DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 401 353 UD 031 330

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TITLE Latino Youth and High School Graduation.
PUB DATE Aug 96
NOTE 24p.; Invited address at the Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association (104th, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, August 1996).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Dropouts; Educational Practices; *Grade Repetition; *Graduation Requirements; High Risk Students; *High School Graduates; High Schools; High School Students; Institutional Characteristics; Low Achievement; *Mexican Americans; Minimum Competency Testing; Standardized Tests; *Track System (Education)
IDENTIFIERS *Latinos; Texas

ABSTRACT

A study begun in a Texas school district in 1988 focused on families of Mexican origin, studying characteristics of their schools and studying what the families and schools did or did not do to promote graduation from high school. The sample of 100 15-year-olds labeled as "at risk" was fairly typical of Latino students in the school district, with only about 13% receiving limited English proficiency services. Even parents with little or no formal education valued a high school diploma and understood its importance. The study found that school practices, rather than parent influence, were the primary cause of dropping out. Three practices in particular contributed to dropping out. The first was retention in grade, which resulted in over-age students with a sense of inadequacy. The second detrimental practice was tracking, or grouping students by standardized scores, which lessened student expectations and damaged self esteem. The third educational practice cited was the addition of passing an exit-level test as a requirement for obtaining a high school diploma. Especially in the lower academic tracks, preparation for these tests is inadequate, and students often drop out because of repeated failure. Students and parents certainly bear a share of the responsibility for continuing in school, but school practices are the main reason Mexican American students in this district dropped out. (Contains 3 figures, 2 tables, and 23 references.) (SLD)

Latino Youth and High School Graduation.

Toni Falbo

Latino Youth and High School Graduation,

Invited Address at the Annual Convention of the

American Psychological Association, August, 1996

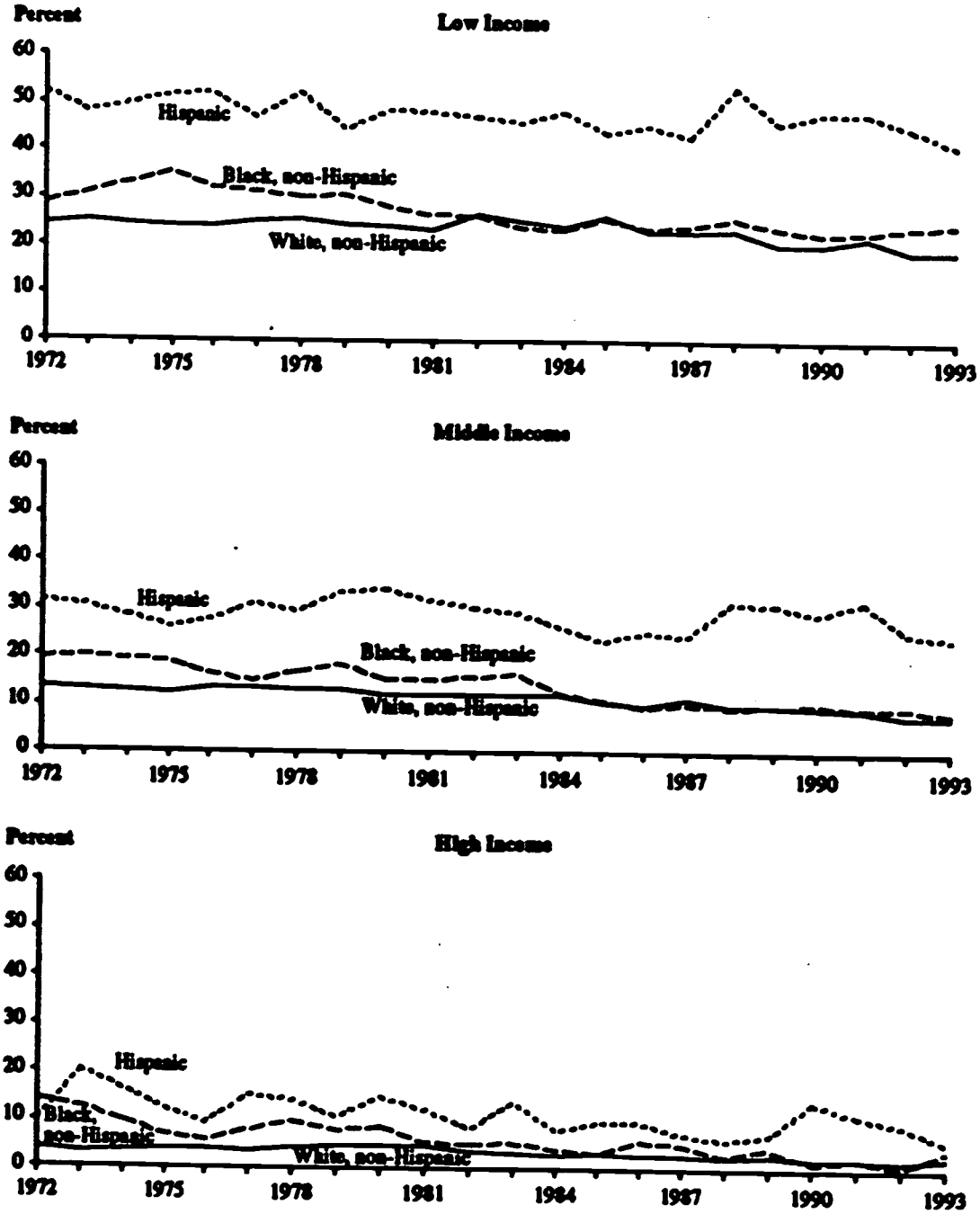
Toni Falbo, Professor of Educational Psychology and Sociology

