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AFT Teachers

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Closing the Achievement Gap: Focus on Latino Students

Introduction

The Latino population is the fastest growing ethnic minority in the United States. This group is rapidly changing the face of public schools and presenting a unique set of challenges to public education.

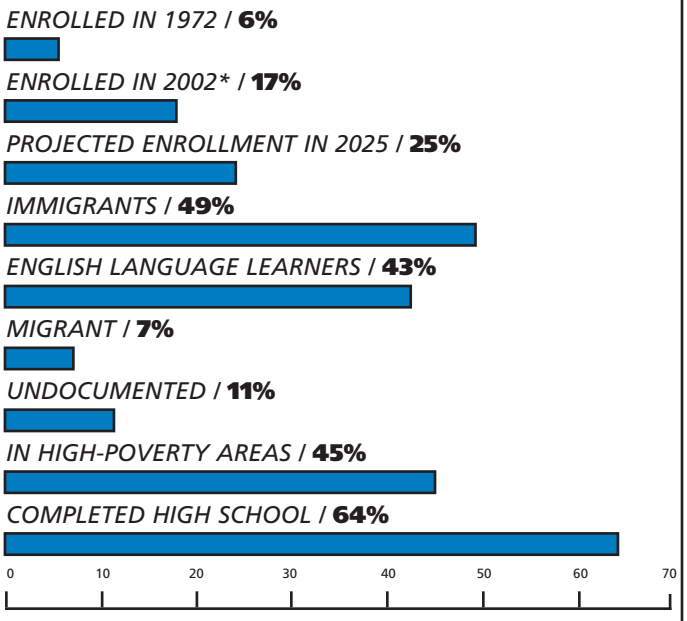
This policy brief provides the data and context to support the AFT's call for increased attention to the condition of education for Latino students. It provides a snapshot of the current demographic and achievement trends of Latinos, some of the specific barriers to closing the achievement gap, and presents a set of recommendations to improve educational opportunities for Latino children.

Demographic Trends

Despite the fact that information on the Latino population is largely collected and analyzed in aggregate form and the Latino population is portrayed as a monolith, with English language learners as its only subgroup, the Latino population is actually quite heterogeneous. It is multiracial, multinational, and diverse in its educational and socioeconomic background. Very little disaggregated achievement data are available by race, nationality, recency of immigration, socioeconomic status, previous formal levels of education, and other variables. Consequently, the data are broad and do not present a very detailed picture of the Latino population.

In 2002, Latinos made up 17 percent of the K-12 student population, and it is predicted that they will comprise 25 percent of the student population by 2025. More than four in 10 Latino students are English language learners and 45 percent of Latino students attend schools in high-poverty areas (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1
PERCENT OF K-12 LATINO STUDENTS, 2002-03



*Equivalent to approximately 9 million students.

Sources: NCELA, 2002; NCES, 2001; President's Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans, 2003; Urban Institute, 2000.

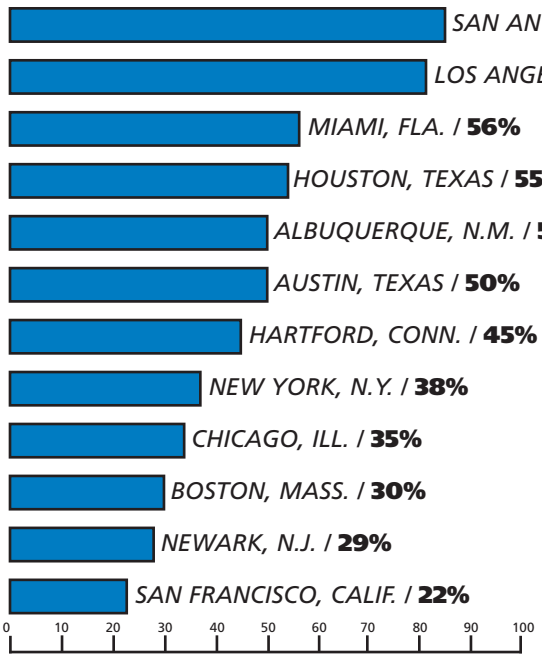
TABLE 1
INCOME, OCCUPATION, AND BASIC EDUCATION DISTRIBUTION OF LATINOS, AFRICAN-AMERICANS, AND WHITES NATIONWIDE, 2002-03

	Percent
Latinos with limited English proficiency making less than $30,000/year	65
Latinos making less than $30,000/year	50
African-Americans making less than $30,000/year	44
Whites making less than $30,000/year	29
Latinos making more than $75,000/year	2
African-Americans making more than $75,000/year	4
Whites making more than $75,000/year	11
Latinos with limited English proficiency in low-wage service industry jobs	74
Latinos in low-wage service industry jobs	51
African-Americans in low-wage service industry jobs	24
Whites in low-wage service industry jobs	30
Latino school-age children with parents who have less than a HS diploma	48
African-American school-age children with parents who have less than a HS diploma	19
White school-age children with parents who have less than a HS diploma	9

Sources: College Board, 1999; U.S. Census Bureau, 2000; NCES, 2001; President's Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans, 2003.

