



Education Commission  
of the States

# The Progress of Education Reform 2004

## Hispanic Achievement

Vol 6, No. 3, August 2004

### What's inside

- Status and trends
- School engagement variabilities
- College-completion rates

## *Research Sheds New Light on the Hispanic-White Achievement Gap*

Few issues in American public education are as urgent and perplexing as the continuing educational underachievement of Hispanics, the nation's fastest-growing minority group.

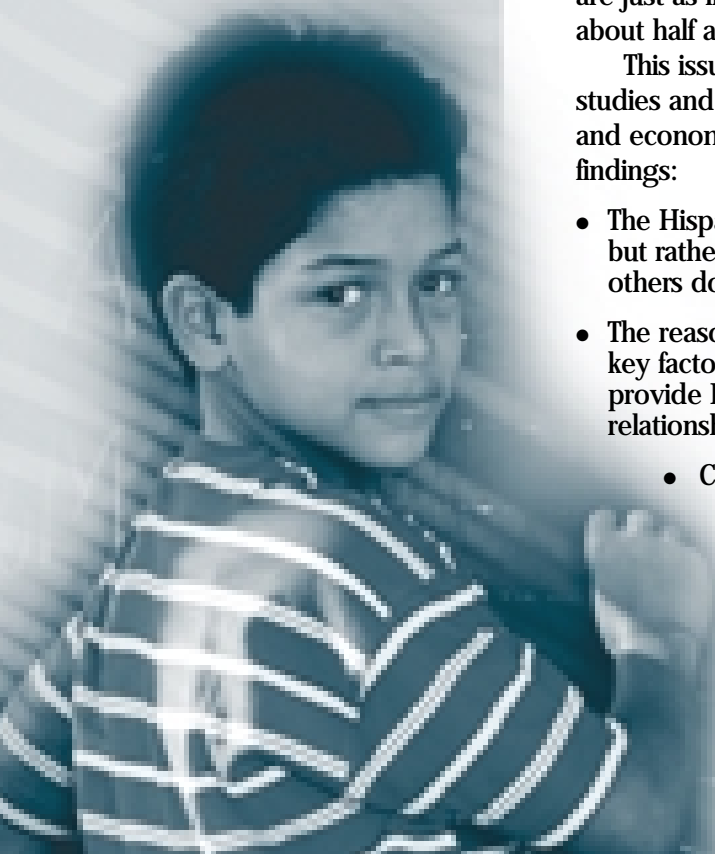
One in nine Americans, one in every four new entrants into the labor force and – in several states – one of every two children entering school is now of Hispanic descent. In little over a decade, today's Hispanic 1st graders will constitute a significant percentage of the nation's working adults.

To be sure, there have been steady and significant increases over the past two decades in Hispanic students' performance on national achievement tests, and in the number who participate in high school Advanced Placement courses, enroll in college and earn a bachelor's degree.

But Hispanic students remain significantly more likely than white students to enter kindergarten unprepared for learning, to have to repeat a grade and to drop out of school. And while, today, Hispanic students who finish high school are just as likely to enroll in college as white high school graduates, they are only about half as likely to go on to earn a bachelor's degree.

This issue of *The Progress of Education Reform* summarizes several recent studies and analyses that shed new light on the dimensions, causes, and social and economic consequences of Hispanic underachievement. Among the key findings:

- The Hispanic student population is not a monolithic group of low performers, but rather a heterogeneous one in which some students perform well and others do not.
- The reasons for these variations warrant deeper attention and research. A key factor appears to be the extent to which schools are able and willing to provide Hispanic students access to supportive programs, services and relationships.
  - Closing the achievement gap will require addressing a range of social, economic and educational disparities that put Hispanic children at a competitive disadvantage from the time they enter school, and hamper the success of even those who work hard and achieve at higher levels.



### ***Status and Trends in the Education of Hispanics***

(National Center for Education Statistics, April 2003,

<http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2003/2003008.pdf>)

This report examines the educational status of Hispanics in the United States through the lens of 47 key statistics, ranging from grade-school absenteeism to college-completion rates to voting participation. The report – in an easy-to-read format of tables, charts and short blocks of text – sharpens the picture of the educational gains Hispanics have made in recent years, as well as the many gaps that still exist.

