



A Homecoming Journey:
**THE REENROLLMENT EXPERIENCE OF
LATINO HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS**



The National Council of La Raza (NCLR)—the largest national Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization in the United States—works to improve opportunities for Hispanic Americans. Through its network of nearly 300 affiliated community-based organizations (CBOs), NCLR reaches millions of Hispanics each year in 41 states, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia. To achieve its mission, NCLR conducts applied research, policy analysis, and advocacy, providing a Latino perspective in five key areas—assets/investments, civil rights/immigration, education, employment and economic status, and health. In addition, it provides capacity-building assistance to its Affiliates who work at the state and local level to advance opportunities for individuals and families.

Founded in 1968, NCLR is a private, nonprofit, nonpartisan, tax-exempt organization headquartered in Washington, DC. NCLR serves all Hispanic subgroups in all regions of the country and has operations in Atlanta, Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, Phoenix, Sacramento, San Antonio, and San Juan, Puerto Rico.

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A Homecoming Journey: The Reenrollment Experience Of Latino High School Dropouts

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Latino community is the fastest-growing population in American society. In fact, 25% of children younger than five are of Latino descent. Yet despite their numeric significance, Latinos continue to be overrepresented in low-skilled, low-paying jobs and drop out of school at double and triple the rates of their Black and White counterparts. While the body of literature on the subject is replete with accounts of “push-out” and “pull-out” factors that contribute to a student’s dropout decision, little is known about students who drop out and then reenroll in school to pursue their high school diploma.

Through this study, the National Council of La Raza (NCLR) aims to shed light on why Latino students drop out and then decide to return to school and complete their education. To achieve this, NCLR conducted focus groups at three sites: MAAC Community Charter School in Chula Vista, California, George I. Sanchez Charter High School in San Antonio, Texas, and Santa Fe South High School in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. With the assistance of school personnel, students were purposely identified, convened, and posed a series of open-ended questions regarding their reasons for dropping out and the motivating factors which led them to reenroll in school to earn a high school

diploma. In this study, the sample population was composed of approximately 77% Latino students. Within the larger sample, male and female students were on average 18 years old and the majority (59%) experienced one dropout event over the course of their high school careers.

From the data gathered, several themes emerge which properly align with the body of literature on dropout students. For instance, the dropout process for many students interviewed began well before high school. While students physically disengaged in high school, mainly in the ninth and tenth grades, their mental disengagement began as early as fourth grade. Several factors contributed to students leaving the school system without a diploma: chronic absenteeism, high mobility, credit deficiency, lack of motivation, boredom, family responsibilities, a sense of disconnection with their schools, negative peer pressure, and a lack of safety in school. A couple of Latino-specific factors, not extensively documented in the literature, also surfaced from the data, including discrimination based on national origin, immigration issues (such as deportation of parents), and the binational reality of students who for a variety of reasons traveled between the United States and Mexico.

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The prime goal of this case study was to identify the motivating factors behind Latino youth's decision to reenter the educational system and earn a high school diploma. Studies conducted on the subject have suggested two key explanations for the reenrollment process of high school dropouts: 1) students experience a life-altering event (e.g., having a child) that motivates them to return to school and 2) students encounter barriers to employment mobility due to their lack of formal education. Aside from experiencing a life-altering event or facing dead-end jobs, the most prominent reasons cited by students include a high degree of family support, college aspirations, a need to defy low expectations, and the desire to earn a high school diploma, which is perceived as a social marker of success.

Given the interplay of dropout predictors, the recommendations below are broad in scope and extend beyond the defined parameters of the educational arena to reach external institutions and policies that directly impact the schooling process of Latino students. Furthermore, these federal and district-level recommendations are contextualized within the "push-out/pull-out" framework, which delineates factors that both encourage and force students to leave the school system before earning a high school diploma. If properly implemented, these policies can help prevent the exodus of Latino students from public schools.

POLICIES TO ADDRESS PUSH-OUT FACTORS

Pass the "Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act" to allow the approximately 65,000 immigrant students who graduate high school annually to pay in-state college tuition rates if they meet their state's criteria for residency.

Fund gang prevention programs that educate students about the detrimental consequences of gang involvement through a school-based, age-appropriate curriculum. In addition, schools should partner with community-based organizations to deliver in-service trainings to parents, community members, and

other stakeholders interested in mentoring youth and preventing the proliferation of gang activity.

Support educational and supplemental programs that expand after-school programs, interventions, and test preparation courses (e.g., high school exit exam, SAT, ACT).

Disseminate best practices that have resulted in strong retention rates and high academic outcomes for Latino students across the country.

Identify dropout predictors to recognize students on the verge of dropping out prior to their arrival in high school.

Ensure early outreach to dropouts immediately following the first dropout event.

Enhance personalization to allow trusting relationships between teacher and student, teacher and parent, and student and student to flourish.

Integrate culturally and linguistically relevant curriculum and practices that are respectful of the values, history, language, experiences, and traditions of the school's community.

Uphold high expectations and high supports to ensure that all students have the means to meet their maximum potential and perform at grade level.

Foster a college-going/college-ready school environment to make college a tangible and desirable reality for Latino students and their families.

POLICIES TO ADDRESS PULL-OUT FACTORS

Enact comprehensive immigration reform to provide the nearly 12 million undocumented people in this country with an avenue for legalization and reduce the instability faced by some families with children at risk of dropping out.

Encourage integrated, place-based strategies that promote active collaboration

between housing agencies, community development, and health providers in targeted communities.

Expand employment opportunities for Latino youth to equip students with job-related skills while they earn money and engage in positive activities.

Target financial resources for wraparound services to integrate services such as mental health care, family counseling, substance abuse counseling, job training, early childhood care, and after-school programs into the school's programmatic infrastructure.

Establish an infrastructure for support services to provide reenrollees with the programs, interventions, support systems, and extracurricular activities needed to retain students and assist them in obtaining a high school diploma.

Promote family engagement and community collaboration to give parents an opportunity to engage in school activities and become advocates for their children's education.

The factors that contribute to the dropout decision are complex and multifaceted; therefore, the proposed recommendations may not be applicable to all dropout scenarios or reenrollment decisions. Still, studies and programs have demonstrated that, if properly funded and implemented, these recommendations are likely to have a positive impact on student retention and graduation rates.

INTRODUCTION

The dropout crisis in America is a conversation three decades in the making. In recent years, the personal and social costs of dropping out of school have largely shifted the educational agenda from innovation to intervention.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, approximately 3.8 million 16- to 24-year-olds did not complete a high school program in 2000.¹ Moreover, this population is not equally representative of all the major ethnic subgroups in the United States; rather, the dropout problem is persistently an issue for Latino and Black students. The National Center for Education Statistics asserts that “[o]ver the past three decades, the status dropout rates for White young adults have persisted at levels that are lower than the rates observed for either Black or Hispanic young adults. However, the percentage of Hispanic young adults who were out of school without a high school credential remained higher than that of Blacks and Whites in every year throughout the 29-year period.”² More specifically, an estimated 27.8% of Latino students in the 16- to 24-year-old range permanently dropped out of public schools compared to 13.1% and 6.9% of their Black and White counterparts, respectively.^{3*}

This information is coupled with a recently released population estimate that reveals a striking reality: Latinos are the largest and fastest-growing group in the United States. Approximately 25% of children younger than five are of Latino descent.⁴ In addition to their rapid population growth, Latinos are the fastest-growing segment of the nation’s workforce. Currently, Latinos compose 13.3% of the formal economy; however, they are projected to make up 24.3% of the labor force by 2050.⁵ The numeric significance of the Latino population invites a deeper analysis of their educational outcomes. While Latinos represent a significant portion of the emerging workforce, they are also grossly undereducated, highly concentrated

in low-skilled jobs, and residing in low-income households. Given that increased educational attainment has the potential to reverse these unfavorable outcomes, it is therefore imperative to examine the personal, familial, and structural factors that contribute to the high dropout rates among Latino youth.

