were often portrayed as having little time for students and being of little help for both academic and non-academic issues; even helpful counselors were overextended by the school system.**



"I didn't know anything about AP classes...If you don't have a specific question to ask them, they are not going to offer you any kind of information on their own... If you have a failing grade they will call you but only if you have an F."

—Spanish-speaking student, Orlando

"My college counselor, she would meet and be like, 'Okay, so what are you doing? Are you going to college?' She'd just ask you what you're doing but she wouldn't like provide resources, she wouldn't help you. She'd just be like, 'Okay, cool, that's nice.' You know, 'Go find scholarships, and go to college,' and that would be it. And then she would meet with you again, like, 'Oh, so what are you doing now? What did you apply for now?' Like she didn't know anything. I didn't know what the point was." **—English-speaking student, Nashville**

"My daughter wanted to talk to the counselor and she says that the counselor cannot see me because she does not have time."

—Spanish-speaking parent, Las Vegas

"They were giving that college counselor all these other tasks that had nothing to do with his actual job, and like he just got really overwhelmed. But he was really good; he helped me and a bunch of other students go to college, and he pressed us about DACA stuff as well and how we should apply, and through the Oasis Center actually got some scholarships."

—English-speaking student, Nashville

- Many students did state that they had had a strong relationship with a teacher or other adult in the school. These relationships were critical, and in some cases transformative. A good teacher was described as one who truly pays attention to students' needs, motivates students beyond rote learning/testing, provides extra attention needed to understand a subject, or can help a student through a tough situation at home. Students also say they have had positive relationships with Latino teachers with whom they can share a cultural connection.



"My most important experience and I think it was really life-changing for me was one of my teachers. I was just getting picked on for stupid reasons, but she told me that I was not going to be defined by the mistakes of other people."

—English-speaking student, Orlando



"The teacher that taught the Heritage Spanish class was and still is my favorite teacher. And she was not like a nice person, she was really strict. You did not mess up you did not sleep in her class and did not have a phone. But she had those like values that a Hispanic mom would have, a Hispanic grandma. She would teach you respect if you didn't know it. And by the end of the class you would use your manners. You were like a family." —**Spanish-speaking student, Nashville**

"I try to make strong bonds with certain teachers that I know have shared life stories with the class and with me sometimes. I made those bonds so I have somebody that yes I look up to and somebody that can help me further my experience or my education or anything that I need. I can always talk to those types of people."

—**English-speaking student, Las Vegas**



Closer Look: English Learners



Many students had been in ESL classes for a few years as young children, and both students and parents had mixed reviews of ESL. Several students said it was not a challenge, and that they were placed there simply because they spoke Spanish at home and/or were kept in ESL classes when they did not need to be. Some even admitted that they avoided checking the Spanish language box on school forms, so that their child would not be tracked into ESL.

"For me it wasn't that much learning to do. I already knew English but they put me in there because they knew that I spoke Spanish."

—**Spanish-speaking student, Orlando**

"My experience that I had with that was basically the assumption was because the Latin last names. Whenever I go into the school, they ask you what language is spoken at home and one of the people at the school told me if you mark Spanish they are going to put her in ESL automatically. So that assumption is being made and so they are dumping these kids into these classes based on these papers and so no clarification is being given."

—**English-speaking parent, Orlando**

"With my second child, I made sure in the form I did not write that I speak Spanish at home. That's the trick in that form. And I made sure I didn't do it the second time and they still did it with my second son and then I said I am going to get a judge and file against you guys for doing this if you don't get my child out. Because to me that is telling my children that Spanish is not a value."

—**English-speaking parent, Pontiac**



Closer Look: English Learners Cont'd

There was confusion among both students and parents around what quality ESL services should look like. Students' experiences with past ESL services had been quite varied, with some ELs not having had certified ESL teaching at all. Some also expressed frustration with the manner in which tests were administered.

