

NEW JOURNALISM ON
LATINO
CHILDREN



GETTING LATINO YOUTH THROUGH HIGH SCHOOL

Aspirations and Family Support Can Offset Obstacles



In 2006, 22% of Latinos had left high school before getting a diploma.

JORGE MARTINEZ

PHOTO CREDIT: ANNIE WELLS

New Journalism on Latino Children offers a fresh perspective on reporting and research on Latino families and schools. It is a project of the National Education Writers Association, based in Washington, D.C. and the National Panel on Latino Children and Schooling, based at Berkeley's Institute of Human Development. For additional stories, new research and tips for reporting, look for updates at www.ewa.org or call EWA for more information at (202) 452-9830

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From the 3rd grade to the 11th grade, Jorge Martinez walked out of his front door each day hating the prospect of going to school.

For most of those days, Martinez, now 17, was a target of bullies. But that was only half of it. There was discord at home. He says he was lazy and unmotivated, preferring to spend his time in front of the television, distracted from his troubles. As a result, he was failing most of his subjects with a 1.1 GPA.

At the beginning of the 2007-08 school year, Martinez dropped out of his San Fernando, Calif., high school, becoming a small part of an increasingly large national crisis.

No matter the contributing factors, low academic achievement puts students at risk for a lifetime of poverty and lost opportunities.

In 2006, 9 percent of Americans ages 16 to 24 left high school before getting a diploma, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. For Latinos, the dropout rate was far worse: 22 percent.

At a time when a high school diploma is a minimal requirement to succeed in a society increasingly reliant on a highly skilled and educated labor force, the fact that so many youth still fail to graduate and obtain a diploma is a source of frustration for educators and alarm for a growing number of policymakers.

There is no single predictor of whether a student will drop out. It is a process that can begin as early as elementary school, influenced by factors such as poverty, inadequate access to preschool, absenteeism, delinquency, teen parenthood, academic struggles and poor English skills.

Latinos fare poorly in many of those categories compared to other racial and ethnic groups—for example, their median income is three-quarters the U.S. average, while their teen birth rate is one and a half times as high. No matter the contributing factors, low academic achievement puts students at risk for a lifetime of poverty and lost opportunities.

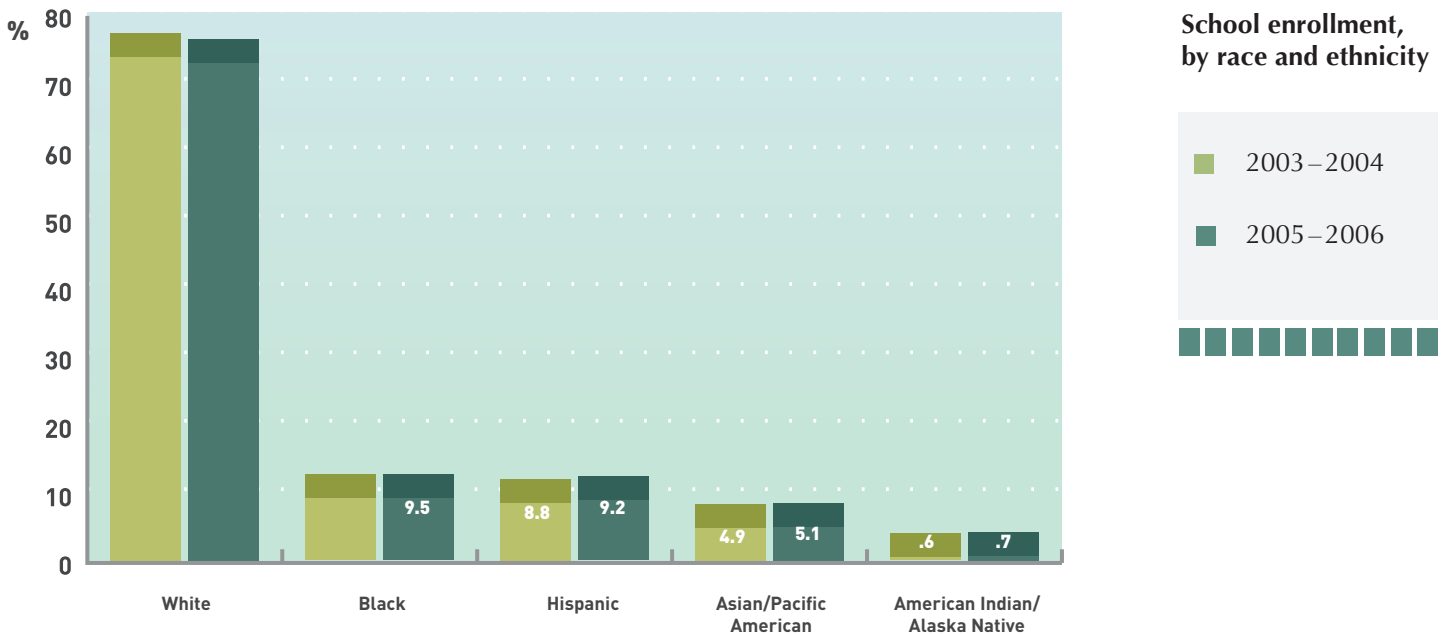
Because of comparatively high birth rates and immigration, Latinos are one of the fastest growing populations in the United States. Their

numbers are expected to nearly triple from 47 million today to 133 million by 2050, when they will account for almost one in three U.S. residents, according to Census projections. Already, Latinos make up more than half of public school students in California and New Mexico.