An important factor to consider is that the dropout experience is often a gradual process, not a sudden one, and thus, not an absolute outcome. However, research conducted on the subject has almost exclusively focused on a cohort of ninth-grade students who enter school and either graduate or fail to do so four years later. Furthermore, studies on the dropout experience have typically focused on the personal characteristics of dropouts, potential factors contributing to the dropout decision, and the ripple effects of this critical decision. However, little is known about dropout students who reenroll in school and pursue their high school diploma. Simply stated, academia and the policy arena have not provided adequate forums for the voices of these students to be heard. Undoubtedly, the dropout rate for Latino students commands immediate attention as the growth of this population and its educational attainment hold many implications for the financial and social well-being of the United States.

This case study is intended to begin the dialogue between reenrollees and educators, policymakers, and other stakeholders interested in and committed to addressing the dropout crisis and providing educational opportunities to Latino students, regardless of the path taken to graduation. The National Council of La Raza (NCLR) aims to contribute to research and policy development on the issue through this report, which was conducted to meet the following objectives:

1. Give students a voice to articulate their own reasons and personal stories for leaving school.

* The status dropout rate was deemed appropriate for this study, as it provides a more accurate description of the dropout situation. Unlike event rates, which provide a measure of the percentage of high school students who drop out over the course of a given school year, status dropout rates represent the proportion of young people ages 16 through 24 who are out of school and have not earned a high school credential.

2. Identify the motivating factors for Latino youth's decisions to reenter the educational system and pursue their high school diploma.
3. Provide recommendations to the education community about effective ways to retain students who are at risk of dropping out and attract those who previously left the system.

To meet these objectives, focus groups were conducted at three distinct sites: MAAC Community Charter School in Chula Vista, California, George I. Sanchez Charter High School in San Antonio, Texas, and Santa Fe South High School in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Students were convened at their school sites and posed a series of questions that covered reasons for leaving school, personal background information, and challenges encountered while out of school and upon returning to the educational system. Through this national study, NCLR aims to shed light on why Latinos drop out and then decide to return to school and complete their high school education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The public school system has garnered strong criticism and scrutiny from a host of stakeholders concerned about the academic gaps and low educational attainment of students, in particular, Latinos and Blacks. The inability of many urban high schools to boost the academic performance (as measured by standardized tests) of inner city students of color has been coupled with high dropout rates.⁶ Although there is no consensus on the national dropout rate—various methodologies and formulas are used to derive it—there is no dispute about the disproportionality of this phenomenon. It is estimated that 50% of urban Latino students drop out of school before completing their high school studies. In addition to poor education services, other factors such as racially isolated districts and socioeconomically disadvantaged schools contribute to high dropout rates for Latinos.⁷

The educational, social, and financial cost of dropping out has a direct impact on households, communities, the economy, and the future of our country. For instance, the unemployment rate for high school dropouts is four times the rate for college graduates.⁸ With a rapidly globalizing economy, these alarming figures signal the potential deterioration of the quality of life of high school dropouts and compromise the productivity of the labor market. Moreover, research shows that dropouts are more likely than high school graduates to suffer from health problems, become dependent on government programs, engage in criminal activity, and experience incarceration. As previously stated, the lack of formal education and adequate job skills tracks many high school dropouts into low-paying, low-skilled jobs in the service sector. The compound effect of these factors poses a serious challenge to society's stability and vitality. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the factors that contribute to a student's decision to leave the school system prior to graduation, but more importantly, the reasons why these dropouts decide to return to school to earn a high school diploma.

WHY DO STUDENTS LEAVE HIGH SCHOOL?

While some of the factors related to dropping out of school are well known, identifying the specific causes of dropping out with precision is difficult since this process is influenced by “an array of proximal and distal factors related to both the individual student and to the family, school, and community setting in which the student lives.”⁹ Furthermore, the dropout process is neither universal nor permanent. Many students leave school, mainly in the early high school years (primarily in ninth and tenth grade), and return to school one or more times during the course of their high school careers. The reasons for dropping out vary among the following: poor academic achievement, disciplinary issues, family responsibilities, poverty, pregnancy, employment opportunities, lack of motivation, disengagement from the schooling process, mental health issues, and lack of structural support for at-risk students. Furthermore, gender and race contribute to specific reasons why students of particular subgroups leave school. It is essential to note the heterogeneity of the dropout population to tailor appropriate interventions, policies, and programs to different ethnic groups.

Using North Carolina's public school data system, Stearns and Glennie found significant differences in the dropout patterns in age, gender, and ethnicity. For example, boys are more prone to drop out of the ninth grade than subsequent grades, while girls have constant dropout rates in the ninth, tenth, and eleventh grades with rates declining sharply in the twelfth grade.¹⁰ Furthermore, younger students (ninth and tenth graders) tend to leave school for disciplinary reasons while older students leave for academic and employment reasons. In terms of gender differences, female students typically exit the school system to assume family responsibilities, such as the care of family members or their own children, and young men are pushed out of school because of disciplinary problems.¹¹ To better conceptualize the dropout process, scholars have created frameworks and established grounded theories which explain the factors leading to particular students dropping out. Whereas past research focused solely

on student characteristics, emerging work looks at a three-pronged approach: individual, familial, and structural factors that account for the dropout process. The dropout decision has also been framed in terms of “push-out” and “pull-out” theories, terms which allude to school-specific factors and financial, structural, and familial situations that both push and pull students out of the educational system.

The interactive combination of individual characteristics, familial context, and structural factors can all contribute to the dropout process. Within the body of literature, individual characteristics have been defined as the behaviors, attitudes, and attributes (such as language, ethnicity, and generational status) ascribed to specific students. Students’ behavior at school, their academic performance (as measured by grades and course credits earned), attendance records, and motivation levels are all considered when tracking trends among dropouts. In terms of familial factors, the close-knit familial structure in the Latino community is dually viewed as both enabling and hindering the academic success of students. The social and cultural capital within the Latino family, as well as the entrenched support systems, are said to provide students with experiences and situations that assist them in their educational journey. However, the interdependency of the Latino family in terms of assuming family responsibilities (such as caretaking services), the high poverty levels (which may force students out of the school setting and into the workforce), and the increasing number of single-headed households have all been documented as predictors of dropping out.

Most recently, researchers have looked at structural factors, such as the school environment and neighborhood context, to explain why certain students do not succeed in education.¹² Although these institutions shape the daily realities of students, they have been overlooked in the analysis of dropout factors. Nevertheless, studies have shown that teachers’ low expectations, school practices, poor learning conditions, school policies (such as the “zero tolerance” policy), and criminal activity

surrounding and encroaching upon school sites all contribute to the push-out process of students. In fact, the term “push-out” was coined to highlight the structural forces that lead to students exiting the educational pipeline prior to graduating.