Latinos are mostly poor and concentrated in the low-wage service sector—especially if they do not speak English (Table 1). Furthermore, twice as many Latino children as African-American children have parents who do not have a high school diploma, and they are more than five times as likely as white children to have parents with less than a high school education.

FIGURE 2
PERCENTAGE OF THE LATINO STUDENT POPULATION IN LARGE CITY SCHOOL DISTRICTS



Source: Council of the Great City Schools, 2003a.

In many of the nation's largest public school districts, at least one of three students is Latino (Figure 2). In cities with AFT affiliates—such as Los Angeles, San Antonio, and Miami—Latino students make up the vast majority of the student population.

In sum, these demographic trends indicate that the Latino population growth has been inversely proportional to economic progress and, as the next section points out, academic success.

Educational Outcomes

Despite some promising signs of progress, educational outcomes for Latinos have not improved dramatically in the last 30 years. Latinos continue to have low academic

achievement and the highest dropout rates in the nation, as well as low college preparatory course enrollment and post-secondary attainment.

K-12 achievement. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), often referred to as the "nation's report card," is the only disaggregated, nationally representative, continuing assessment of what students know in core academic subjects. It is a useful tool for comparing the academic performance of students by ethnicity and socioeconomic status.

Since the 1970s, the average score gaps between Latino and white students at the elementary, middle, and secondary levels have decreased, but Latino students still score well below their white peers on the NAEP reading and math assessments. Indeed, for each age group, the average gap is more than 20 points in both reading and math (Table 2).

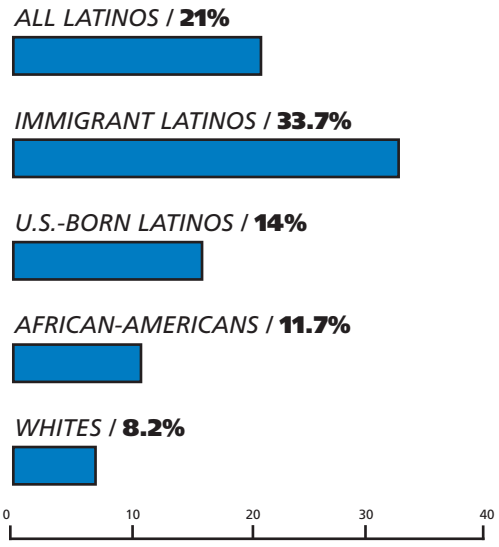
According to NAEP, one-third of Latino students perform below grade level. In the most recent NAEP results (NCES, 2003), only 11 percent of Latino eighth-graders scored at or above proficient in math, compared to 36 percent of white ninth-graders. In reading, only 14 percent of Latino eighth-graders scored at or above proficient, compared to 39 percent of white eighth-graders.

TABLE 2
ACHIEVEMENT GAP BETWEEN THE AVERAGE SCORE OF WHITE AND LATINO STUDENTS ON NAEP MATH AND READING ASSESSMENTS

Reading	*9-year-olds*	*13-year-olds*	*17-year-olds*
1975	*34*	*30*	*41*
1999	*28*	*23*	*24*
Math			
1973	*23*	*35*	*33*
1999	*26*	*24*	*22*

Source: NCES, 1999.

FIGURE 3
PERCENT OF HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS, AGES 16-19



Source: Pew Hispanic Center, 2003

Dropout rates. As Figure 3 shows, Latinos have the highest dropout rates of any major ethnic group in the United States (U.S. Department of Labor [DOL], 2003; Tomas Rivera Policy Institute et al., 2003). Even after separating out immigrant Latinos, U.S.-born Latinos still have a higher dropout rate than whites or African-Americans. One of the contributing factors to the high dropout rate is the poor academic performance of Latino students. One-third of Latino students perform below grade level, which increases their chances of dropping out of school from 50 percent to 98 percent, depending on how far behind they are (U.S. Senate HELP Committee, 2002).