On the one hand, there have been steady and significant increases over the past two decades in Hispanic students' performance on national achievement tests, and in the number who take high school Advanced Placement courses, enroll in college and earn a bachelor's degree.

These gains, however, have merely narrowed – and, in some cases, barely made a dent in – the historically large gaps between Hispanic and white students on these and other measures. For example:

- Only 14% of Hispanic 4th graders scored at the proficient or advanced levels on the 2002 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading test, and 57% did not even reach the “basic” level. Similarly, on the 2000 NAEP mathematics test, fewer than one in 10 Hispanic 8th graders scored proficient or advanced, and 60% scored “below basic.”
- At all grade levels, the average achievement-test scores of Hispanic students are consistently lower than those of white students. By the end of high school, according to a recent NAEP analysis, Hispanic students' reading and writing skills are roughly on a par with those of white 13-year-olds.
- Hispanic students remain significantly more likely than white students to enter kindergarten unprepared for learning, to have to repeat a grade, to be suspended or expelled, and to drop out of high school. They are less likely to enroll in and complete college, and those who do are more likely to pursue a two-year associate degree than a bachelor's degree.
  - Hispanics constitute nearly 20% of the nation's K-12 student population, but account for only 10% of postsecondary enrollment – and just 6% of baccalaureate recipients.

The 47 statistical measures in this report span several categories: demographic characteristics; preschool, elementary and secondary education; postsecondary education; and labor market and social trends. The report draws on data from a variety of agencies and organizations, ranging from the U.S. Census Bureau to the American College Testing Program.

*Status and Trends in the Education of Hispanics* is a spin-off of the National Center for Education Statistics' annual report, *The Condition of Education*. Similar reports on the educational status of blacks and American Indians/Alaska Natives are forthcoming from the department.

***Closing Achievement Gaps: Improving Educational Outcomes for Hispanic Children***  
(Tomas Rivera Policy Institute, July 2003, [http://www.trpi.org/PDFs/Closing\\_Achievement\\_Gaps.pdf](http://www.trpi.org/PDFs/Closing_Achievement_Gaps.pdf))

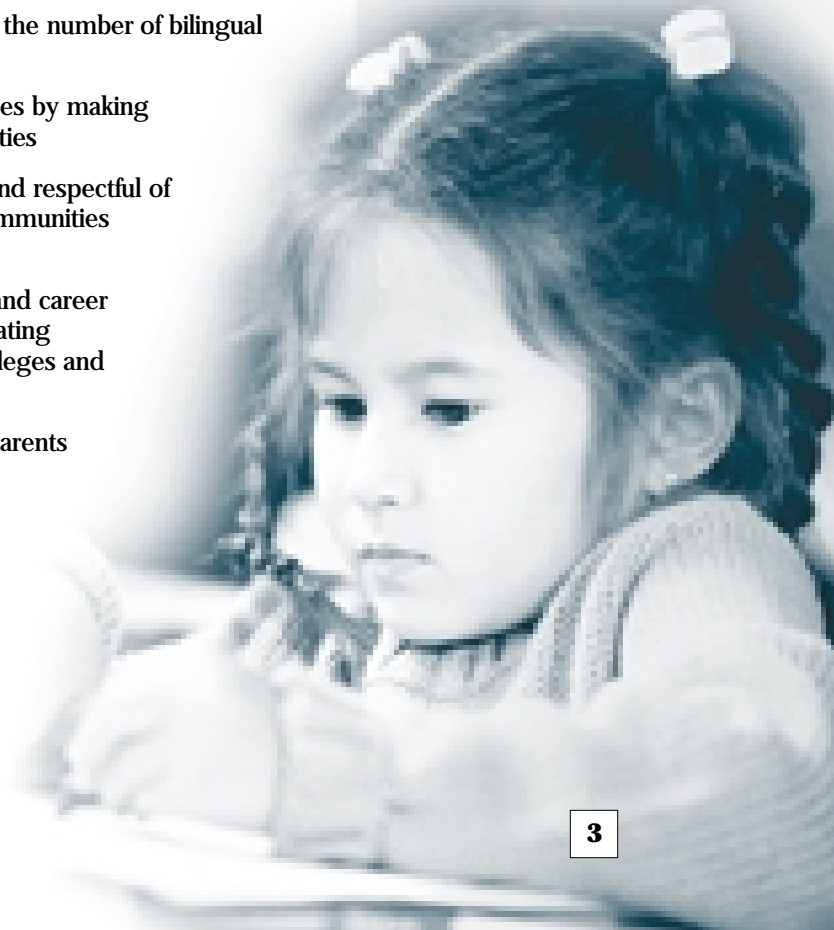
The achievement gap between Hispanic and white students is not a single phenomenon, but rather the product of a range of social, economic and educational disparities that must be addressed by policymakers on a coordinated and sustained basis, the authors of this report contend.