University of Texas at Austin

The education of Latino schoolchildren is only now beginning to attract national attention. By far, students of Mexican origin predominate in this very heterogeneous category, which includes Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Guatemalans, and other Spanish-speaking people. Children of Mexican origin include the children of Mexican Americans as well as children of Mexican immigrants who are in the U.S. either legally or illegally. In many large, western states the proportion of schoolchildren who are of Mexican origin is high. For example, in the fall of 1993, approximately 37% of all schoolchildren in California and 36% of all schoolchildren inTexas were of Mexican origin (National Center for Education Statistics, 1995).

One of the concerns about the Mexican origin population is the slowness with which this group has assimilated to mainstream American culture (Chapa, 1990; Ortiz, 1996; Portes & Zhou, 1993). The general trend for immigrants to the U.S. has been for increased Americanization with each generation (Gordon, 1964, 1978). Assimilation has occurred for immigrants from Mexico, but at a slower rate than for immigrants from other countries. Furthermore, Mexicans who came to the U.S. in the 1980s have been assimilating more slowly than Mexicans who came to the U.S. in the 1960s or 70s (Ortiz, 1996). Assimilation is measured in several ways. The topic I am focusing on here is earning a high school diploma. Currently, the average number of years of education for the

Figure1 —Status dropout rate, ages 16-24, by income* and race–ethnicity: October 1972 through October 1993



*Family income in current residence. Low income is defined as the bottom 20 percent of all family incomes for the relevant year; middle income is between 20 and 80 percent of all family incomes; and high income is the top 20 percent of all family incomes.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey, October (various years), unpublished data.

Mexican origin adult population is much less that the non Hispanic White population (Bean & Tienda, 1987; Bean, Chapa, Berg, & Sowards, 1994).

Figure 1 portrays the gap. The three figures demonstrate the percent dropouts among young adults in the U.S. population between 1972 and 1993. The top figure presents the data for youth whose income is in the lowest 20 percent. The bottom figure presents the data for youth whose income is in the highest 20 percent. And the middle figure portrays the data for youth in the middle 60 percent. As you can see from all three figures, the group with the highest percentage of dropouts is Hispanic, the term the U.S. Census has used to label Latinos. There are several other facts that these figures portray. First, income status is highly related to dropout status: youth from the poorest families are much more likely to drop out that youth from the richest. Second, the lines representing Blacks and Whites merged in 1991 and have not been significantly different since then. Third, while dropout rates for Hispanics have improved in the 90s, they still remain much higher than those of the Black and Whites.

