The Latino

They're the fastest-growing ethnic group but the most poorly educated. Do we have what it takes to close the gap?

Patricia Gándara

From their first day of kindergarten to their last day of school, Latinos, on average, perform far below most of their peers. They now constitute the largest minority group in the United States and the fastest growing segment of its school-age population. As such, they are inextricably bound up with the nation's future.

The Latino public school population nearly doubled between 1987 and 2007, increasing from 11 to 21 percent of all U.S. students (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2009b). The U.S. Census Bureau predicts that by 2021, one of four U.S. students will be Latino. In key states in the U.S. Southwest, such as Texas and California, the Latino school-age population is already approaching one-half of all students. In these states, the future is already here.

But it's a troubling picture. Latinos are the least educated of all major ethnic groups (see fig. 1, p. 27). Although a large gap exists between the college completion rates of whites and blacks, both groups show steady growth. However, the growth in college degrees for Latinos is almost flat. The failure over more than three decades to make any progress in moving more Latino students successfully through college suggests that what we have been doing to close achievement gaps is not working. This fact has enormous consequences for the United States, as the job market continues to demand more education and Latinos continue to make up a larger and larger portion of the workforce.

Behind at the Start

Can schools close these gaps? It is instructive to look back to the first days of schooling to see the differences that exist at that point. Data from the 1998 Early Childhood Longitudinal Study show that only one-half as many Latino children as white children fall into the highest quartile of math and reading skills at the beginning of kindergarten, and more than twice as many fall into the lowest quartile. The gap is even wider between Latino and...
Asian students (see fig. 2). Access to preschool education, of which Latino children have less than any other major group (NCES, 2009a), contributes to some of this early gap, but it cannot account for all of it. The evidence shows that poverty is the culprit. Young Latino children are more than twice as likely to be poor as white children and are even more likely to be among the poorest of the poor. At least one-third of Latino families lack health insurance; many Latino children rarely see a doctor, dentist, or optometrist, and so they often go to school with toothaches, uncorrected vision problems, and untreated chronic health problems (Berliner, 2009). Many also go to school hungry. These all constitute serious impediments to learning that schools are often poorly equipped to address.

Latino students are many more times as likely as students from other ethnic groups to come from homes where parents do not speak English well—or at all—and where parental education is low. More than 40 percent of Latina mothers lack even a high school diploma, compared with only 6 percent of white mothers; and only about 10 percent of Latina mothers have a college degree or higher, compared with almost one-third of white mothers (see fig. 3). Although Latino students may come from loving homes, limited education and resources do affect their education outcomes. There is no better predictor of how well children will fare in school than parents' education attainment (Murnane, Maynard, & Ols, 1981).

It is difficult for parents to impart to their children experiences and knowledge that they do not have. Many studies have shown that school benefits poor children more than middle-class children (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olsen, 1997; Coleman, 1966); in the case of poor children, schools offer what parents cannot, whereas for middle-class children, school supplements what the home and community routinely offer. Under the right conditions, schools could conceivably close the gaps for Latino children, but the schools that serve most Latino students today have not met those conditions.

The Need for Comprehensive Support

Factors like health care; intense neighborhood segregation (which results in school segregation); and the language and resources of the family may seem beyond the scope of what most schools can reasonably address. But other factors—such as teacher quality, school facilities and resources, and a rich curriculum—are very much within the purview of schools.

One key to successfully meeting Latino students' needs is to conceptualize our efforts as a continuum of interventions rather than discrete interventions; according to the literature, the effect of a single intervention tends to fade in the absence of sustained supportive environments. Preschool won't, on its own, permanently narrow or close achievement gaps, just as the effects of an intervention in elementary
school will probably not last through high school.

The evidence suggests that a continuing net of support for disadvantaged students is likely to significantly improve their academic outcomes and reduce the wide gaps in achievement that now exist. It follows that under these conditions, students will be more likely to graduate from high school and successfully prepare for college.