“Well-meaning but inadequate public policies are no longer acceptable,” they write, considering what’s at stake: the long-term prospects for maintaining the nation’s competitive edge in the global economy.

Today’s Hispanic 1st graders will enter the labor force in the next 12 to 16 years, just as the retirement of the nation’s aging baby-boom generation is peaking. Hispanic children thus will be a significant percentage of tomorrow’s working adults in little more than a decade.

“To ensure that these students are ready to compete and produce in and for tomorrow’s America, their educational attainment must be considered today,” the authors say. The report, which is aimed at state legislators, offers a detailed set of interconnected policy options and recommendations in eight areas, ranging from preschool educational experiences to the social organization of schools. State policymakers are urged to consider, for example:

- Increasing funding for high-quality school readiness programs, and guaranteeing full-day kindergarten for all children
- Reducing class size in the early grades, and implementing programs that have proven effective in reducing absenteeism, tardiness, truancy and dropout rates
- Making English language proficiency a component of state performance assessment at every grade level, and eliminating differences in the rigor and quality of curriculum across schools
- Revamping professional development programs to increase the number of bilingual teachers and paraprofessionals
- Reducing the “digital divide” experienced by Hispanic families by making computers more accessible in libraries and other public facilities
- Ensuring teachers and principals are knowledgeable about and respectful of the culture, history and language of the various Hispanic communities within their school district
- Strengthening college planning, information dissemination and career development guidance in middle and high schools, and creating incentives to increase transfer rates between community colleges and baccalaureate institutions
- Establishing outreach programs aimed at making Hispanic parents “better informed and more active education consumers for themselves and their children.”



***Structuring Failure and Success: Understanding the Variability in Latino School Engagement*** (Harvard Educational Review, 2001, [http://www.gse.uci.edu/doehome/DeptInfo/faculty/gilbertoRP/HER\\_2001.pdf](http://www.gse.uci.edu/doehome/DeptInfo/faculty/gilbertoRP/HER_2001.pdf))

In this study, Harvard University sociologist Gilberto Conchas examines the theory that differences in academic achievement by race result primarily from minority groups' perception that the opportunity structure is stacked against them.

The so-called "cultural-ecology" theory holds that blacks, Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans and Native Americans underachieve in school because they recognize that, relative to whites, their chances of benefiting from education are quite limited. By contrast, "voluntary minorities" – Asian Americans, Cuban Americans and others who come to the United States willingly, often for economic, social or political reasons – typically have a more optimistic view of schooling and the opportunity for social mobility.

But cultural-ecology research so far has been of limited value in explaining Hispanic underachievement, Conchas argues. It does not explain, for instance, why middle-class Mexican American youth "do not typically resist schooling, as one might assume for 'involuntary' minorities."

Nor does it explain, he notes, troubling declines in educational performance from one generation to the next: While newly arrived Mexican immigrants strongly desire to learn English, acculturate and participate in American society, subsequent generations of U.S.-born Mexican Americans develop more of an oppositional identity to American culture that rejects performing well in school.

The fact is, Conchas points out, the Hispanic student population "is not a monolithic entity in which all students perform poorly, but a heterogeneous one in which some perform well and others do not."

To get a better idea of why this is so, Conchas took an in-depth look at low-income Hispanic students in a large urban high school in California. His study revealed wide variations between native- and foreign-born students in their experiences of, reactions to and success in school.

Students who had access to and/or sought out supportive programs, services and relationships, Conchas found, tended to achieve at substantially higher levels than those who, for one reason or another, did not. Thus the key variable – one which Conchas argues merits deeper research – appears to be the extent to which institutional and cultural processes in schools inhibit or encourage Hispanic students' engagement and achievement.