Table 1 presents the most recent information about income and ethnic differences in dropout rates among young adults. As shown below, Hispanics

Table 1—Status dropout rate, ages 16–24, by income and race-ethnicity: October 1994

Family income	Total	Race-ethnicity[1] White, non-Hispanic	Black, non-Hispanic	Hispanic
Total	11.5	7.7	12.6	30.0
Family income[2]				
Low income level	21.0	14.3	23.0	39.5
Middle income level	11.3	8.2	9.9	28.1
High income level	4.4	3.5	3.9	17.6

[1]Not shown separately are non-Hispanics who are neither black nor white, but who are included in the total.
[2]Low income is defined as the bottom 20 percent of all family incomes for 1994; middle income is between 20 and 80 percent of all family incomes; and high income is the top 20 percent of all family incomes.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey, October 1994, unpublished data.

have a much higher dropout rate than either Whites or Blacks, and this is true across all income groups. Thus, the gap between Hispanics and non Hispanics persists.

According to the Bureau of the Census (Montgomery, 1994), the proportion of young Mexican origin adults who have at least a high school diploma has increased from 46 % in 1983 to 53% in 1993. Still, this proportion is way below that of non Hispanic Whites, 84%. Thus, in 1993, the gap between Mexican origin youth and White youth was almost 30 percentage points.

In an attempt to understand more fully the problem, Harriett Romo and I began a study in 1988 in a Texas school district. At the outset, we focused on what Mexican origin families did or failed to do to promote their children's graduation from high school. We studied 100, 15-year-old Mexican American and Mexican immigrant students who had been labeled as "at risk" of dropping out of school. We followed them for four years, during the time when they would be expected to attend high school and graduate. From their school district we obtained information about the students, such as their eventual graduation (or dropout) status, the number of credits earned, their standardized test scores, their low income status, and their attendance rates. We interviewed the parents and teens in their homes to measure their expectations and experiences about school. The parents also described the family structure, their own educational attainments, and their values about school. In addition, we interviewed a subset of the parents and students in their homes and accompanied the students to their schools. We talked to their teachers, counselors, and administrators.

Our sample of 100 was fairly typical of "at risk" Latino students in the school district. Slightly over half qualified for free or reduce lunch, only about 13% were receiving limited English proficiency services, and 10 % were receiving special education services. As Table 2 shows, only about 29% of the parents in

Table 2. Description of The Parents at Beginning of Study

Spanish Speaking	29%
Mexican Born	25%
Educational Attainment (all parents)	8.7 years
Educational Attainment (U.S.born only)	10.5 years
Single Parent	25%

our study preferred speaking to us in Spanish and about a quarter of the parents had been born in Mexico. The educational attainment of the parents of the students we studied was only 8.7 years. Although we had a few parents who had college degrees, many of the immigrant parents had never attended school and many of the second generation parents had been removed from school by their parents after completing the third grade. When we generated a mean score for number of years of school for only those parents who were born in the U.S., the mean educational attainment increased to 10.5 years. Thus, while our sample contained a few parents with bachelors or associates degrees, the more typical parent had less than a high school education. At the time we began our data collection, about one-quarter of the families had only one adult in the household.

Overall, our sample consisted of Mexican American and Mexican immigrant families. All but one of the students preferred speaking English; while 75% of the parents preferred English.

Although popular wisdom about the high dropout rates of Mexican origin students blames their parents, typically arguing that these parents don't value education, all the parents and students we studied valued a high school diploma. They understood that getting a high school diploma was essential for obtaining a good job. Even Mexican immigrant parents with zero years of formal education could articulate the relationship between attaining a high school diploma and getting a better job. Despite this, only 31% of the students in our sample graduated. Why did this happen?

We found that school practices often were the primary cause of dropping out. I will highlight some of these policies and practices and discuss how psychological theories and tools have been used to justify and maintain these practices.

Grade Retention. The first policy is grade retention, that is the policy of not promoting students who have not demonstrated mastery of skills thought to be needed for a grade level.

The causes of grade retention have varied depending on whether the student is in primary or secondary school. In elementary school, it was relatively common in the 1980s for students to be deemed not ready to enter or complete first grade because they did not exhibit "readiness." These students spend an extra year between kindergarten and first or they repeat the first grade, based on teacher recommendations and the test results of psychologists. This type of grade retention makes the child one year older than the typical age for a grade level.