Push-out theorists argue that students leave school because they encounter structural, contextual, and climate-related factors that negatively impact the connection the student makes with the larger school environment.¹³ These theorists outline an array of institutional practices that intentionally or unintentionally increase the dropout rate of disadvantaged students. For instance, male students, specifically Latino and Black boys, tend to be pushed out of the schooling system due to discipline policies, grade retention, academic performance, and subjective diagnostic tools which label them as emotionally disturbed or as members of other special education categories. Female students, on the other hand, are typically pulled out of school to fulfill family obligations. Pull-out theorists assume that “students make a cost-benefit analysis of their economic interest to remain in or leave school.”¹⁴ These theorists focus on the employment opportunities afforded to older high school students as well as the family responsibilities (e.g., child rearing, care of siblings or elders, etc.) assumed by female students, especially girls of color.

Furthermore, research and practice have uncovered several predictors for dropping out, including concentrated poverty, behavioral problems, low academic performance, high absenteeism, pregnancy, boredom with school curriculum, grade retention, limited language proficiency, contentious relationship with teachers, multiple responsibilities at home, and high mobility rates. These predictors can help practitioners shape policies and practices most appropriate for specific subgroups. In terms of Latino students, immigration status and linguistic needs must also be considered when shaping interventions. Although a heterogeneous community, the Latino student population shares some commonalities that allow for the generalization of visible schooling patterns. Unique challenges Latino students

experience include limited English proficiency, high mobility rates (most noticeably in rural communities where students and their families follow migration rotations), racial prejudice, lack of educational opportunities (specifically as it relates to preschool education), and undocumented status. Proper documentation of the effect of being “illegal” in this country is missing due to privacy and legal issues.

However, the National Center for Education Statistics reports that 44.2% of Latino young adults born outside the United States were high school dropouts.¹⁵ This figure nearly doubles the percentage of U.S.-born Latinos who drop out of school. However, it is unknown if these foreign-born students are undocumented; therefore, a direct correlation cannot be made. Also, when looking at all native-born young adults, Latino youth are still more likely to be dropouts than other ethnic subgroups.¹⁶ Hence, leaving school may be less the function of immigration status than the combined effect of individual, familial, and structural factors encountered by Latinos. Again, this is difficult to deduce given the limited studies on the subject matter.

WHY DO STUDENTS RETURN TO HIGH SCHOOL?

The literature on the dropout process, in terms of statistics, student characteristics, push-out/pull-out factors, and dropout predictors, is rather exhaustive. However, there are few studies that address the process of reenrolling in school to pursue a high school diploma or an equivalent certificate, mainly, through the General Educational Development (GED) program. As a result, little is known of the characteristics or situations that enable a portion of the dropout population to reenroll in school to complete their studies. In 1997, Metzger conducted a study of dropout students in a rural county in Illinois. To learn about students’ views and perceptions regarding education, as well as efforts by school personnel to attract dropouts back to the school system, 259 students were surveyed (via a telephone call or home visit) and in-depth interviews were conducted with 52 dropouts, as well as principals, teachers, and counselors working with this subgroup. One

striking similarity among dropouts was their identification as special education students. The total number of dropouts classified as special education was twice the proportion of all secondary school students in the county.¹⁷ Other general commonalities included lagging behind in course credits, a strong sense of alienation, high mobility (especially as it relates to migrant workers), pregnancy, disruptive behavior, and the inability to adjust to the rigid structures of the comprehensive high school. The latter was particularly true for teen parents, migrant workers, and students with family obligations to fulfill.

The findings of this qualitative study also revealed that some students require more time to complete high school and that the dropout problem is not a “permanent condition” for a relatively large group of youth.¹⁸ In fact, 48% of surveyed dropouts returned to school to attain a diploma or enrolled in a GED program after the first year of leaving high school. Of this pool of returnees, 24% graduated at the end of the year from high school or through a GED program.¹⁹ Survey data compiled also indicated that female students returned to school at higher rates than their male counterparts and that White students were more likely to return than students of color. In addition, the majority of students opted to return to a GED program, as it allowed a greater degree of flexibility and freedom than the regular high school model. Those students who did return to high school or a GED program typically experienced a “pivotal event or realization” which paved their way back to school.²⁰ For example, students interviewed encountered roadblocks in their job aspirations due to their lack of a high school degree, some experienced boredom and frustration after a couple of months out of school, and others had a change of heart regarding the value of education. Equally important, most dropouts felt that returning to their high school was a public admission of failure. It should be noted that while the traditional high school did not prevent dropouts from returning to school, it did not have policies in place to actively encourage their return.

Most recently, the Regional Educational Laboratory at WestEd (REL West) released a longitudinal study on high school reenrollees

in one of California's largest school districts: San Bernardino City Unified School District. The study followed a cohort of approximately 3,856 first-time ninth graders over the course of five years. Five years later, during the 2005–06 academic year, 45% of the original cohort had been continuously enrolled and earned a high school diploma. However, the schooling process for 35.1% of the ninth-grade cohort was interrupted by at least one dropout event.²¹ From this pool of dropout students, 18.8% dropped out multiple times (two to four occurrences).²² Ultimately, 18.4% of reenrollees attained a high school diploma within the five-year period. Consistent with the literature, the reenrollment rates were lowest among Latino students, specifically male students and English language learners. It is important to note that low reenrollment rates typically translated into permanent exits from the school district.²³ Students who were pushed out of school in the ninth and tenth grades due to behavioral problems or insufficient course credits found it much harder to meet the graduation requirements upon their return; thus, they dropped out permanently. However, students who were pulled out of school by employment opportunities, pregnancy, and family crisis during the later high school years typically reenrolled and graduated with a diploma. The prime explanation for the discrepancy between early and later dropouts is the number of credits accumulated prior to leaving the school system.

While the San Bernardino school district lacked adequate information on the reasons why students decided to reenroll in school, personal interviews conducted by the REL West team disclosed valuable information. Interviewed reenrollees admitted failure to secure employment as a decisive reason for returning to school. In addition, interviewees credited caring principals, teachers, counselors, and coaches for their efforts to pull them back to school. Reenrollees involved in the juvenile justice and child welfare systems were mandated to return to school as a condition of their probation or as a condition for parents to receive public assistance.²⁴ These reasons are not universal and may vary by student, district, and region. Still, this study goes beyond speculation and

offers invaluable insights to the personal stories of students and why they left the school system, as well as information on the students who are likely to return to school (mainly female students, students who left during their later high school years, and students who are proficient in English). Furthermore, the dismal return rates of Latino students serve as a call to action for Latino advocates to make a case for an agenda inclusive of Latino-specific reform strategies.