In addition to having higher dropout rates than the rest of the student population, Latino students also tend to drop out earlier, between the eighth and 10th grades, than other students. More than 50 percent of Latino dropouts have less than a 10th-grade education, compared to 29 percent of whites and 24 percent of African-American dropouts (The League of United Latin-American Citizens, 2003).

Higher education enrollment and attainment. As Tables 3 and 4 indicate, there is a wide gap between Latino college enrollment and attainment. Latinos tend to enroll in community colleges more than any other group, but more than half never complete a postsecondary degree. Latino enrollment in four-year institutions is more comparable to that of whites and African-Americans, but only 16 percent of Latinos graduate with a bachelor's degree, compared to 37 percent of whites and 21

TABLE 3
COLLEGE ENROLLMENT RATES BY RACE/ETHNICITY AND AGE

Age Group 18- to 24-Year-Olds	Latino	White	African-American
Two-year institutions	41.6	24.1	27.2
Four-year institutions	53.6	68.4	66.8

Age Group 25- to 34-Year-Olds	Latino	White	African-American
Two-year institutions	35.5	21.6	27.9
Four-year institutions	43.6	36.3	44.9

Source: Pew Hispanic Center, 2002.

percent of African-Americans (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

Challenges to Closing the Achievement Gap

Most Latinos face multiple barriers to improving academic achievement, high school completion, and postsecondary attainment. Research by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the National Research Council (NRC), the Urban Institute, and others identify the key challenges jeopardizing Latino students' chances to excel academically and later in life:

■ Disproportionate attendance at resource-poor schools;

■ Lack of access to fully qualified teachers;

■ Lack of participation in rigorous, college-preparatory coursework;

■ Parents with low-household incomes and low levels of formal education;

■ English language learners and English language learners with disabilities, both with unmet instructional needs;

■ High mobility of students whose families are migrant farm workers; and

■ Students who are undocumented who cannot attend college or work legally after attaining a college degree.

Disproportionate attendance at resource-poor schools. Almost half of all Latino students attend schools in central city school districts, most of which serve families with higher poverty rates than the statewide average. These schools typically receive about $1,000 less per student than do schools with fewer minority students (U.S. Senate HELP Committee, 2002). High-poverty, low-performing schools tend to lack other resources that the research shows—and teachers know—are needed for students to thrive. The schools lack fully qualified teachers who are retained through mentoring programs and other supports; strong professional development support networks for teach-

TABLE 4
PERCENTAGE OF BACCALAUREATE AND ASSOCIATE DEGREE ATTAINMENT AMONG 25-TO 29-YEAR-OLD HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES

	Latino Generations				Non-Latino	
	Foreign-Born	Second	Third & Higher	Total	White	African-American
Associate's degree	7.2	14.6	11	10.3	10.5	10
Bachelor's degree	15.2	16.1	18.6	16.4	36.5	20.6

Sources: Pew Hispanic Center, 2002; Tomas Rivera Policy Institute et al., 2003.

ers and staff; long-term leadership; and high expectations and rigorous academic standards for students. Poverty also has an adverse effect on academic achievement. Latinos who attended schools with large numbers of poor students had lower test scores than Latinos who attended schools where less than 10 percent of the students came from low-income families (NCES, 2001).

Lack of access to fully qualified teachers. Schools in high-poverty urban areas with large minority enrollments tend to have the least qualified and/or least experienced teachers (Ingersoll, 2002). The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning (CFTL) found that poor, high-minority urban schools have less access to teachers with the appropriate qualifications than affluent, suburban schools. Such schools also have three times more uncertified teachers, are less likely to have teachers with graduate degrees, have larger class sizes, and are more likely to assign teachers to courses for which they have not been formally prepared (CTFL, 2003).

A study by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) produced similar findings:

- 26 percent of Latino eighth-graders had math teachers who lacked certification and at least a minor in math, compared to 17 percent of white students;
- 27 percent of Latino fourth-graders did not have the same teacher at the beginning and end of the year, compared to 18 percent of white children; and
- 25 percent of Latino 12th-graders experience teacher absenteeism every day, compared to 11 percent of white students (ETS, 2003).

Exacerbating the problem is the lack of teachers who are trained and certified to work with English language learners. Nationwide, less than 3 percent of teachers of English language learners have received formal preparation and certification to work with them. Only 27 percent of these teachers report feeling adequately prepared to teach these students (NCES, 2001; President's Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans, 2000; Urban Institute, 2000).