The teachers and psychologists who recommended such grade retention thought that they were helping the child be successful in school. However, many research studies have demonstrated that the expected benefits do not materialize (Shepard & Smith, 1989). While young children rarely complain about grade retention, the negative effect of their being overage for grade level becomes obvious when the students are in secondary schools (Shepard & Smith, 1989).

In middle or high school, students fail to become promoted because they flunk important courses, such as English or math. Several studies have found that students who had been retained in elementary school are likely to be retained in secondary school, so that by the time they are in ninth grade, they are two years older than their classmates.

Figure 2 presents the percent of 1989-90 students 2 or more years overage by grade and ethnicity for the state of Texas (Texas Education Agency, 1991). I have selected this figure because the data here are most relevant to the students we studied. The top line represents the Hispanic students. They were

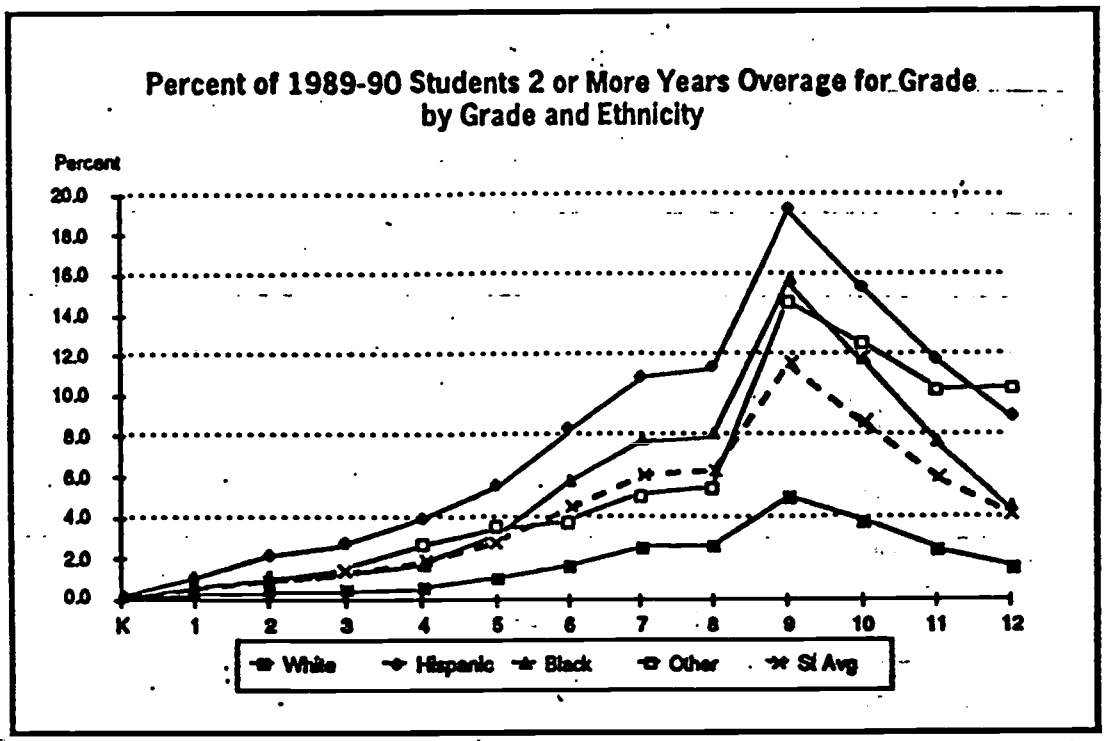


Figure 2 : from the following publication:

Texas Education Agency (1991). Older is better, right? Not really. Research Briefs, Issue 91.1.

the most likely to be in this category of having been grade retained twice. The next line represents Black students, and the line representing Whites, is the bottom line. There are two important points here. First, Hispanic students were more likely to be grade retained twice than were White students. The second point here is that the percentage for all groups peaks in the ninth grade, the first year of high school, and then drops off, precipitously. Why? Twice grade retained students drop out.