The creation of learning environments that "link academic rigor with strong collaborative relationships among students and teachers" is crucial to improving the academic performance of Hispanic students, Conchas concludes. "While schools often replicate existing social and economic inequality present in the larger society and culture, they can also circumvent inequality if students and teachers work in consort toward academic success."



***Hispanic Youth Dropping Out of U.S. Schools: Measuring the Challenge***  
(Pew Hispanic Center, June 2003, <http://www.pewhispanic.org/site/docs/pdf/high%20school%20dropout%20report--final.pdf>)

This report reveals that dramatic increases in the Hispanic dropout rate over the past decade are more a measure of immigration trends than an indicator of how well U.S. schools are performing.

It shows that the dropout rate for Hispanic students who attended U.S. schools is alarmingly high at 15% – twice as high as for whites – but still considerably lower than common calculations of a Hispanic dropout rate of 30% or more that includes many thousands of immigrants who quit school before coming to this country.

The steady influx of teenage immigrants, who come here to work and have little or no contact with U.S. schools, has complicated assessments of the Hispanic dropout problem. This report, based on a new analysis of Census Bureau data, provides a more nuanced picture of the Hispanic dropout problem as a reflection of the American education system.

The Hispanic dropout problem, the report concludes, “has several different components that call for different policy responses. For the teenage immigrants who come here to work rather than to finish their schooling, the challenges are to provide opportunities for workforce training and to learn English. For the Hispanics who attend U.S. schools, the need is to ensure access to programs with a proven ability to improve retention.”

Some of the report’s key findings include:

- The dropout rate for native-born Hispanics declined from 15% in 1990 to 14% in 2000 – in line with the downward trend in dropout rates for other racial and ethnic groups.
- About one-third of all Hispanic youth counted as high school dropouts are immigrants who had little or no contact with U.S. schools.
- Dropout trends for Hispanics vary considerably by state. The rate for the native-born declined in both Florida and California between 1990 and 2000, while increasing slightly in Texas.
- A lack of English-language ability is a prime characteristic of Hispanic dropouts, but it pertains primarily to immigrant youth. Language is a relatively small factor among dropouts who received most of their schooling in the United States.
- A greater share of Hispanic dropouts (56%) are employed than whites (49%) or blacks (35%). And 78% of the Hispanics who work are employed 36 hours a week or more, compared to 52% of white dropouts and 54% of black dropouts.

**Federal agencies, philanthropic organizations and nonprofit advocacy groups provide a wide range of information and analysis on the issue of Hispanic educational achievement. They include:**

The Education Trust <http://www.edtrust.org>

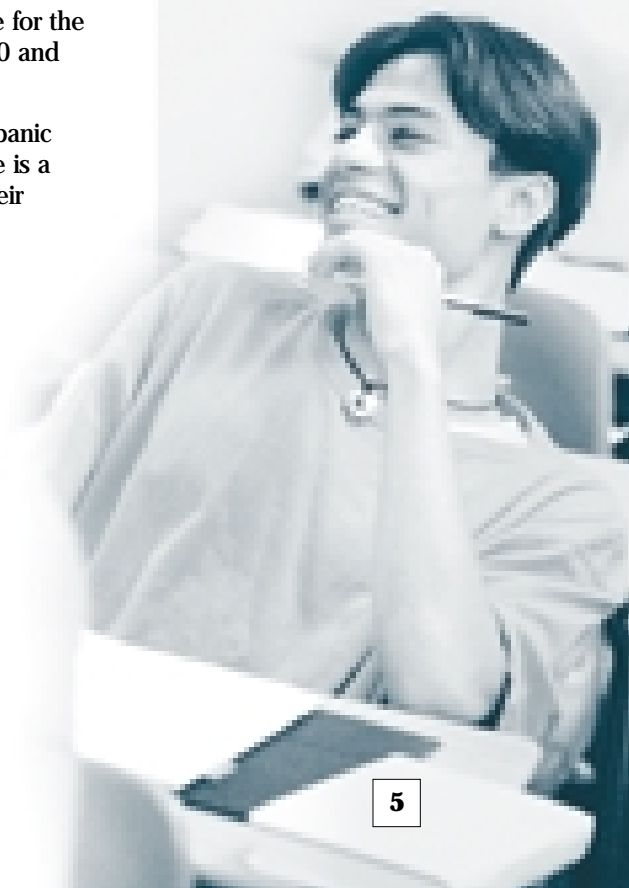
Hispanic Dropout Project, U.S. Department of Education  
<http://www.ncela.gwu.edu/pubs/hdp/>