For instance, an earlier study by Aviles et al. looked at Chicano/Latino students who dropped out of school and sought reenrollment. In the study, focus group participants expressed reasons for dropping out that closely mirror those already discussed. However, the recommendations that emerged from these conversations with Chicano/Latino dropouts merit further attention. From the students' perspective, the retention rates of Chicano/Latino students can be increased with a change of school practices. Incorporating culturally relevant and sensitive practices predominated on the list of participants' recommendations. For example, students suggested adding Chicano/Latino history courses to their core curriculum, hiring more Chicano/Latino teachers, providing credible Chicano/Latino role models, and encouraging the participation of Chicano/Latino students in extracurricular activities. Coincidentally, these student-led recommendations closely align with those advanced by educational experts. According to researchers, Latino-serving institutions must change or improve their practices in three core areas: 1) structural support, 2) the school-home link, and 3) accountability and interventions with Chicano/Latino students.²⁵

In terms of structural support, the school district must provide clear guidance to parents on the school's policies and on services available to students. This information should be related in a language and format understood by parents, including through bilingual materials. Similarly, the school-home link must be fortified through open and clear communication. According to Aviles et al., the steady flow of two-way communication can be facilitated by school-based, bilingual personnel. Lastly, the school

should be required to set in place interventions to assist at-risk Latino students in attaining higher academic levels. These requirements should also extend to monitoring the inappropriate placement of Latino students in programs outside of the mainstream curriculum such as special education, alternative programs, vocational courses, and similar interventions that detour students from a college-ready, college-going path.

The literature and studies presented thus far provide a framework for understanding the dropout experience as a cumulative and long-term process to be addressed through multiple strategies. Besides framing the context of education for Latino students in the public school system, this literature review looked at patterns of reenrollment and presented firsthand accounts of the experiences of reenrolled students. This background served as a foundation for the national study conducted by NCLR on Latino students who reenroll in school to attain a high school diploma.

METHODOLOGY

Data for this case study were drawn from focus groups conducted in NCLR Affiliate high schools located in Chula Vista, California, San Antonio, Texas, and Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Conducting focus groups was deemed appropriate for this study, as they “produced data and insights that would be less accessible without interaction found in a group setting—listening to others’ verbalized experiences stimulates memories, ideas, and experiences in participants.”²⁶ A minimum of 30 and maximum of 45 students were targeted for this qualitative study. Active recruitment efforts by school site personnel led to the identification of 39 (n=39) students. The criteria for identification were limited to two factors: 1) an interruption or dropout event during the four years of high school, and 2) school reenrollment for the purpose of attaining a high school diploma. Since the selected students reenrolled in charter schools that offer an array of traditional and accelerated programs, including early college programs, students could not be randomly selected; rather, they were purposely identified.

Furthermore, it should be noted that the exclusive use of students for the focus groups is both a strength and limitation of the study. Insightful information was gained from the focus groups, which provided a forum for students to share their views and personal testimonies with those individuals with whom they interact on a daily basis and without the pressure of an adult audience. Conversely, the data gathered lacked a comprehensive perspective of the schooling challenges encountered by students as perceived by their presumed support system of administrators, teachers, and staff. In addition, it was difficult to cross-reference the students’ dropout experience with his/her classification as an English language learner or special education student. An understanding of this missing information is valuable, as studies have shown that a disproportionate number of students in these special subgroups tend to drop out at accelerated rates.

To better gauge the motivating factors which encouraged students to return to school and pursue their high school diploma, the following open-ended questions were posed by an NCLR facilitator:

- Q1: Why did you decide to leave school?
 - a. Were you attending this school when you left? If not, was your school a public, charter, or continuation school?
- Q2: What, if anything, would have kept you from leaving school?
- Q3: What motivated you to return to school to earn a high school diploma?
 - a. Did teachers or other people from your school encourage you to return?
- Q4: What are some benefits of getting an education?
- Q5: Did your parents graduate from high school?
- Q6: How long were you out of school? What were you doing during that time?
- Q7: What challenges did you face when you returned to school?
- Q8: How does your current school support your goal of graduating from high school?
- Q9: Where do you see yourself in ten years?

For quality assurance and validity purposes, all interviews were tape recorded, reviewed, and transcribed verbatim. Each interviewee was identified with a pseudonym to protect their anonymity. In addition, each school site was allotted approximately two hours to conduct the focus group. Flexibility, however, was calculated into the scheduling process to accommodate the potentially impacted schedules of collaborating school site staff (who assisted with school-based logistics) and the summer activities of students. Also, all interviewed students received a store gift card for their participation in the scheduled focus group.

ABOUT THE STUDENTS

Table 1 provides demographic information of participants at the three school sites: MAAC Community Charter School, George I. Sanchez, and Santa Fe South. Diversity among respondents was noted along gender and age lines, but not necessarily ethnicity, as the great majority of students, an approximate 77%, were Latino, predominately of Mexican descent. Nonetheless, several noticeable student trends were closely associated with the school's geographic location. For instance, students residing in Chula Vista (a San Diego County city with close proximity to the U.S.-Mexico border) are mainly immigrant students who have to be flexible about traveling across the border. Thus, they experience a bicultural reality. Conversely, more than half of the Latino students interviewed in San Antonio, Texas were second-, third-, or fourth-generation Mexicans living in the United States.

Table 1: Focus Group Demographics		
	Boys	Girls
Students (n=)	19	20
Grand Total	39 Students	
Median Age	18	18
Dropout Events		
One Dropout Event	22 (56%)	
Two Dropout Event	11 (28%)	
Three Dropout Event	4 (10%)	
Students with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFE)	2 (5%)	
Note: The SIFE students in our study first entered high school at age 16.		

The observed pattern was not a complete surprise considering the deeply rooted history of Mexicans in Texas. It is worth noting that an approximate 55% (or six) of Texan students had parents who graduated high school in the United States. This was significantly higher than the percentage recorded for students in California and Oklahoma City, an estimated 29% and 21%, respectively. Unfortunately, the educational accomplishments of Texan parents were not enough to prevent their children from dropping out once or more during their high school years.

The final focus group in Oklahoma City revealed a broader ethnic diversity among participants. Only 50% of student attendees were Latino. The remaining 50% of students were Black, White, and Native American. However, all students were either foreign-born or first-generation. This trend appears to be consistent with the recent migration flow of Latinos to nontraditional destination communities, specifically in the Midwest and the South. Like their Chula Vista counterparts, Latino students in Santa Fe South spoke of immigration barriers encountered during their schooling experience. However, the consistent movement across the U.S.-Mexico border was not a prevalent topic. Still, high interstate mobility did surface during the focus group process. Again, this was a persistent pattern across the various focus groups. Another common element for students interviewed was the percentage of Latinos who will be the first in their families to graduate high school (about 34% of the interviewed population).

Despite differences in ethnic or generational backgrounds, all focus group attendees shared the common experience of dropping out at least once during their high school careers. Furthermore, the vast majority of students, about 72%, dropped out of a traditional public high school, with an estimated 36% dropping out a second time from a continuation school or learning center. In addition, all students interviewed decided to reenroll in a small, Latino-focused charter school to complete their high school diploma. Table 1 shows that 38% of interviewed students at the combined

sites dropped out more than once during high school. The number of male and female students who described multiple dropout events was nearly equal. Similarly, the years in which both male and female students dropped out were typically the ninth and tenth grades. However, the reasons for dropping out varied widely by gender. The contributing factors for dropping out of school, and more importantly, the reasons for reenrolling to attain a high school diploma, an occurrence that generally takes place one year after the initial dropout experience, will be examined in the next section. While general findings will be juxtaposed against the literature on dropout students and reenrollees, select student narratives will be mined and highlighted to gain a better understanding of the Latino-specific factors which account for students' decisions to return to school and attain a high school diploma.