In our study, many students told us that they dropped out because they felt that they were too old to be in high school. They wanted to be doing what their age mates were doing. One student in our sample dropped out, got a GED with the aim of entering community college. In this way, he would be more like his friends, who were all entering college. What was more common was the reaction of another student. He arrived in high school and discovered that there was no way he could make up for the fact that he had repeated seventh grade. He realized that he would be 21 by the time he graduated. As the school year wore on, he found it harder and harder to get out of bed in the morning and go to school. By March, he simply stopped attending. He said he felt too tired. He dropped out.

Even those who toughed it out and stayed in school were daunted by their overage status. One student told us that he was so embarrassed to be older than the other students in his geometry class, that he avoided asking questions during class. As a result, he flunked the course and had to take it again in summer school. Fortunately,in summer school, there were few younger students, and he was able to request the help he needed. He graduated.

As Figure 2 suggests, however, Hispanics are disproportionately in this group of grade retained students. In our sample 77% had been grade retained at

least one year. All of the students in our sample who entered high school two or more years overage for grade level dropped out.

Tracking. The second practice is tracking, or the grouping of students by standardized scores, for the purpose of offering "appropriate" coursework.

In the early part of this Century, most Americans did not have as much education as a high school diploma. As the American economy grew and we became industrialized, we legislated compulsory education that spanned kindergarten through 12th grade. Middle schools (or junior highs) were invented to prepare a very small percentage of students for entry into college or to prepare the vast majority of students for work immediately after high school. The rationale originally was that only a few students needed to be educated to a standard high enough to prepare them for college. In the early part of this century, most students became farmers or line workers in manufacturing and consequently were not thought to need higher scholastic skills (Hechinger, 1993).

That situation began changing in the 70s. Now, a person with solely a high school diploma earns substantially less than someone with a post-secondary education (Marshall & Tucker, 1992). Teens who drop out of high school now are almost destined to a lifetime of poverty in the next Century. In response to the changed American economy, both Republican and Democratic politicians have agreed that schools must change in order to encourage all students to strive for post-secondary education, either in the form of bachelor's degrees, or other forms of specialized training, such as in the skilled trades (Marshall & Tucker, 1992). Unfortunately, the schools have not restructured to meet the needs of our changing economy.

This problem was apparent in the secondary schools that the students in our sample attended. Most of the students we studied left elementary school with positive views of themselves and bright hopes for their futures. They all

expected to graduate from high school and many hoped to have careers in such fields as engineering, law, or business. However, as they matured into adolescence, they become aware of social class and race/ethnic differences and the consequences of these differences for their futures. During middle school, their educational dreams began to dim and their school performance started to slip. In the literature, many of the explanations for this decline focus on the students' motivation for school participation (Gibson & Ogbu, 1991; Ogbu, 1978). Middle school students absorb the attitudes of their teachers who believe that the students in the non college tracks are unable to rise to intellectual challenges (Oakes, 1985; Wheelock, 1992). The curriculum for such students does not encourage them to acquire the level and type of higher order thinking skills that will prepare them for participation in more challenging high school courses.

Who decides whether a student is tracked into college preparatory or non college tracks? In the district we studied, tracking decisions were made primarily on the basis of how students scored on norm referenced tests. School counselors assigned students to high, middle, or low tracts based on their percentile scores. Because NRTs are highly associated with the socioeconomic and ethnic/racial background of the student's family, it turned out that the higher tracks were composed predominantly of higher income, White students, while the lower tracks consisted primarily of lower income, nonWhite students.

The argument of Ogbu and others is that since low income and minority youth have been disproportionately tracked into the non-college preparatory courses (Dornbusch, et al, 1990; Oakes, 1985), these students are de-motivated in school. They develop oppositional identities. Since the school has denied them a chance for a good job in the future, they define themselves as contrary to the processes and goals of schooling. In our study, we found that middle school students in non college tracks often ridiculed their classmates who

turned in their homework or performed well on exams. Low-track students who tried hard in school were called "nerds" or "schoolboys." Several students we studied preferred repeating the seventh grade to handing in their homework and suffering this form of derision.