North Central Regional Educational Laboratory  
<http://www.ncrel.org/gap>

Pew Hispanic Center  
<http://www.pewhispanic.org>

Tomas Rivera Policy Institute  
<http://www.trpi.org>

U.S. Census Bureau (Population Estimates)  
<http://eire.census.gov/popest/data/states/stasro.php>



## ***Latino Youth Finishing College: The Role of Selective Pathways***

(Pew Hispanic Center, June 2004, [http://www.pewhispanic.org/site/docs/pdf /The%20Role%20of%20Selective%20Pathways\\_formattedFINAL-06-23-04.pdf](http://www.pewhispanic.org/site/docs/pdf/The%20Role%20of%20Selective%20Pathways_formattedFINAL-06-23-04.pdf))

Drawing on newly available longitudinal data from the U.S. Department of Education, this study assesses the dimensions and sources of the gap in bachelor's-degree completion between Hispanics and whites who graduate from high school with similar levels of academic preparation.

According to the study, young Hispanic high school completers are as likely as white high school completers to enter postsecondary education, but half as likely to finish a bachelor's degree. For many of these young people, the failure to earn a degree will have a lifelong impact as the wage gap continues to widen between those with a degree and those with some college education but no degree.

A broad variety of factors, the study found, appears to affect Hispanics' pathways through postsecondary education and their bachelor's-degree completion rates, including delayed enrollment in college, the kind of college they attend, whether they live with family in college rather than in campus housing, and the extent of their financial responsibility for family members.

According to the study, a disproportionate number of Hispanic high school graduates – both those who are well-prepared and those who are less so – enter postsecondary education through community colleges and “open-door” four-year colleges, putting them on a path less likely to lead to a bachelor's degree.

Compounding the problem, Hispanic undergraduates drop out at significantly higher rates than similarly prepared white undergraduates. White students beginning at community colleges are nearly twice as likely as Hispanic students beginning at community colleges to finish a bachelor's degree; among students starting out in nonselective four-year colleges, 81% of white students go on to earn a bachelor's degree, compared with only 57% of Hispanic students.

The report concludes that disparities in the college-completion rate could be reduced substantially if greater numbers of Hispanic high school graduates were to enter postsecondary education through more-selective colleges and universities or, in the alternative, to complete community college studies and transfer to four-year institutions at the same rate as white students.

Subscribe to four issues of *The Progress of Education Reform* for \$25, including postage and handling. Ask for No. SI-04-01.

Please order from the ECS Distribution Center, 700 Broadway, Suite 1200, Denver, CO 80203-3460; 303.299.3692; fax: 303.296.8332; or [ecs@ecs.org](mailto:ecs@ecs.org). ECS accepts prepaid orders, Visa, MasterCard and American Express. All sales are final. Pricing subject to change.

© 2004 by the Education Commission of the States (ECS). All rights reserved.

ECS encourages its readers to share our information with others. To reprint or excerpt some of our material, please contact the ECS Communications Department at 303.299.3628 or e-mail [ecs@ecs.org](mailto:ecs@ecs.org).

The Education Commission of the States is a nonprofit, nationwide interstate compact formed in 1965 to help governors, state legislators, state education officials and others develop policies to improve the quality of education.

Postage and handling charges if your order totals:

Up to \$10.00 - \$3.00  
\$10.01-\$25.00 - \$4.25  
\$25.01-\$50.00 - \$5.75  
\$50.01-\$75.00 - \$8.50  
\$75.01-\$100.00 - \$10.00  
Over \$100.01 - \$12.00.

Single copies of this issue of *The Progress of Education Reform 2004* are available from the Education Commission of the States for \$7 plus postage and handling. Ask for publication No. SI-04-04.

Generous discounts are available for bulk orders of this publication. They are: 10-24 copies, 10% discount; 25-49 copies, 20% discount; 50-74 copies, 30% discount; 75-99 copies, 40% discount; and 100+ copies, 50% discount.

This publication is made possible in part through a grant from the GE Foundation. The report was written by Suzanne Weiss, ECS managing editor.