"My experience is that all I remember is that I was looking at a computer all the time, since. I don't know if my class was a general ESL, but what I remember is that because I was so new to this country and I did not know any English, I was on the computer the whole time, the rest of the kids were doing their thing, but I had to be on the computer looking at this really boring program. Kind of like right now it'd be like Rosetta Stone but for kids. So in a way I was kind of excluded because they needed me to learn the language faster. So I don't know if that was good or bad, but I do remember that in second grade I didn't have to go to an ESL class anymore." —Spanish-speaking student, Nashville

"The other day my mom was worried about my little brother. He speaks fluent English and Spanish. He's still in ESL, he's in second grade, and she was wanting to remove him from ESL. So I went to go speak to his ESL teacher, and she said that last year he did good on his exam to get out of ESL—but then this year he scored really, really low, like extremely low, like three points less. They mentioned that he took a test on the computer, like this time they all took exams on the computer instead of—before the teacher would sit with the student and speak out the question and the answer, and now the kids have to go on the computer and complete the exam, so I think that's the difference." —Spanish-speaking student, Nashville

Some immigrant students did not attend ESL classes. For these, and for other Latino students who grew up bilingual, part of their language experience as children and youth involved translating for parents and adults. One DACA student who arrived in the United States at age one said:

"When I was in elementary school I never got put in ESL because I grew up speaking English, I don't know how, but they would make me translate and I was in kindergarten, I was like five years old and I would be translating in the office all the time. I was itty bitty, and I would be translating these adults. I was like, what am I doing here, you know? But I liked it. I don't think I knew what I was doing but I liked it, yeah. I would always be in the office just like translating." —English-speaking student, Nashville

School Environment

- **Parents and students worry about violence, drugs, bullying and cyber-bullying, and disrespectful peers.**

"I'm worried. When they are in school, they are a different person and they are around different people. So in my case, my concern is my kid is very good. He don't smoke and he don't do nothing negative, but he sees so much going on around, and he told me about the drugs and the kids in this building smoke weed and stuff like that."

—English-speaking parent, Orlando

"The students nowadays they're disrespectful. I really seriously am thinking that schools should add some kind of like respect class to respect older people like teachers, or not talking back to parents, because now I'm seeing that more and more often. I know that like having social media now it's kind of like, we can do any kind of bullying—we can bully verbally or we can cyber-bully you, and that's another thing I think schools should restrict."

—English-speaking student, Nashville

- **Some students shared stories about being judged based on their complexion, the clothes they wear, or the people with whom they associate. They felt that they were being slotted into negative and reductive stereotypes by both peers and school staff.**



"I just feel like there are a lot of stereotypes within the school and within the education and I mean outside of school as well. And just like with the stereotypes they tend to bring people down and they say that there is no limit or no barrier and you have no boundaries and you can succeed as far as you want to go, but I feel that it isn't true. I feel like people are put in certain limits and they can't exceed those expectations."

—English-speaking student, Las Vegas

"They just even expect you to fail. When I was in high school, so many of my friends you know we come in late to school and they look the part. You look the part. You look like you did something bad, but you are just trying to get to class."

—English-speaking student, Orlando

"Sometimes when somebody just hears you speak, like students, they'll just be like, 'Dang, you speak good English.' Girl, what are you talking about? You don't say that. That's insulting. Or they'll be like, 'Well, you're pretty for a Mexican.'"

—English-speaking student, Nashville



- **For some students, bias and discrimination had devolved into bullying and outright racism, creating psychological vulnerability for those who are targeted.**

"Last year my daughter went into ninth grade and she told me, mommy I am sad because I am being bullied. I asked her whom, she said another student and a teacher. Yes, she was behind in English and she said the teacher insulted her because she did not understand. I asked her if she wanted me to go to the office and she said 'Mommy, let me talk to the teacher and ask her why she is upset with me.' But I left to Mexico for awhile and returned and she would still cry."

—Spanish-speaking parent, Las Vegas

- **Anxiety around the current environment, and its negative impact on Latino kids, was palpable in both student and parent groups. Every group of students and parents shared examples of discrimination and outright racism since President Trump's election. Stories range from students making jokes about the wall on the U.S.-Mexico border to strong fears of relatives being deported. Parents say that being Latino in the Trump era has made school difficult for their children and has generated fear among their social networks.**

"I have seen Hispanics or Blacks they have been treated worse ever since the new president because the Caucasian people just think that it is okay now and they are allowed to say whatever they want." **—Spanish-speaking student, Las Vegas**

"Now that he is president I was like the jokes for Hispanics have gotten way on a different level. Like, 'Hey man are you going to help me go build a wall,' stuff like that. It sounds funny or whatever but at the end of the day, it still hits you."