The manual of the NRT used by the school district we studied stated that these standardized scores were highly reliable and that the correlation between a student's score in the fourth grade and a student's score in the 12th grade was between .7 and .8 (Hieronymus and Hoover, 1986). Since participation in the college preparatory tracks was restricted to students who scored very well on NRTs, a student tracked into a non college track in middle school would never make it into the college track. By relying on NRTs to sort students into college-bound or not, the school district we studied perpetuated inequality. A student from a nonWhite or low income household was highly likely to be trained not to go to college; while a student from a White or higher income household was highly likely to be educated to succeed in college.

Exit Level Tests. The third educational practice is the addition of passing an exit-level-test as a requirement for obtaining a high school diploma.

In Texas, as in many other states, the 1980s was a time that legislatures attempted to improve public education. Business leaders, including Ross Perot, believed that many high school graduates did not have the skills they should. Therefore, to make certain that all students who graduated from high school had the minimum skills expected of them, the state instituted an additional requirement for graduation, the passing of a standardized test. This is a criterion referenced test, consisting of three parts, one, reading, one writing, and one mathematics.

The problem has been, however, that Latino students have been disproportionately likely to flunk the test and be denied their diplomas. For

example, 60% of all 10th graders talking the exit level test passed all sections, a requirement for graduation. That percentage for white students was 74%; while for Latino students, 44% (Texas Education Agency, 1996).

The students in our sample should have been in the class of 1991; however, many were like Alice, who because she had been forced to repeat first grade, was in the class of 1992. This class was the first to have to pass a new form of the exit level test, one that included a writing sample and higher order math problems. Alice was the 7th of 9 children, all daughters. Her father had attended school for only 7 years, although he had a job in one of the city's utility departments. Her mother had died of breast cancer when Alice was in the first grade for the second time. Alice completed elementary school with the aid of special education services, then completed middle school without problems, but then, when she entered high school, one of her older sisters, who was attending college, convinced Alice that she needed to take a series of very high level, college preparatory courses. Although Alice attended school daily, she became overloaded with this demanding coursework and flunked enough courses to be grade retained again. Another one of her sisters attempted to help Alice by encouraging her to sign up for a vocational program, one that allowed her to work part-time as a bagger in a grocery store and go to school a few hours a day. Alice did this and was able to make up for her lost credits so that she was only one year overage by the time she was a senior.

Her main obstacle to high school graduation was passing the exit-level test. We accompanied her to school, in order to determine what she was being taught during her last two years of high school in the vocational track. From what we observed and what she told us about her schoolwork, little of her classroom experience was relevant to passing the test. Indeed, it was difficult to figure out how she would have acquired the skills expected of her on the exit level test

based on what we observed. We accompanied her to a special training program that was designed to help her learn how to pass the test for her fourth and final try. We discovered that the room where this training occurred consisted of computers that were programmed to present her with sample items. We sat with her while she went through the computerized program, and noticed that she did not read carefully the questions before choosing an answer. Apparently, a teacher once had told her to move through the items quickly, advising her to guess when the answer wasn't immediately obvious to her. We were not surprised when we discovered that she had flunked again. She gave up trying to pass, having accumulated enough credits to graduate, but unable to receive the diploma. Ironically, during this time, she had been promoted from bagger to checker at the grocery store where she worked and when we last saw her, she was working at a desk job at the city. She was however, ashamed to be the only one of the 9 children in her family, not to have earned a high school diploma.

Alice is not a rare case. Only 28% of the Latino students in her grade at her high school passed the test the first time they took it. Thousands of students every year are denied their diplomas in Texas because they cannot pass the exit-level test. Because of the obvious injustice involved here, the state education agency has been motivating school administrators throughout the state to prevent such cases from happening. Principals have been fired if too many students in their school end up in Alice's situation. This has led to efforts to align the curriculum more to the content of the test and to provide more opportunity for specialized training for those who need it.

Latino High School Graduation: The Book

After spending four years with these families, Harriett Romo and I decided to write a book about our findings (Romo & Falbo, 1996). In Latino High School Graduation, we made several recommendations for changes in the schools,

based on what we saw happen to the students in our study. Sometimes when we present our recommendations, we find that a few members of the audience will become upset because they assume that we are arguing that parents and students have no responsibility for school performance. To prevent this type of misunderstanding from occurring, let me state from the outset that we believe that both students and parents have some responsibility for school success. In particular, parents are responsible for meeting the basic needs of their children, such as shelter, food, medical care, supervision, and so on. They are also responsible for getting their children to attend school. Students are responsible for attending classes, doing their schoolwork, and following school rules.