**A Focus on Early Childhood**

If Latino children are going to catch up with their more-advantaged peers, they must have access to high-quality preschool. We have never been successful in closing these achievement gaps after students are in elementary school. A number of studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of high-quality Head Start–type programs that provide comprehensive services to students and their families. The research on Head Start has demonstrated "moderate effects on pre-academic skills, greater parental awareness of the needs of their children and increased skills in meeting those needs, and

**Latinos are inextricably bound up with the future of the United States.**

 provision of health and nutrition services and information" (Gándara & Contreras, 2009, p. 259). Of course, once children leave Head Start, they also lose the health and family support services that are so important for many low-income Latino students.

In his study of Oklahoma's universal preschool program, Gormley (2008) documented that Latino students benefited more than any other category of student from attending preschool. In both reading and math readiness, the Latinos in the program performed approximately one year above those Latino students who did not attend preschool. Students in full-day kindergarten also outperformed those who attended a half-day program. The researchers attributed the score gains to the policy of hiring fully credentialed teachers and paying them at the same salary level as other teachers. The teachers not only were competent, but also were likely to stay and build strong programs at the center over time. Other researchers have found similar gains for low-income preschool students in high-quality programs (Karoly et al., 1998).

The single biggest argument against providing universal preschool—apart from its cost—is that research has shown that the positive effects are not sustained for many students; students show an initial rise in test scores that seems to disappear after one or two years of school (Currie & Thomas,

![FIGURE 1. Bachelor's Degree Completion by Ethnicity](image1)

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>37</td>
<td></td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>21</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
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The figures represent the percentage of 25- to 29-year-olds in the United States who completed a bachelor's degree or higher.


![FIGURE 2. Percentage of Kindergartners Scoring at Highest and Lowest Quartiles, on the 1998 Early Childhood Longitudinal Study](image2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Math</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic Group</td>
<td>Highest Quartile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
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<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


![FIGURE 3. Mother's Education Level by Ethnicity](image3)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Less than High School</th>
<th>High School</th>
<th>Bachelor's Degree or Higher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>41.3%</td>
<td>28.6%</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
<td>29.0%</td>
<td>31.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
<td>34.4%</td>
<td>15.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
<td>44.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Asian percentages were based on a small sample, so they may not be entirely representative.

1995). However, researchers have argued that this is probably because the schools these students attend are too weak to sustain the positive effects of preschool. Research has also shown that students’ environments outside school probably contribute more to schooling outcomes than in-school factors do. Compared with all other developed nations of the world, the United States provides the weakest safety net for its low-income students and their families (Rainwater & Smeeding, 2005). This surely contributes to the erosion of positive effects of schooling interventions.

A Focus on K–12 Supports
To sustain the effects of early interventions, it is crucial to strengthen the capacity of K–12 schools to monitor and support students once they arrive at school. Some programs, such as Project GRAD (www.projectgrad.org), have attempted to bundle research-based interventions that follow students as a cohort through their K–12 years. These include well-established programs, such as the University of Chicago School Mathematics Project (http://ucsmmp .uchicago.edu) and Success for All (www.successforall.net). In fact, consistent with other studies, the Success for All researchers found good outcomes for Spanish-speaking students in their regular English curriculum but superior outcomes using their bilingual curriculum (Slavin & Cheung, 2005).

Although Project GRAD takes a whole-school reform approach, it also monitors students and their progress. Recent findings indicate that students who stay in the program longer appear to benefit the most and that careful monitoring of individual students is central to the effectiveness of education interventions (Gándara & Bial, 2001).

High school programs that focus on dropout prevention and college-going have proven particularly successful for Latino youth.

Dual-Language and Two-Way Immersion Programs
Programs promoting bilingualism have been found to produce superior academic outcomes for both Latino students whose first language is Spanish and for non-Spanish speakers, while also developing a strong competence in a second language (see Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2006). Such programs, whose goal is to transform monolingual speakers of either English or Spanish into fully bilingual and biliterate students, have mushroomed in recent years. Because the programs give equal status to both languages and typically enroll Latino students alongside non-Latino students, they have the additional advantage of (Gándara & Bial, 2001). They (1) provide at least one key person whose job it is to know, connect with, and monitor the progress of each student; (2) structure a supportive peer group that reinforces program goals; (3) provide access to strong curriculum that leads to college preparation; (4) attend to students’ cultural backgrounds; and (5) show students how they can finance their education, providing scholarships when possible.