—Spanish-speaking student, Las Vegas

"I think, currently, the racism. Before, the racism wasn't as bad as it is today. Thanks to the president it was okay, but now with the new president the racism has jumped to a higher level. The schools discriminate against them because they are Hispanics. Even if they were American-Mexican born in the United States, they are still discriminated, just because they have Latin blood they are discriminated against in this country."

—Spanish-speaking parent, Pontiac

"We are afraid of everything. That they will deport us, that they will deport our children." **—Spanish-speaking parent, Pontiac.**

- **Despite a difficult environment, most students evoked Latino culture as a foundation for resilience and perseverance, and a point of collective pride. Students alluded to their culture as promoting positive values—humility, respect, affection, hard work—giving a sense of group belonging, and entailing useful skills such as bilingualism and biculturalism. The goals and dreams emerging from the community’s immigrant experience lead to an ethos of hard work and an increased importance placed on higher education.**

“It makes us work harder. As the Latino community you have that mentality to work for our goals.” —Student, Nashville

“We are unique. Hispanics, Latinos, I could be wrong but in my opinion, we are more humble and I think that makes the world better because when I went to third-world countries, like when I was in Salvador and then I went to Honduras with my dad, it is so much different. You go eat and people say, ‘buen provecho’ you don’t get that over here.” —Spanish-speaking student, Las Vegas

“You are bilingual. There are lots of opportunities when you know both languages.” —Spanish-speaking student, Orlando

“At my school, they would always announce the Hispanic heritage stuff, all these Hispanic clubs, but nobody would go. So I felt like I had to bring them back to life and like make it happen. I went around recruiting people and it worked. We brought all the clubs back to life, because there was also one called Latino Achievers and nobody would ever stay. So we started telling people about it, we started putting posters up to get people involved.” —Student, Nashville

- **In addition, when students did feel supported in their schools, they stated that such support went a long way in helping them feel grounded and safe. Some DACA students, for example, mentioned the strong solidarity that their teachers and peers had shown in the aftermath of the decision to remove DACA.**



“I know there’s a lot of support with teachers—and even other students are really trying to get involved. Like for the DACA thing I know there’s a lot of things going on trying to stop it or to change what is happening.” —Student, Nashville





V. DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION

When woven together, the experiences reported by the students and parents in these focus groups tell a broader story that in some way counters conventional narratives about Hispanic students in public schools. Mainstream accounts often depict stereotypes of Latino students as low-aspiring youth with poor language skills, or as potentially troublesome students who are at risk of school dropout or teen pregnancy, while Latino parents are often represented as being disengaged from their children's education. More positive stories around Hispanic youth usually focus on outstanding Latino students, such as valedictorian DACA students or those who obtain full-ride scholarships to Ivy League schools. While these storylines are important, they are incomplete, missing the complexity and nuance of experience for a highly diverse and dynamic population—our nation's more than 18 million Latino children.

The stories told here point to Latino students who are idealistic in their aspirations, possessing a range of positive, resilient qualities that allow them to bring linguistic, cultural, and social assets to the classroom. These include:

- Placing high value on education
- Holding healthy life aspirations
- Demonstrating a desire to learn, put in work, and be proactive in reaching education goals
- Maintaining a healthy cultural identity
- Supporting biculturalism and bilingualism
- Having strong relationships with family and community
- Demonstrating a commitment to take care of family and community
- For parents, expressing a strong desire for their children's success and well-being

At the same time, many of the students described feeling obligated for practical reasons to support their families financially and socially. In this sense, they are often pioneers who journey alone without the security and knowledge that comes with parents who have traveled the same road before. Moreover, many anticipate that adult choices around jobs and financial responsibilities are imminent—unlike more typical American students who see college graduation as the beginning of independent adult life. For this reason, many Latino high school students are attracted to vocational programs in school that will connect them to work and prepare them for independence. Broadly speaking, many Latino students—particularly those in immigrant families—bring a unique maturity and pragmatism to their high school experience.