Lack of participation in rigorous, college-preparatory coursework. One reason Latinos do not attend college at the same rate as their peers is that they do not take the courses to prepare them for college. About 45 percent of Latino students are enrolled in college prep courses such as algebra 2 and chemistry, compared to 62 percent of white students. Latinos accounted for only 10 percent of Advanced Placement (AP) examinees, compared to 66 percent of whites (ETS, 2003). Studies frequently cite that some teachers and administrators often relegate Latino students to less academically challenging coursework, do not inform them about the existence of AP classes, or do not hold them to high standards (Urban Institute, 2000; Tomas Rivera Policy Institute et al., 2003). Not surprisingly, only 19 percent of Latino high school graduates are highly or very highly qualified for admission to a four-year higher education institution, compared to approximately 40 percent of white students (NCES, 2003).

Parents with low-household incomes and low levels of formal education. Income levels for Latinos are well below those of the rest of the population. A 1998 study by the National Council of La Raza found that between 1990 and 1996, Latinos experienced a 7 percent drop in median family income, while whites and African-Americans experienced at least a 1 percent increase.

The low level of education of most Latino parents is partially responsible for their low income levels. Other contributing factors include the heavy concentration in low-wage jobs and limited English proficiency (College Board, 1999).

English language learners and English language learners with disabilities, both with unmet instructional needs. Eighty percent of all English language learners are Latino and most schools are ill-equipped to meet their academic needs (NCELA, 2002; August and Hakuta, 1998; Gonzalez and Darling-Hammond, 2000; Hakuta, 2001). Most programs for English language learners, regardless of their structure, are not based on the research into language acquisition or effective instruction of linguistically and culturally diverse populations, and are staffed by teachers and paraprofessionals

who lack proper training. Programs and practices are inconsistent within states, districts, and even within different classrooms in the same school. The classes lack academic rigor, high-quality language development, and academic content standards aligned with curriculum and assessment (Urban Institute, 2000; NCES, 2003).

English language learners with disabilities have even less access to adequate specialized intervention services than mainstream English language learners (Artiles and Ortiz, 2002). Across the country, only a few districts have programs addressing language instruction and disabilities simultaneously, and teachers who are adequately prepared to deliver both (*Education Week*, 2001).

Schools have not yet learned how to appropriately refer students to special education or language intervention programs. According to data from the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (2000), three widespread problems exist in the placement of English language learners with disabilities. States either over-refer or under-refer students to special education, or they misdiagnose the learning problems of English language learners.

Migrant farm worker students whose families are highly mobile and whose education is frequently interrupted. Latinos make up 80 percent of the migrant student population (U.S. Senate HELP Committee, 2002). Migrant students are children whose families are agricultural workers migrating seasonally to harvest crops and who often work in the fields themselves. Because they move frequently during the school year, migrant students' schooling and living arrangements are frequently disrupted, their academic studies lack continuity, and they receive little or no support at most of the schools they attend. These conditions often result in even higher academic failure and drop out rates for migrant students than for other Latino students (Huang, 2003; Weyer, 2002; Associated Press, 2003).

Students who are undocumented cannot attend college or work legally after attaining a college degree. Undocumented students' ability to attend and graduate from college depends on U.S. citizenship or legal residency. It is estimated that 50,000 to 65,000 undocumented students graduate from public high schools in the United States every year (Urban Institute, 2000; National Immigration Law Center, 2003). Although such students may pay in-state tuition at some state universities or may attend institutions of higher education without having to declare their citizenship, they cannot apply for financial aid or most scholarships. Without financial assistance and legal residency of citizenship, most undocumented students are unable to attend college or pursue their professional aspirations.

Recommendations

As the Latino population in the United States continues to grow, Latino students will have an increasing impact in our public schools, institutions of higher education, and the workplace. The AFT must provide leadership to its affiliates on how to improve the educational outcomes for Latino students. Specifically, we must:

1. Promote access to more academically rigorous coursework for Latino students.

2. Call for the strengthening of dropout prevention programs.

3. Promote research-based information on effective instruction for linguistically and culturally diverse students.

4. Advocate for stronger professional development programs for teachers on effective instruction for English language learners.

5. Continue to support federal and state legislation that allows undocumented students to seek a change in their citizenship status so that they can attend college and seek employment.

6. Continue to help resource-poor schools improve and promote strategies that work, including early childhood education programs.

7. Promote adult education and parent involvement programs.

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