One high school program that focuses specifically on preparing Latino students for college is the Puente Project, which is active in 36 California high schools. Through a school support team, the program provides a net of services: two years of intensive college-preparatory English, focusing on writing skills and incorporating Latino literature; intensive college counseling; and a mentor from the community who acts as a guide and role model. The program has doubled the college-going of participating students and has motivated them to attend more selective schools. This is important because Latino students tend to enroll in less selective colleges than they qualify for (Fry, 2004), and students who attend more selective schools tend to have higher graduation rates (Sigal & Tienda, 2005). Key to the success of the program is its strong adult-student connections and the availability of a counselor to advocate for the students.

Magnet Schools
Magnet schools often specialize in a specific field, such as medicine, the arts, or science. A number of studies have shown that in addition to benefiting from a more desegregated schooling experience, magnet school students tend to outperform students in regular public and private schools in both reading and math scores on standardized tests (Frankenberg & Seigal-Hawley, 2008).

Dropout Prevention and College-Going Programs
High school programs that focus on immediate issues such as dropout prevention and college-going tend to be more successful for Latino youth than those with less focused goals. Effective programs tend to share five components...
of not belonging. A crucial means by which students attach to school and form supportive friendship groups is through extracurricular activities—sports, band, newspaper, and other clubs. Unfortunately, Latino students are less likely to participate in these activities, either because they perceive the club to be exclusive or because of logistical problems, like needing to work or help out at home after school or not having transportation or the money required for the activity. Latino students’ absence from these activities is also related to their lack of access to the same social circles as their middle-class peers, reducing their chances of being invited into these activities.

Schools that effectively address this issue find ways to incorporate clubs, sports, and other activities into school routines and bring the benefits of these activities into the classroom. For example, some schools mix students in heterogeneous classes and create conditions for students from different groups to interact in conditions in which they are more equal in status (see Gibson, Gándara, & Koyama, 2004).

**How School-Community Partnerships Can Help**

Schools alone cannot close the yawning gaps in achievement. But schools can partner with other institutions to help narrow those gaps. Collaboration in the following three areas can make a significant difference for many Latino students.

- **Create magnet schools that appeal to middle-class parents.** Some interventions are not costly in terms of dollars but require spending political capital. For example, in gentrifying areas of the inner cities, we could attack the problem of neighborhood and school segregation through thoughtful and progressive planning. The apartments that have sprung up in formerly downtrodden areas typically market to professional single people and young couples without children—the assumption being that young families do not want to live in the city center. We need to create attractive options by offering desegregated, high-quality schools adjacent to open spaces that could serve both the families of young professionals and inner-city residents. Because dual-language programs often appeal to middle-class parents, it would make sense to include such programs as features of new inner-city magnet schools.

- **Work with health and social service agencies.** Because access to health care and social services is an acute problem for Latino families, schools should be the primary contact for these kinds of services for youth. The Center for Health and Health Care in Schools (n.d.) reports that in 2006, there were more than 1,800 school-based health centers around the United States, providing care for children who might otherwise not have been able to access it. Although this is an encouraging number, it represents a small fraction of U.S. schools that serve low-income students and Latinos.

An evaluation of California’s Healthy Start Program, which provides integrated services primarily to Latino children and families, showed that it reduced needs for food, clothing, transportation, and medical and dental care; improved clients’ emotional health and family functioning; reduced teen risk behaviors; modestly improved grade point averages; and reduced student mobility (Wagner & Golan, 1996). Nevertheless, the program has progressively lost funding.

One study found that such programs are difficult to operate because of the need to integrate many services that compete with one another for dollars (Romualdi, 2000). However, if we can stabilize funding, these programs can make a big difference in the lives of Latino children. Placing medical, dental, and social services in an accessible, safe place makes sense if the goal is to help schools do their job of teaching these students.

Critics have argued against the “effectiveness” of these centers, in part because research has failed to show that they significantly raise standardized test scores. But children who arrive at school with basic health, emotional, and nutritional needs unmet are not ready to learn. It only makes sense to evaluate the centers on their primary mission—healthier developmental outcomes for children that ultimately lead to better opportunities to learn. Moreover, if such programs can create family attachments to a school, thereby reducing student mobility, this could result in long-term benefits for Latino students.
Given the opportunity, most parents are eager to help their children succeed in school.


References
Berliner, D. (2009). Poverty and potential: