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ABSTRACT

A study used focus groups and interviews to examine dropout causes among Hispanic middle and high school students in Hillsborough County, Florida. Major contributors to Latino student success included personal motivation to succeed, supportive parents, and being interested and involved in school activities. Factors contributing to dropout included lack of student motivation; negative peer influence; low support from parents, teachers, and community; responsibilities outside of school; language and cultural barriers; and inflexible school policies. Recommendations for action fell into four categories: (1) communication and support for students, school personnel, and parents; (2) availability of activities for Latino students; (3) appreciation of Latino culture; and (4) communication of school policies. A program at a middle school in the study, mentioned by students as being helpful, is described. The program recruits energetic, bilingual teachers and tutors to provide assistance with homework and basic skills review. It also recruits former program participants and other Latino tutors to serve as role models. Remedial courses with low teacher-student ratios are provided for at-risk students. Strategies are employed to increase parent participation and student involvement in extracurricular activities. Results from a brainstorming session following this presentation are outlined. (TD)

They Are Our Kids:

Significant Findings from a 1998 Latino Dropout Study

Presenters
Teresa M. Nesman, Brigita Barobs-Gahr and Dr. Lydia Medrano

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2001 National Migrant Education Conference, April 2, 2001 Orlando, FL
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The first part of this session includes the findings from a local study of Latino student dropout in Hillsborough County, Florida. In the second part of the session we will look at a program that has been implemented in one area of the county that serves migrant Latino students. The final part of the session will include breaking up into groups for brainstorming about how to apply what has been covered in the session to your local communities.

Background

First, we'd like to tell you about the partners that were involved in the Latino Dropout Study. This was a collaborative effort between the Latino Coalition, the Hispanic Services Council, the Children's Board of Hillsborough County, Hillsborough County Public Schools, and the Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute at the University of South Florida. The study was motivated by the Latino Coalition's concerns about national and local dropout statistics for Latino students and initiated by the submission of a grant proposal to the Children's Board, which is a community funder. The Hispanic Services Council was the fiscal agent and co-coordinator of the study and the Department of Child and Family studies at the Louis de la Parte Mental Health Institute was contracted to coordinate the research.

The Latino Coalition's concerns about dropout are based on national, state and local statistics that indicate that Latino/Hispanic students have the highest dropout rates and

low achievement levels throughout the educational continuum (U.S. Dept. of Education 1998; President's Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans 1994). Students classified as Hispanic through the US Dept. of Education had a dropout rate in 1997 that was almost twice as high as students who were classified as "white" (7.8% compared to 4.0%). The percentage of all Latino young adults in the US who had dropped out of school was almost four times that of white youths (28.6% compared to 7.3%).

To compare with national levels of dropout, the dropout rate for Hispanics in the state of Florida in 1997 was 8.3% (it was 4.2% for whites and 6.6% for blacks) (Florida Dept. of Education, 1998). The Hillsborough County school system reported a dropout rate of 6.4% for all students during 1998, but percentages by ethnicity were not reported (Hillsborough County School District, 1999). It was reported that of students who dropped out, 20% were classified as Hispanic and 28% of truant students were Hispanic. The context for these numbers includes being one of the largest school districts in the state, with over 160,000 students. Almost one-half of the county's students participate in the free and reduced lunch program. Almost twenty percent of the student population is classified as Hispanic/Latino, with 10% participating in the English for Speakers of Other Languages program and about 5% participating in the migrant program (FDOE, 1999).

Latino Dropout Study Goals

It was in light of the dropout numbers, examination of national trends (President's Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans, 1994) and

knowledge of the local context that the Dropout Study proposed a mixed qualitative and quantitative study. This design was chosen in order to provide explanations for dropout of Latino students and to look for variations between different subgroups of Hispanic students. The primary goal of the study was to identify reasons for dropping out by talking to Latino students, their parents and teachers, principals and people in the community. We were also interested in finding out which groups of students were doing well and which were particularly at risk, as well as strategies that could be used to target each group. It was our intention to provide recommendations that would help guide those who work with these students and increase the effectiveness of strategies through collaboration and coordination.

Methods

Based on the study goals, we chose to use focus groups and interviews to collect information about why students drop out, what services they are already receiving and what additional services they need. We also used the school system database to look at demographic characteristics and school-related factors for Latino students and dropout rates for various sub-groups.

Focus groups were held in middle schools and high schools in four school cluster areas with high Latino populations, two of which have large migrant and seasonal worker populations. Bilingual researchers and Latino Coalition members conducted focus groups and interviews. Participants in the student focus groups included three categories that were selected through a pre-interview process, these included high achievers, at-risk

and those who had dropped out. Each of these types of groups met separately. We also held focus groups with parents at community locations, and with teachers at each school. Interviews were conducted individually with the principal of each school and with Latino community leaders from each cluster area.

Results

Database Analysis

To describe the demographics for all Latino students in Hillsborough County we looked at the school system database files. We found that about half of Hispanic students were registered with English as their first language and 55% indicated that they speak Spanish at home. Over two thirds of Hispanic students were born in the US, while one third were born in primarily three countries: Puerto Rico, Mexico and Cuba.

A comparison between students who remained in school and those who dropped out showed marked differences in absences, discipline referrals, suspensions and grade point averages. Students who had dropped out had two to three times the number of absences, referrals and suspensions of those who graduated. Students who completed school and graduated had fewer absences and referrals compared to those who were still in school. Most students who graduated were not participating in the free/reduced lunch program while over half of students who dropped out had been participants.

We were able to roughly calculate an event dropout rate for Latino high school students in the county based on the same criteria used by the state. The dropout rate, which

included only students over 16 years old, was 7.5% at the high school and 3.9% at the middle school level. Of those who dropped out, 2% indicated that they were enrolling in adult education. Over half of dropouts (58%) were male and an overwhelming majority of expulsions (87%) were male. Among students who were in the English for Speakers of Other Languages Program, those who completed the program had a much lower dropout rate (3%) than those who were eligible but not enrolled (20%). The event dropout rate for students in the Migrant program was calculated as roughly 7%.

Focus Groups and Interviews

A total of 24 focus groups were held with students, teachers and parents and sixteen interviews were held with principals and Latino community representatives. Students were recruited at each school through a careful screening process, resulting in a total participation of almost 100 students, with about half of them classified as "high achieving", and the other half classified as "at-risk" or "dropped out". A comparison of demographics between groups of students shows high achievers were more like to classify themselves as bilingual and members of a two-parent household. A greater percentage of high achieving students than at-risk students were female.

Focus group and interview transcripts were analyzed for both themes that cut across all groups and additional sub-themes that appeared in only some of the groups. According to participants, the major contributors to Latino student success in school include a personal motivation to succeed, supportive parents and being interested in and involved in school activities. One student explained. "*...parents is the biggest part, if you don't have parents*

who care you're not gonna do it, that's gotta be the first part, the parents. Second, you've gotta have some kind of motives, you have to realize that motive, that if you do school now you're gonna do great in life later, you know, it's gonna come back. You have to understand that before you can [do well] or you're gonna give up. You have to have something to work towards." Another student suggested that a clear goal and maintaining a focus on that goal is crucial to being able to continue and graduate, *"You have to sort of focus what you're here for, you know, you're here to graduate, to better yourself, your life, your situation, you know. And it's like, it's like right now my parents, they're working in the fields and they, you know, they work hard, you know. I don't want to disappoint them and fail, you know, because it's... you come to school to study, you come to school to learn and your purpose for going to school is to graduate."* Students credited their parents with support at home and helping to maintain goals, but also with pushing them to do what was necessary to graduate and take advantage of opportunities, giving examples such as, *"Our parents would not let us drop out. If we did that, they'd be up here with us the next day...they see the opportunity that I have and they didn't have."*

Other contributors to success that were mentioned included supportive teachers and school staff, staying out of trouble, having academic skills, knowing how to get help, and having a clean and safe environment at school. One student explained the importance of staying out of trouble, "*If you get in trouble, you know, you're like, sidetracking your goals, you know, and it's like, I realize that I have to go to school and I have to go to*

college. I have to help my family and things like that, that's what keeps me out of trouble...."