FINDINGS

THE LATINO DROPOUT PROCESS

A productive conversation about strategies and efforts to reenroll Latino youth after their initial dropout event requires addressing the factors that contributed to their dropout decision in the first place. Information gathered from the three focus groups administered over a two-month period show a striking resemblance between verbalized reasons for dropping out and those factors discussed in the body of literature. Consistent with literature on dropouts, interviewed students cited push-out and pull-out factors such as chronic absenteeism, high mobility rates, credit deficiency, lack of motivation, boredom, family responsibilities, a sense of disconnection with the school from which they dropped out, negative peer pressure, and lack of safety as prime reasons for exiting the school system without a diploma. While these external and internal causes led to the act of dropping out in high school, their influence began much earlier in the schooling process.

As a case in point, Manuel,* a 16-year-old student in California, remembered his dropout experience as dating back to the fifth grade:

“When I was in fifth grade, we didn’t have money to pay for the rent so we had to move to TJ [Tijuana, Mexico] and we stayed there for about two years. We had to come back here in eighth grade, I passed the eighth grade and it was alright and all that, but then I went into high school and I started having problems with attendance and all that. So I basically moved around high schools in National City [California] and went to an alternative program at a boys and girls club, and it helped me a little, but I went through a lot.”

Manuel further explained that during his stay in Mexico he was not enrolled in middle school, thus making his integration into the U.S. public school system that much more difficult. Despite taking advantage of intervention programs like after-school tutoring and summer school classes, Manuel was “behind a lot” and found it difficult to make the transition into high school. This prompted him to engage in “street activities” that moved him further and further away from his goal of graduating.

Unfortunately, Manuel was not the only Student with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFE)[†] interviewed during this study. Perhaps the close vicinity to the country of origin, Mexico, helps explain these students’ interrupted schooling process. For example, the migration between the U.S.-Mexico border was a pronounced theme in the study and one very specific to Latino students in this country. A second student in California, Jesus, reminisced on himself in his middle school days as a “good student” earning “straight A’s” until he started “kicking with the wrong people.” The negative influence of Jesus’ new group of friends soon led him to drug abuse and, ultimately, a rehabilitation facility. As he noted, “My mom didn’t want me here in California, so I got sent down there [Mexico] ’cause I got into bad problems with drugs, too, so she sent me down there for rehab. So I could do better, you know. And so I stayed down there [Sinaloa, Mexico] for three years and I never came to high school and I never started high school down there either.”

The reality of many border town students positions a new lens to analyze the educational experience of Latino students (in particular, Mexicans) in the United States. However, a deeper analysis will not be presented, as it is beyond the scope of this study. Suffice to say, adjacency to their parents’ homeland

* Pseudonyms are used throughout this study to protect the identity of students.

† The New York State Education Department defines SIFE as “Students with Interrupted Formal Education in grades 4 through 12 who had 2 or more years of interrupted schooling in their country.” Margarita Calderón and Associates, “Expediting Comprehension for English Language Learners, ExC-ELL” (PowerPoint presentation, NCLR Leadership Institute for Latino Literacy training, July 2009), <http://www.aft.org/quest2009/downloads/monday/TeachingReadingtoELL-Calderon.pdf> (accessed September 2009).

and the interwoven family dynamics on both sides of the border create a scenario that must be understood by school personnel to better serve their Mexican American students and families. In Chula Vista, California, nearly 60% of participants reported living or working in neighboring Mexican cities (mainly Tijuana and Sinaloa) during the course of their K–12 education. For the great majority of these U.S.-born students, Mexico became the safe haven, the place where families could find support, safety, and a new beginning. In addition, Mexico was identified as the destination of choice for parents wishing to keep their kids “out of trouble” or to protect them from the proliferation of gang-related activities and crime in the local American schools.

In recent years, research has focused on the relationship between the peaking dropout rates of Latino and Black youth and the simultaneous increase of incarceration figures for these subgroups. Still, dropout studies have vaguely addressed this widely documented correlation. In this study, 23% of the Latino students were incarcerated during the course of their high school careers. This figure represents a predominately Latino male population with the exception of one female student. In all cases, incarceration was associated with drug abuse or trafficking of illegal substances. Students did not attempt to offer a justification for their actions or frame a context for their need to engage in illegal activity. Instead, students brushed past the details of their incarceration and simply acknowledged getting “locked up” for “going about wrong ways.” However, a 15-year-old student, Paco, inadvertently embedded his justification into his educational story when he stated, “In ninth grade I was getting into too much fights. Then, I found out that my baby momma was pregnant so I had to start working. I started working with my dad and then I pretty much got tired of working, not winning enough money that I can make, so I ended up in bad ways. I got locked up.”

Financial concerns and family responsibilities were two prevailing threads throughout the various school sites. A substantial number of students reported leaving school to assist their

families during tough economic times or to provide food and shelter for themselves. For instance, Monica, a 17-year-old student, reported dropping out in tenth grade after her diabetic mother suffered a heart attack. Unfortunately, Monica’s father was also diabetic and disabled. Therefore, she felt obligated to assume the role of caregiver for her ill parents, as well as her younger siblings and nephews. Similarly, her peers dropped out of school (or were dismissed after excessive absences) to help parents pay the rent, pursue full-time job opportunities, and provide for their children. Among the pool of students, three were fathers and six were mothers to one or two kids. While male students perceived the role of fatherhood as the provider who works “to put food in the baby’s stomach,” student mothers spoke of working multiple evening jobs and taking care of the children during school hours. As explained by Alicia, mother of a two-year-old, “I don’t have a babysitter and I’m not with him [the father] anymore so I have no support when I come to school!”

While further elaborating on her home life, Alicia, who married at the age of 15, revealed that her ex-husband left her in an economic bind, which forced her to move around quite often. Alicia explained, “He left me with the house. The house payments plus the bills was too much for me so I moved to an apartment complex, and then that was too much for me so it’s just me and my baby. I started a part-time since I started school. Then I had to move in with a family member. I wasn’t comfortable because they weren’t comfortable with me there, so I moved back to an apartment.” High mobility was echoed by Alicia’s counterparts and identified as a prime reason for dropping out of school. Again, this finding was further substantiated by a number of studies that have identified transiency and absenteeism as prominent dropout predictors.

Other reasons for dropping out are rooted in federal policies that have a tremendous impact on Latinos but are rarely highlighted in studies conducted on the educational experience of these students. Such is the case of Julissa, a vocal and inquisitive Californian student who was pulled out of high school by her parents’ deportation to their country of origin. Eager to

share her personal story with the larger student group, Julissa vividly recalled:

to “put an end to the discrimination by quitting school.”

“The reason I dropped out three times, the first time, when I was 15, my dad got deported when he was driving to work and we didn’t have money to pay the rent and stuff like that, so I had to start working and my big brother dropped out, too. So, I dropped out and I was working on a moving storage company with my dad’s friend and I had to wake up every morning at four in the morning and we had to drive all the way to Escondido. We used to work 12 or 13 hours a day, like that, moving boxes, throwing out trash and everything. I did that for about six months and then I started doing some other bad stuff. But I never got in trouble. I was doing that stuff ‘cause I had to help my mother and I started making money. I needed like \$1,800 so my dad could come back, so I wasn’t going to school. If I did, I would only go once in a while and I was still in the regular high school, in ninth grade. Then, when I started my junior year, I was at Chula High, my mom got deported and then I dropped out again and this time it was worse ‘cause my mom is from Central America and now I had to take care of my little sister who was only two years old at that time and I had to take care of her, my other sister, and brothers and work for a long time...But, all the times I dropped out, it was ‘cause of something bad like we were homeless or something.”

Immigration issues were not limited to Julissa and her family. Among the focus group participants, a teen mother in Oklahoma lives in constant fear of her husband’s deportation to Mexico, a Texan mother of two aspires to be an immigration attorney so she can legally assist her undocumented family members, and a former gangster in California hopes to get a high-paying job after graduation to get his mother back from Tijuana.

Another Latino-specific theme that emerged from the data was discrimination and marginalization by school site personnel. Mistreatment by administrators, teachers, and staff was referenced by all students when speaking about their schooling experience. In particular, discrimination based on Hispanic ethnicity was cited by Lucy, a student from San Antonio, Texas. Lucy, the biological daughter of a Latina woman, was adopted by a White couple (both middle-class professionals) and attended a predominately White school in Texas’ “countryside.” During Lucy’s junior year in high school, she endured the ridicule and constant harassment of her peers who discriminated against her “simply for being Mexican American.” Regrettably, the school administration did nothing to stop the harassment, so Lucy decided

Along similar lines, students pointed to dismissive behavior by teachers when notifying them of bullying incidents, harassment, and even sexual assault on campus. Many of these self-described “troublemakers” felt disrespected in class by the teachers’ neglectful behavior toward them. José, a student in Texas, recounted the turning point that prompted him to drop out of school. Bitterly, José stated:

“Straight out school sucked! I felt like I wasn’t appreciated in class, and I felt like I wasn’t needed at school. The teachers really didn’t care. They always just kicked me out of class anyways. So I did ended up leaving.”

In the same manner, Sonia, a 20-year-old student from Chula Vista, shared her negative classroom experience with a taunting teacher. According to Sonia, “The teacher really embarrassed me in front of the class, so I kind of just went off and I started like, ‘F you, F you, F you,’ and I left and never went back.” Among all students, the notion of *respeto** was highly emphasized by focus group participants. This value was perceived as a validation of the

* *Respeto* is the Spanish word for respect.

students' worth within the school context, as well as an extension of the element of care. The idea of care and the means by which it is conveyed has garnered attention among educators as an intangible variable that renders tangible outcomes, mainly, the interpersonal relationship between student and teacher and the creation of a personalized school environment.

Furthermore, acceptance and *respeto* are highly valued among this student population. This is largely due to the rejection they have encountered within the public school system. For instance, focus group students cited overt rejection by public school officials when seeking to return to school after dropping out. According to participants, students were told that they could not reenroll in their former high schools due to their behavioral problems, academic challenges, or high absenteeism. As stated by a female student, "The high school wouldn't take me back anyways 'cause they didn't want me there 'cause I was always in trouble." Hence, these students were encouraged to enroll in a "more flexible environment" such as a learning center, alternative school, or local charter school. A significant number of interviewed students internalized the school's rejection and delayed their reenrollment process due to this negative experience. This was the case for Pablo, a student with resentment toward the school system that he believes "cheated" him of earned credits and offered students in his community "unequal opportunities." Pablo's discontent with his schooling experience was clearly projected when he exclaimed, "I'm sick of education, I'm sick of everything, they are not teaching me and everything they should teach me, so I was done." Fortunately, Pablo and many resilient students opted to pursue their diploma aspirations and reenroll in high school after reaching a turning point in their lives.

MOTIVATING FACTORS FOR LATINO REENROLLMENT

Few studies have explored the core reasons for the reenrollment of high school dropouts, especially Latino students. The leading goal of this qualitative study was two-fold: to fill the literature gap on Latino reenrollment and to mine the collective experience of Latino reenrollees to unveil their reasons for returning to school. In general, studies conducted on the subject have suggested two key explanations for the reenrollment process of high school dropouts: 1) students experience a life-altering event that motivates them to return to school and 2) students encounter barriers to employment mobility due to their lack of formal education. Data gathered for the purpose of this study provided several Latino-specific factors that contributed to the reenrollment decision of this subgroup. Aside from experiencing a life-altering event or facing dead-end jobs, the most prominent reasons cited by students included a high degree of family support, college aspirations, a need to defy low expectations, and the desire to earn a high school diploma, which was unanimously perceived by focus group participants as a social marker of success.

In terms of life-altering events, the most commonly referred event was the birth of a child. Within the focus groups, many of the young mothers seemed determined to set a positive example for their children by pursuing their high school diploma. For example, Susana, a 17-year-old mother from Oklahoma City, detailed her reasons for reenrolling in school, stating, "Well, I didn't want to have the excuse that I dropped out and I couldn't go to school because I had a baby. I also wanted to make my son proud that I finished school and got an award for it." Upon further examination, Susana's comment touches upon other reenrollment factors, such as defying low expectations by completing her studies despite getting pregnant at the age of 15 and meeting the social markers of society by earning "an award" for completing her high school studies. Likewise, Maria, a married

student with two children, elaborated on the compelling reasons which led her back to school after dropping out on two different occasions. Maria summarized her motivation for returning to school by simply stating “my children.” Once probed, Maria, who worked at McDonald’s and cleaned hotel rooms during a two-year span, expanded on her answer:

“When I was working, I was working from 12 in the afternoon to three or four in the morning, and I wasn’t able to see my kids at all. And I knew that I didn’t want that kind of life for my kids so that’s why, and my husband also gave me a lot of support. He was working, but he was working in construction during that time and it stopped. So...he stopped working for like two months and I was the one that was paying the bills and everything and I just didn’t want my kids to go through the same things I went through.”

Many of Maria’s peers exit the school system to join the ranks of undereducated, low-skilled employees working in the ever-growing service sector. To make ends meet, students assumed a number of low-paying, dead-end jobs that left them physically exhausted and financially stagnant. Low wages led many students to reconsider their decision to drop out. In California, Jennifer’s educational epiphany came after six months of hard work in her uncle’s construction company. According to Jennifer, “My uncle was trying to prove a point so he made me do the worst part of the job. I was doing drywall for about six months. I hated doing that.” Along similar lines, Jaime, a shy 19-year-old who left high school in tenth grade due to gang activity, complained about his former position at a warehouse in San Antonio, Texas. He described his job as a “place where you can go nowhere.” More specifically, Jaime claimed, “Well, the job that I was at, you can’t move up or down. There’re just the owner and the workers, and you can’t retire there or nothing so you just work there till you get old and, that’s why you gotta plan out, so every day is about making it.” Jaime’s long-term goals are very much rooted in his working experience at

the warehouse, a place that has seen his own father age as yet another worker. Therefore, it is Jaime’s expectation that a high school diploma will prepare him to enter the job market with higher skills and increased opportunities for upward mobility.

The notion of high expectation and aspirations also resonated across state lines. It appears that a dose of reality, a glimpse at potentially living a life without the appropriate school credentials, triggered an appreciation for education. When posed the question, “What are some benefits of getting an education?” students enthusiastically brainstormed an extensive list of reasons for staying or returning to school including:

- “Education gives you a plan B. You can always find a second career.”
- “If you drop out, you just become another statistic.”
- “Without education you’re stuck. There is nothing. You will stand there; you’re just gonna be in that flat little place ‘cause you have nowhere to go.”
- “With a good education you can enjoy what you do and enjoy who you work with.”
- “Well, education is good, if not then I’ll be working like my dad, same job. Forever. It gives another chance to do something else.”
- “Education is good ‘cause technology nowadays, everything comes in technology so you gotta learn more and more.”
- “Yeah, you need an education. Don’t you have to have at least a GED to be working at McDonald’s or something like that? You need your education for anything.”
- “You can’t get what you want out of life. A proper education and a high school diploma is the first step that you gotta take in any direction.”

Moreover, students juxtaposed the conceptual reasons for obtaining an education with personal stories about their turning points and the influential factors that resulted in their return to school. The shared narratives spoke about resiliency, a process of self-discovery, the pressure to compete in a society that devalues undereducated individuals, and the supportive character of Latino families. In particular, students attributed their reenrollment decision to a family member who believed and encouraged them to “move beyond the limits of what other people tell you.” The majority of reenrollees identified their mothers as the motivating factor in their lives. Students cited their mothers’ words and acts of support, which ranged from constant praise and encouragement to babysitting grandchildren and actively searching for a suitable school for their dropout children. Furthermore, reenrollees recounted the pleas of their mothers who begged them to “become someone in life” and break the family cycle by earning a high school diploma. A mother’s imploration to her dropout child was frequently associated with the incarceration of an older son or the unplanned pregnancy of a daughter. For instance, Carlos, the youngest of seven, proudly asserted:

“I think it was just encouragement from my family, hearing my mom crying, telling me that she wants at least one boy to graduate, because both of my older brothers are in prison. I haven’t seen them for a very long time. I made her really happy that I’m actually getting back to school and getting it done. That’s what encourages me every day, that I see my mom happy and I’m telling her that I’m off to school. Seeing that smile on her face keeps me going.”

While family support served as a catalyst for change for a great majority of students, a small group of former dropouts regarded relatives and friends as their personal challenge. Essentially, students sought to defy their purported failure by returning to high school and pursuing their degree. Interestingly, the idea of “proving people wrong” surfaced frequently during the data gathering phase. Again, this concept

is deeply rooted in the notion of *respeto*; a validation of self-worth earned or demanded through a particular action. As an example, Alicia, who dropped out in tenth grade to meet the demands of her *machista* husband, reenrolled in high school to “prove my ex-husband wrong and show him that I can make it.” Similarly, Paco, a father currently on probation, decided to “prove my mom wrong” after overhearing a conversation between his parents where his mother faulted his father for her son’s fate in “becoming a mess that would never graduate.” The similarly negative comments of others also prompted Alicia’s reenrollment in school. As she explained, “I lived in a really small town where everyone kept saying, ‘Oh, she’ll never amount to anything.’ I wanted to show them that I work harder than they had credited me for.” Alicia’s determination to defy low expectations has resulted in a concurrent high school diploma and associate’s degree from San Antonio Community College.

Furthermore, other students also reclaimed their agency and attributed their return to a personal desire to succeed and meet specific goals. Such was the case of a Texan student who recognized her family’s role in her decision to reenroll but ultimately made a decision that honored “who I wanna be in life.” Equally, Jesus, the Californian who enrolled in high school three years after leaving the eighth grade, regretted the fact that he never received an award of completion for middle school; therefore, he “at least wanted to get a high school diploma.” More importantly, Jesus viewed the high school diploma as the signature of maturity and good citizenship. This perception was exemplified in his statement:

“I know it’s important for me to get a job ‘cause I really think about my future too, you know. It doesn’t look like I’m a really good boy, but I would love to get a good job and be a responsible man.”

Attending to a sense of responsibility was also Julissa’s call to action. Despite dropping out of school on three different occasions, mainly

due to personal problems such as her parents' deportation to Mexico and Central America, Julissa's passion for learning and her inclination toward helping others have never faltered. When asked the reasons for her return to school, Julissa fervently answered:

"I see myself doing a lot of things, a lot of things. Not only for myself, but for the community. I want to do a lot of things. I came back 'cause I want to be a journalist and I know I can't be a journalist unless I go to the university. I love writing. I write my own short stories and stuff like that. I want to write a book on like, like, not on my own life, but I want to write a story on different points of views of students and people, like on immigration. I want to know how people feel when their parents get deported. I want other people to know us. Like people who are racists or people who say, 'Oh yeah, it doesn't matter if they get deported, they're criminals.' I want to answer questions that people really want to know!"

Julissa's long-term goals were driven in part by her belief that this country is unwilling to assist the less fortunate, especially immigrants and the homeless. It was clear that her struggles with immigration issues and troubles living in unstable home environments contributed to a sense of social justice and responsibility to be fulfilled by acquiring an education.

Although few students articulated their plans to help the larger Latino community, 87% of participants expressed interest in financially assisting their families once they complete their education. For instance, Miguel, a former gang member who put his "mother through hell," wants to "buy my mom a pad [house] 'cause my mom got deported and I want to get her back. She can have a big kitchen 'cause she makes good...food." The American value of homeownership arose consistently across the different focus groups. Students referenced homeownership, cars, good-paying jobs, a strong nuclear family, and college degrees as tangible outcomes of a projected ten-year goal.

Without exception, all participants expressed dreams of a "better life," a life of stability, comfort, and privilege not afforded to dropouts.

To arrive at this end, students have reenrolled in schools that foster good learning environments. In the course of the study, reenrollees dichotomized the school system by drawing comparisons between large public high schools and small charter schools. In particular, reenrollees were attracted to schools that offered personalized instruction, a safe and respectful ambiance, flexibility, and caring teachers. In terms of curriculum and instruction, students mentioned relevance and real-world applicability of materials as key benefits of a small school setting. To illustrate, Julissa noted the following: "Teachers here help us learn why things really happened...they don't teach you that in the regular high school. They don't tell you why. But here they let you know why you have to learn math, why you have to know English and history. That's what makes this school not boring."

Pedro also agreed that the core material was relevant to a real-world context. In addition, he praised his teachers for their dedication and caring nature, important attributes which he deemed as missing elements in the public school system. In describing the level of support provided to students, Pedro asserted:

"You can call them if you need anything, like, they help us with school or, you know, with personal problems. You call them, you know, they are there to help you in any way they can and, I mean...that's what impacted me a lot. Not like regular high school, teachers are there just to get paid, you know. They're here...they do get paid, but they are not here for that, they're here to give us a better chance, you know, make sure we do right, 'cause that's all they care about."

Descriptive examples of teachers' support were also depicted by other students. Reenrollees commented on the teachers' willingness to

stay after school and “help with homework,” as well as their openness to differentiate instruction and “use visuals” with students who find it difficult to “sit there and listen to lectures.” Moreover, students were elated by the smallness of the school sites, as it allowed students to build relationships with “everyone at the school,” thus minimizing the constant fights witnessed at the larger high schools. Further, students characterized these settings as caring environments where adults are friendly toward their students, motivate and “push” them to be responsible young adults, and invest the “extra time” to make everyone feel comfortable, well-guided, and properly advised on educational and personal matters. Meeting the holistic needs of students is a monumental task facilitated by the wraparound services that are anchored at the distinct charter school sites. Support services such as counseling, family therapy, and child care were described by students as critical components of their schooling experience. The importance of these programs was summarized by a student who affirmed, “They help us a lot 'cause they really know what your intentions here are. Like, you tell them, you open up to them and they are really, really nice. I think that’s what a lot of students like us need. Because we don’t have no one to talk to. Like, others don’t understand.”