However, as highlighted by this report, Latino students also confront a range of serious challenges, both in and outside of school. Some of the key barriers mentioned by participants include:

- Under-resourced schools
- Lack of teacher training and diversity
- Lack of access to quality school programming
- Lack of guidance around AP and college credit-bearing coursework
- Low bar for Latino students and nonalignment of teaching to standards
- Limited communication between school and parents
- Legal barriers (either their own or their family's)
- Difficult school environment, increased exclusion, and racism targeted to Latinos

In addition, students and parents often reported lacking the types of economic and social capital—for example, money for tutors or SAT preparation classes, or social networks in the postsecondary or professional world—that students with more advantage can leverage to succeed in their education and careers. Without these supports, it is difficult for Latino students to compensate for the cracks apparent in under-resourced schools. Moreover, according to the students and parents interviewed, there is misalignment between schools that incentivize grades rather than college preparation, suggesting the need for much better quality advising around college preparation for Latino students. Furthermore, many students recounted experiencing various types of discrimination within the school environment, ranging from negative stereotyping by teachers—which can contribute to student disengagement or poor motivation— to more acutely traumatizing events such as blatant racism.

On the flip side, focus group participants did not only report negative school experiences, but also discussed the positive aspects of their public high school education that made them feel engaged, valued, and successful within their school environment. These included relationships with supportive teachers and mentors who guided and challenged them; programs and coursework that centered on their Latino culture; services that allowed them to gain knowledge about college requirements and scholarships; and school administrators who went out of their way to make them feel safe and supported. A number of students expressed gratitude for their public school education, as did their parents. The unevenness of Latino student experiences in high school existed in all of the research sites, pointing to the fact that the quality of programs can vary substantially between districts and schools within the same state.

In general, there appears to be a gap between the aspirations and willingness to learn demonstrated by these students, and the reality of their experience with the public education they are receiving. Indeed, focus group participants clearly described wanting to be active participants in their own education, but also wishing for more rigor, preparation and cultural competence in their classroom experience. Many articulated a desire for teaching and programs that provide support in areas where Latino students and ELs may need additional help, and that tap into their own strengths such as being bilingual or bicultural.

The good news is that numerous researchers and advocates have, over the years, outlined a clear set of school practices that have been shown to influence better results for Latinos in public schools. These researchers show that traditional school structures—which rely on the social capital of their largely middle-class White students and parents—are simply inadequate given the increasingly diverse, low-income public school population.⁴⁸ A variety of lessons can be learned from successful schools that serve predominantly Latino students, which “affirm that excellence and equity are possible when educators come together around an important purpose and focus on the unique life experiences, strengths, and interests of all their students.”⁴⁹ These schools prove that by 1) promoting consistent and shared responsibility, 2) fostering student-centered values, 3) providing high-powered curricula, strategies, and programs, 4) building the capacity of educators, and 5) strengthening teaching and learning through the use of data, urban schools serving predominantly Latino students have made large strides in improving the educational experience and academic achievement of their students. UnidosUS, also, has outlined best practices for schools serving Latino students and their families, describing eight core qualities that each include specific indicators, measures, and evidence of success (see Box 3).

BOX 3:

Core Qualities for Successful Schools Serving Latinos

- High expectations and high supports
- Collaborative leadership
- Partnerships with institutions of higher education
- Cultural competence
- Bilingualism/biliteracy
- Sustained meaningful relationships (e.g., mentors)
- Family engagement and collaboration
- Continuous performance-based assessment

Source: National Council of La Raza, *Core Qualities for Successful Schools*.

Clearly, the field of education has at its fingertips the tools and assets to promote quality learning environments for Latino students. Receiving a quality school experience, however, should not depend upon geography and socioeconomic status; federal, state and district-level systems must be held accountable for promoting practices and programs that will close existing achievement gaps and allow our Latino student population to succeed socially and academically in schools. By elevating the voices of Latino students and parents, and the types of themes highlighted in this report, educators and advocates can help to build positive classroom environments that support students, advance equity, and lift up educational achievement for the nation.



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NOTES

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