Having said that, let me point out that we cannot blame early grade retention and tracking on either parents or students. These are educational practices -- decisions made by teachers, counselors, and other professionals, working within the school. These are also actions that we know reduce the likelihood that a student will graduate and we know that these school practices affect Latinos disproportionately. Thus, Harriett Romo and I recommended in our book that we discontinue these practices and solve the problems these practices were designed to solve differently.

Our recommendation about eliminating early grade retentions is not particularly controversial. Many states, including Texas, have legislated that all children must enter first grade by a specified age, period. Other states, notably Kentucky, deal with the varying maturity of young students by creating classrooms that contain a mixture of ages. Indeed, the whole concept of grade levels is unnecessary and could be replaced by mastery levels, regardless of chronological age.

Our recommendation about eliminating tracking based on standardized test scores is also consistent with the recommendations of others. Researchers

like Oakes (1985) have demonstrated how tracking reduces the opportunity of middle and low track students from acquiring higher order thinking skills, necessary for success in post-secondary education. Wheelock (1992) has demonstrated how to create untracked schools that benefit all students. The Carnegie Corporation (Task Force on the Education of Young Adolescents, 1989) has advocated restructuring middle schools so that students are not tracked by ability groups. Sadly, tracking continues in most middle and high schools in the U.S.

The topic of grade retentions in secondary school certainly brings in the student as a responsible party. The thinking is that students flunk courses because they are not working hard enough to pass. If students attend class, hand in their homework, study hard, and ask for help, when needed, they should be able to avoid course failure. While students are the major determinant of Fs in secondary school, still, the school has also made a contribution to this outcome. In the high schools that the students we studied attended, the majority of students flunked at least one course during the first semester of their freshman year. This made graduation in four years relatively unlikely for most of the students attending these schools. Why do so many students flunk?

In our study, we found that 79% of the students told us that neither their mathematics nor their English courses were too difficult for them. In fact, the majority (73%) rated some of the classes as boring or dull. Virtually none of the students who dropped out told us that they dropped out because their coursework was too difficult. Instead, their coursework was at such a low level that it failed to motivate them to participate.

I think it is reasonable to expect teachers to create classroom experiences for students that are engaging and challenging. Unfortunately, in our experience, teachers of college prep students were much more likely to make the effort to

engage and challenge students. Teachers in non college prep classrooms expend more energy attempting to control students than on engaging them in learning.

Finally, about exit level tests, I am arguing that if we have to have them, then, schools should make certain that all students are educated to meet these standards. During the time of our study, schools did not make a strong effort to educate all students up to meeting the skills standards required to pass the test.

Essentially, the schools via the quantity and quality of learning they provided, did not give all students a good chance of passing the test. In this regard, the school district we studied was typical of those in urban school districts nationally. That is, students in the college preparatory tracks are provided with challenging curriculum that promotes the intellectual development of the students so that almost all of them pass the exit level tests the first time they take them. In contrast, students in the lower tracks, often called vocational tracks, have not been provided with adequate amount of challenging coursework that leads them to acquire the skills they need to pass the test. Relatively few of them pass the test the first time they take them.

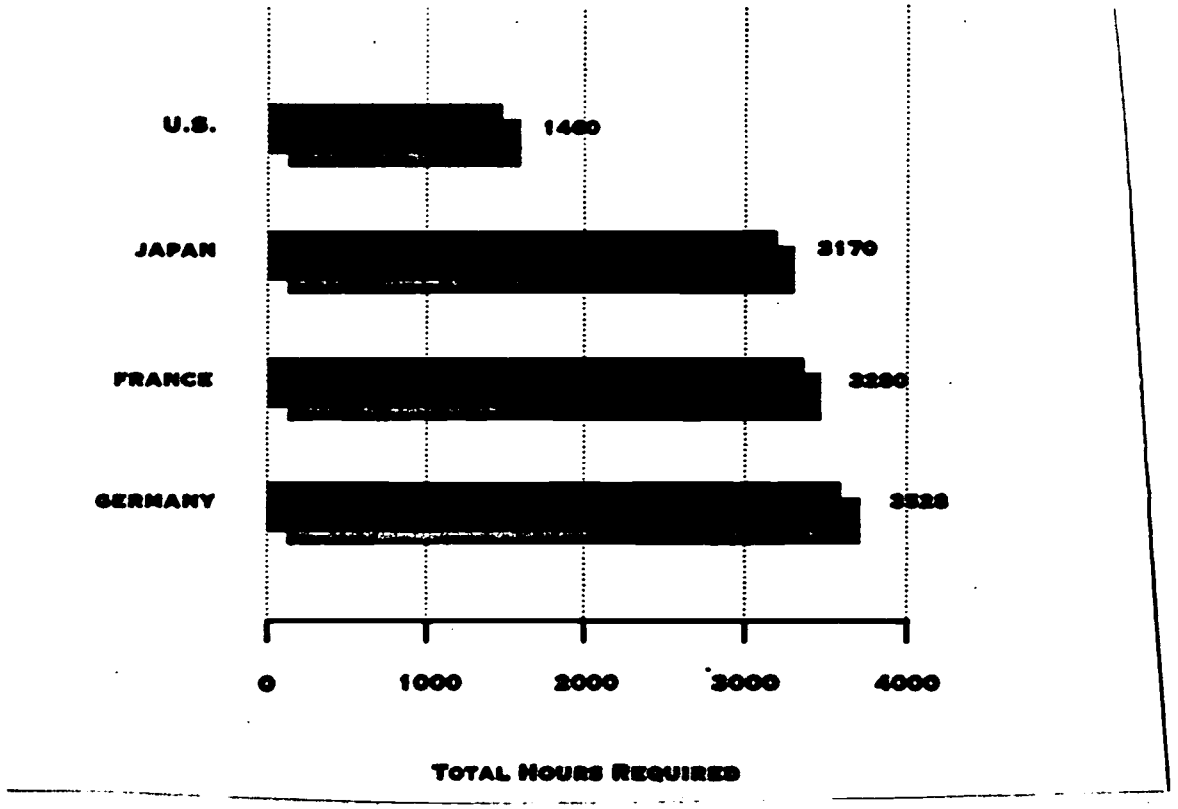
What these students need is more instructional time dedicated to training them to acquire the skills they need. We have to accept the reality that some people need more time to acquire a level of skills necessary for high school graduation. These students are not going to stay in school until they are 21 and public schools will not enroll them after that age. In our book, we recommend that such students be given more instructional time, every day, every week, every year. By this we mean that our schools need to make better use of the time during the regular instructional day so that all students have enough time to master the necessary skills. We also recommend 6-day weeks, and 220 day school years.

Our international competitors already require that their students spend more time learning than we do. For example, Japanese students have spent 240 days a year in school; compared to our 170-80. By the time Japanese students are 16, they have already experienced the equivalent of four more years of school than their American counterparts (Berliner, 1993). Can we be surprised that Japanese students outscore ours? The Japanese are not alone. In Figure 3, taken from the report from a national commission on time and learning, points out how little time we provide our high school students (National Education Commission on Time and Learning, 1994).

I'd like to end this presentation by advocating that psychologists get involved in restructuring schools so that schools provide all students with the opportunity to acquire the skills they need in order to graduate from high school. At present, most urban public schools do not provide all students with the quantity and quality of education they need in order to graduate from high school and go on to post-secondary education.

Psychological theory and tools have been used in American public education to perpetuate inequality, justifying early grade retentions and tracking by ability. Psychological theories and tools could also be used to restructure public schools to promote opportunity for all students. Psychologist know a great deal about motivation and learning, cognitive development, individual differences and we need to make a greater effort to change school practices.

Figure 3. The Final Four Years in Four Nations: Estimated Required Core Academic Time



Source: National Education Commission on Time and Learning, 1944

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Title: Latino Youth + High School Graduation

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Publication Date: August 12, 1996 (when the speech was given)

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