Assessing the academic and personal needs of these students is a critical piece of the alternative school setting. It is precisely these wraparound services (noticeably missing from the comprehensive high school) that attract dropouts to return to school and retain students at their corresponding high schools. A general finding of this study is the students’ need for a well-established infrastructure of social services. Identifying specific student characteristics of reenrollees, however, was difficult given the study’s limitations. The inaccessibility of student records prevented definite conclusions regarding language ability, level of academic achievement, behavioral standing, and student classifications (e.g., special education or gifted). Nonetheless, several student attributes were detected in the data gathering process. For instance, the majority of reenrollees returned to school within the first year of dropping out.

These same students were motivated to reenter the school system by a family member, mentor, or caring teacher. In addition, students chose an alternative school setting that allowed for flexibility (in terms of school schedule) but also offered discipline, live instruction (versus independent study), and a host of support services. These attributes are important to consider, as reenrollees tend to build allegiance to people and not schools. In fact, the majority of focus group participants were not involved in sports, school clubs, or spirit activities when they opted to leave the high school setting. Moreover, students’ commentary made it clear that the mega-high school structure was deemed an impersonal and hostile system that offered ample opportunities “to get in trouble.” Thus, it is important to consider the students’ narratives, perspectives, and needs when proposing and crafting relevant policies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the interplay of dropout predictors, the recommendations below are broad in scope and extend beyond the defined parameters of the educational arena to reach external institutions and policies that directly impact the schooling process of Latino students. Furthermore, it is important to note that these recommendations emerge from the vocalized needs of interviewed students, and the federal and district-level recommendations are a direct response to a growing body of literature on push-out/pull-out factors that affect Latino youth. Still, the factors that contribute to the dropout decision are complex and multifaceted; therefore, the proposed recommendations may not be applicable to all dropout scenarios or reenrollment decisions. Nonetheless, studies and programs have demonstrated that the general approach of these recommendations is likely to have a positive impact on student retention and graduation rates if properly funded and implemented.

POLICIES TO ADDRESS PUSH-OUT FACTORS

Pass the “Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act.”

Federal legislation must be enacted to allow the approximately 65,000 immigrant students who graduate high school annually to pay in-state college tuition rates if they meet their state’s criteria for residency. In addition, legislation should provide a path to legal residency for students who came to the U.S. at age 15 or younger and meet the outlined requirements of the “DREAM Act.” The passage of this needed legislation will grant qualified students the opportunity to attain a postsecondary degree and, hence, a well-paying, career-track job.

Fund gang prevention programs. Efforts to educate students about the consequences of gang involvement should begin in elementary school. To this end, a school-wide age-appropriate curriculum must be developed and taught (in partnership with local law officials) at the school site and in partnership with a

community-based organization that has expertise in gang prevention among Latino youth.

Support educational and supplemental programs.

Since students with credit deficits are likely to be pushed out of school, it is important to channel additional money to local school districts to establish or expand after-school programs, interventions, and test preparation courses (e.g., high school exit exams, SAT, and ACT).

Disseminate best practices. The U.S. Department of Education should conduct and/or support research and evaluation of best practices and programs that have resulted in strong retention rates and high academic outcomes for Latino students across the country.

Identify dropout predictors. Since the dropout experience entails a gradual process of mental disengagement, school personnel should use widely recognized predictors such as absenteeism, grades, and behavior track records to identify students on the verge of dropping out. Identification of at-risk students should begin as early as the sixth grade, as dropout behaviors are prominent and recognizable in the middle school years.

Ensure early outreach to dropouts. School personnel should target efforts to reenroll dropout students immediately following a dropout event, thus increasing their odds of graduating within a five-year span.

Enhance personalization. Downsize large, impersonal schools to small school settings. Smallness invites personalization, reinforces the element of care, and allows trusting relationships between teacher and student, teacher and parent, and student and student to flourish. Furthermore, small environments allow teachers to identify students’ learning needs and promptly intervene with customized educational plans.

Integrate culturally and linguistically relevant curriculum and practices. The school community should respect and incorporate the cultures of its students—their

values, history, language, experiences, and traditions—into every aspect of school life. Moreover, school leadership should adopt or design relevant curricula that enable students to understand material within a real-world context and through their cultural lens.

Uphold high expectations and high supports. The school community should establish high expectations for the academic, intellectual, and social growth of all its students, in particular, vulnerable populations such as English language learners and special education students. To ensure that its students have the means to meet their maximum potential and perform at least at grade level, the school should allocate resources that directly target identified areas of need.

Foster a college-going/college-ready school environment. To make college a tangible and desirable reality for Latino students and their families, students must be exposed to the notion of college, the college requirements, and the college application process from an early age. At the secondary school level, Latino students should be aware of college requirements and adequately prepared for college-level courses.

POLICIES TO ADDRESS PULL-OUT FACTORS

Enact comprehensive immigration reform. Congress should enact comprehensive immigration reform that enables the nearly 12 million undocumented people in this country to find avenues for legalization and assume the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. By legalizing their status, Latino families can provide stability and a sense of safety to their school-age children.

Encourage integrated, place-based strategies. A comprehensive strategy is needed to improve educational outcomes by supporting and funding innovative models that promote active collaboration among housing agencies, community development organizations, and health providers in targeted communities.

Expand employment opportunities for Latino youth. Federally funded programs that create paid internships and summer jobs for at-risk youth can equip students with job-related skills while they earn money and engage in positive activities that will move them further along in their educational and career aspirations.

Target financial resources for wraparound services. School leadership should develop partnerships with local agencies and nonprofit organizations to integrate services such as mental health, family counseling, substance abuse counseling, job training, early childhood care, and after-school programs into the school's programmatic infrastructure.

Establish an infrastructure for support services. Increase the capacity of district and school staff to provide reenrollees with the programs, interventions, support systems, and extracurricular activities needed to retain students and assist them in attaining the high school diploma.

Promote family engagement and community collaboration. School staff should view parents as critical partners in the educational process of Latino students. To this end, the school should actively outreach to parents, in their home language if needed, and encourage them to engage in school-related activities. More importantly, the school should give parents an opportunity to participate in parent training programs, which empower them to become advocates for their children's education.

CONCLUSION

The dropout rates of low-income and minority students, particularly Latinos and Blacks, have been well documented. However, the fact that many of these students choose to reenroll is less known. To fully understand the breadth and depth of the dropout epidemic in the Latino community, the push-out and pull-out factors must be deciphered, understood, and minimized with proper interventions, programs, attitudes, and behaviors. It is time for school systems to assume institutional responsibility and accountability not only for the disengagement of students but also, more importantly, for their reenrollment. Specifically, the reenrollment process must be optimized by providing students with a portfolio of viable options and support systems to ensure their timely graduation. Attempts to retain or reenroll students must consider a multidisciplinary approach that looks at the holistic needs of students and their families, including immigration status, housing needs, employment opportunities, and social service gaps. While the dropout crisis may be limited to specific socioeconomic or racial groups, its financial, social, and educational impact affects us all, making the dropout crisis an American issue.

ENDNOTES

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