Even though successful, some students were clear about the challenges that exist for Latino students, and especially those who migrate, including having to adapt and to different schools and re-negotiate relationships. *"It's hard because we move around a lot during the year...because my parents, you know, work in seasonal work ...and like, sometimes schools would be different, like, you'd be behind on certain lessons and stuff and you'd have to catch up...."* Suggestions that were made to help students succeed, even in such difficult circumstances were related to the need for additional support. One example of support that is needed is to help migrant students keep track of where they are academically, *"School is not very, you know, it doesn't help them very much. I think there needs to be a program specifically for just that, you know, if you go off and do this...let's work out a plan so that when you come back you'll be caught up..."*

When asked about reasons for dropout, participants talked about many factors that combine in different ways for different students. These factors included lack of motivation in students; having negative peer associations that pulled them away from school; not having enough support from parents, teachers and school staff, *"[Parents need to] make it worth it for us. Tell us we are doing good."*; pressures and responsibilities outside of school, such as jobs and child care; language and cultural barriers between students, their families and schools; lack of community support for Latino students and families; and the inflexible policies that affect being able to earn

credits for graduation. One at-risk student explained his position, *"I'm still thinking about it, I'm still thinking about it, I'm gonna turn eighteen and I'll still be in the ninth... can't get all my credits. Just think, I gotta go to school then go to night school all year long so I can get my credits..."* A principal also felt strongly that, *"We're losing them now because of the benchmarks; they get frustrated..."* Another student echoed frustration over the complexity of requirements for graduation when she stated, *"It's hard, like you gotta do all them tests and everything, all the credits and everything. It's hard, I don't like anything at school."*

Students who were considered to be at-risk or who had already dropped out felt that dropping out is related to academic difficulties that had not been addressed and to being bored in school, as well as a desire to work for money or to help out the family. *"I'd rather work than go to school...Because you get money. That's what's important, money, see,"* stated one at-risk student. Another student explained, *"School is hard and boring...It's a place to get out of my house. I like coming to school because of my friends."* A high achieving student expressed how difficult it can be to stay motivated in classes that are not interesting, "*I mean, they're just talking and it gets boring. I don't like those kinds of classes, they've gotta like, be like excited, they've just gotta get more involved with the students."* Other students felt that the materials covered are not what they need to learn or are not taught at the right level for them. *"It was hard for me to do it, but he never really explained anything, just did one or two [exercises] because he knew how to do [it]...He didn't explain it to me, he just did it, and [said] did you follow it?'..."* At risk students and those who had dropped out also felt that not enough

individualized attention is given and some teachers do not care enough to make sure that Latino students are learning and involved. *"Like, individual work, like, say you know, she teaches a lesson and all of a sudden you get stuck, you don't know, you're like stuck... They come, they're willing to stay there until you understand, and there's a lot of teachers that don't do that."* Students also felt that extracurricular activities were often inaccessible even when they were interested in trying to join. One student pointed out, *"Well, there are activities, but they don't tell the Hispanics anything, we are the last to be informed... it's all reserved already, it's other people that are in it, we're too late..."* A major barrier to involvement was a feeling of being considered inferior based on ethnicity, *"...they portray you as being nobody, basically... I get that reaction from everybody, that just because I'm Hispanic or whatever, I'm not as good as them.... That's why I don't even try going to any activities at school. I don't think, to me it's not worth it, cause I tried it and it doesn't work"*

Recommendations for ways that schools could help to keep Latino students in school included working together with migrant students to plan ahead for their transfers to and from other schools. One high achieving student suggested, *"Maybe by the time we get older our kids and us together maybe can form a plan. Like I said, there needs to be a program for migrant workers to keep kids in school, say 'Listen, we'll do this, this and this for you, you got to do this and this to catch up when you get back', you know, help them. You can't just say, 'Oh, they're gone.'"* In addition, all participants suggested that activities and learning needs to be offered in different ways. Specifically, participants felt that teachers who interact more with students are helping Latino students to learn by

making classes interesting. Students made many comments about the importance of interactions, such as, *"Anything that gets the students involved with the teacher and with the rest of the students, I think helps a lot in the class, makes the class more interesting."* Participants also felt that teachers could be more helpful in facilitating Latino students' participation in activities. *"I do feel that if you don't speak up in a class, especially when the majority of the class is, like, white, you know.... If you don't speak up, they really won't get you involved... they will to a certain extent, but not so much, they'll just leave you there..."* Another suggestion was that teachers or other school personnel can help a great deal by being able to listen, *"School needs more listeners, it needs people who listen and give students their undivided attention."*

In their discussions, participants were both critiquing and providing solutions for increasing motivation, involvement and success of Latino students in schools. Many programs and activities that are available and accessible to students were also mentioned and described, such as the English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) program, the Migrant program, the HEP program at the University of South Florida, Migrant Advocates, ROTC, the Health Occupations Services Association (HOSA), the Leadership Program, the Intensive Learning Alternatives program (ILAP) for dropout prevention, and certain Latino interest clubs.

One of the most important existing resources that was mentioned, especially by at-risk students and those who had dropped out, was an adult who took the time to encourage them and help them to set and achieve goals, and especially if that adult was bilingual

and/or Latino. These adults were in a variety of positions at the school, including School Resources officers, GED teachers, after-school program teachers, administrators, Migrant Advocates, guidance counselors and dropout prevention program teachers. One student was convinced to stay in school after his mother insisted he talk to the guidance counselor and he was placed in ILAP (Intensive Learning Alternatives Program). He explained how this has helped, *"... ILAP teachers are good...ILAP classes are smaller, only 15 students, they concentrate more on you and they hardly get you in trouble. The teacher knows what you are going through...they are more real, tell you straightforward."*

Recommendations

Recommendations for action based on the findings of this study fell into four inter-related categories. The first category is communication and support for students, school personnel and parents. This included increasing the knowledge of Latino families about the school system and its resources, increasing accessibility to programs and services, and creating a welcoming and validating environment. The second was participation in and availability of activities for Latino students. This included increasing options and flexibility in types of activities and scheduling, developing outreach strategies and involving community organizations, recruiting more Latino sponsors and mentors, and providing personalized connections to career and college information. The third category was appreciation of Latino culture. This included recommendations to train and recruit additional bilingual personnel, highlight achievements of Latinos to promote positive images, and incorporate more educational and recreational activities that validate Latino

cultural styles. The final category of recommendations was the communication of school policies. This included providing a supportive environment with flexibility in policies, and providing training in cross-cultural competence for school staff and students. Most participants felt that these efforts needed to be addressed collaboratively by the community and schools, as one administrator put it, *"There needs to be collaborative identification of need and a collaborative goal to better the programs available, and wanting to make it better for others...Kids aren't going to go away. It is a responsibility and an opportunity to make a difference in the future by investing early. They are our kids."*

The Migrant Leadership Program: A Collaborative Approach to Dropout Prevention

In this portion of the session we will look at one program provided by a middle school that was involved in the Latino Dropout Study and that was mentioned as a helpful resource by many students. The Migrant Leadership Program also addresses the recommendations made by the Latino dropout study. The goals of MLP are to 1) promote school success among migrant student participants, 2) help students develop educational/vocational goals and a belief in their attainment, and 3) increase parental involvement.

Strategies used by MLP include recruiting a team of energetic teachers and bilingual tutors to provide effective homework help and basic skills review so students can attain the academic benchmarks. The program also recruits former MLP participants and other Latino tutors who can serve as positive role models for the students (tutors can earn

community service hours for scholarships). Another aspect of the MLP strategy is to communicate with classroom teachers to identify students needs and to monitor progress. The program also helps to develop organizational skills by requiring students to maintain a homework planner. For students who are at-risk, MLP provides remedial courses with a low teacher/student ratio & monitors attendance daily. The program also incorporates recreational activities to provide non-academic interaction with youth and to enhance program participation. Communication with parents is an important part of the strategy that can be used to encourage student participation in activities, discuss student progress, and invite parents to conferences and activities. The MLP also employs strategies to involved students in activities such as an annual leadership conference where they are exposed to positive role models, participate in team-building activities, learn how to make good decisions, and plan for the future, and provides support for high-achieving Latino students through linkages to the CROP program.

The MLP is a collaborative effort that includes several dedicated partners. The first partner is the Middle School Extended Day Program (dual-enrollment) which provides snacks, transportation and optional extra-curricular activities on non-MLP days. The second partner is the Title I Migrant Education Program, which identifies and recruits at-risk migrant students, recruits bilingual high school volunteer tutors/mentors (including former MLP participants), funds teachers to provide both remedial instruction and homework assistance, communicates with students, parents and teachers on a regular basis, and coordinates partner services. The third partner is the Redlands Christian Migrant Association (RCMA), which provides bilingual adult tutors/mentors, transports

students for weekend outings & leadership conferences, communicates with parents by evening phone calls and home visits, serves as interpreter on teacher-parent conference nights, organizes the student leadership conference, and assists with the student awards ceremony. The fourth partner is the Tampa Bay Sierra Club Inner City Outings (ICO), which plans, leads and funds monthly weekend outings designed to develop interpersonal skills and positive self-esteem through active involvement with nature. The final partner is the College Reach-Out Program (CROP), which provides academic support for high-achieving students from low-income families (after-school, weekends, and summers), exposes youth to college/university life through weekend visits to state colleges & universities, and conducts a variety of parent workshops.

Brainstorming Session

After considering the Latino Dropout Study findings and recommendations and the strategies and methods used in the MLP program, we would like to conclude the session with a brainstorming activity. Each category of recommendations for action made by the Latino Dropout Study will be assigned to a group of session participants to brainstorm specific applications to their communities. Each group will present their suggestions to the entire group and the results will be summarized.

The results of these brainstorming sessions are outlined below:

1. Enhance communication and support for Latino students, school personnel and parents.

- Provide the school calendar in both Spanish and English
- Design a webpage with activities and services of the school district and/or each school
- Bilingual bulletin board and pamphlets at schools
- Welcome wagon group at schools

- School's tour providing information, orientation and a bilingual mentor
- Parent involvement through home liaisons/social worker paraprofessionals
- Sensitivity toward inclusive issues
- Providing electives through Support Services
- Providing bilingual support
- On-going support and follow-up
- Have community agencies represented in the School Improvement Council (School Advisory Council)
- Adult 'night' classes
- Using media for disseminating information

2. Increase participation in and availability of activities for Latino students.

- Celebrate multicultural days, holidays
- Show and share Latino activities and celebrations with the Anglo community
- Provide transportation for activities- school bus service
- Hold evening meetings
- Hold weekend activities
- Use Spanish in the school newspaper or develop a Spanish paper
- Collaborate with community agencies to serve the school, students and families
- Recruit and train older students as mentors for younger students

3. Promote appreciation for Latino culture.

Strategies to recruit and train additional bilingual personnel:

- School personnel participate in community activities
- Push to get articles about people and events at school published in English and Spanish newspapers
- Bring in the community to participate in school events and volunteer
- Recruit churches, chambers of commerce, adults from the community to tutor and mentor
- Train teachers on culture
- Invite parents to volunteer in school

Strategies to highlight achievements to promote positive images of Latino youth:

- Recruit Latino professionals and role models to talk to students and parents
- Identify parents that can be role models and volunteers, and involve them in PTA
- Empower parents to be in control, such as how to help with homework

Strategies to incorporate more educational and recreational activities that validate culture:

- Invite the community to participate in festivities, such as Mexican holiday celebrations
- Recognize that parents have skills and invite them to share their skills (e.g. soccer, music).

4. Collaborate to enhance communication and understanding of school policies.

- Have a state level accountability system that holds local school systems accountable for all students (including Latino and other minorities), not just aggregated data
- Develop buy-in at local school system level through community, parent and community-based agency involvement in policy implementation process
- Develop and disseminate a manual of parents' rights (and provide Spanish version)

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