Educators and policymakers working on the nation’s dropout problem are placing particular emphasis on keeping Latino students in school.

“The demographics are such that it is imperative that we address this issue,” said Russell W. Rumberger, a professor of education at the University of California, Santa Barbara, who also directs the California Dropout Research Project. “States like California, New Mexico, Texas and Arizona especially are going to be greatly impacted by whether or not we’re successful in educating these kids. There’s also a moral imperative to try to eliminate the achievement gap.”

There is cause for optimism: Graduation rates are increasing, if slowly; many communities are finding success in collaborative efforts that target the entire family; and new studies suggest that Latino students and their families have high aspirations and understand the importance of completing school.



In his office on a busy commercial strip in Pacoima, Calif., David Kietzman, director of Youth Speak Collective, a nonprofit youth services group, observes firsthand the wreckage of young people who have lost hope in themselves.

Pacoima, located in the Northeast San Fernando Valley, is one of the region's most impoverished communities. Nearly 90 percent of residents are Latino, and 70 percent lack a high school diploma, according to Census figures.

Kietzman sees a direct line from poverty, gang activity, access to drugs, overcrowded schools and neighborhood dynamics to the epidemic of dropouts.

When teens were interviewed for a documentary about community involvement, a theme emerged: "They just didn't care," he said. "They have low expectations, there's graffiti, trash on the streets, some areas don't have sidewalks, there's a lack of green space, overcrowded schools. They know there shouldn't be 45 students in a classroom."

Jose Lara, one of the teens who Kietzman works with, will soon be 17 but has only earned enough credits to be in the 9th grade. He has frequently dropped out or been suspended, spending more time out of school than in, he said.

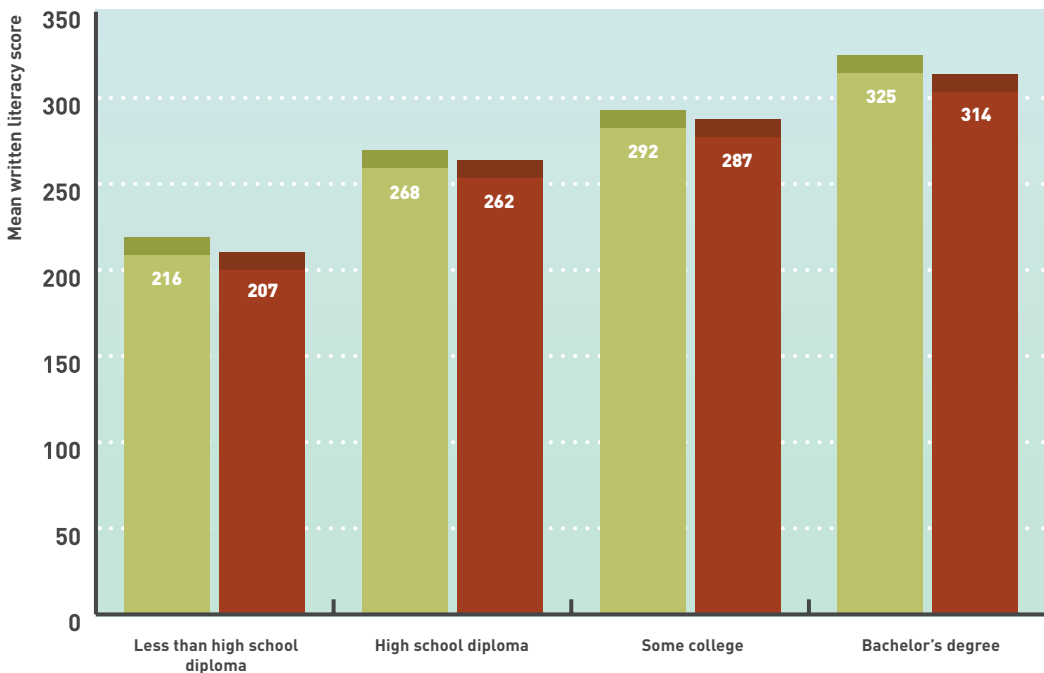
In his early years he got A's and was an eager student,

interested in sports and other activities. But during the critical period of middle school, he became distracted by girls and was drawn into gang life. By 9th grade, despite encouragement from his family, he was getting into trouble with the law and encountering teachers who expected little of him or other students, he said.

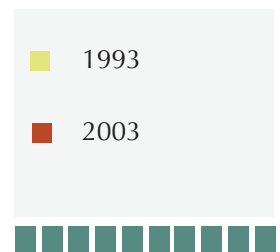
"The teachers didn't try to motivate me," said Lara, whose soft spokenness and youthful features belie his life experience. "The attitude was, if you want to learn or if you want to mess around, that's on you. There were times when the class didn't want to do nothing, and the teacher would sit in the back and read."

Lara is now the father of an infant son. He meets regularly with a group sponsored by Youth Speak Collective that discusses their lives and challenges in the community. After being out of school for four months, he recently enrolled in Options for Youth, a public charter school for at-risk students that focuses on independent learning. Right now, the only thing keeping him there is the thought of providing a better life for his son.

"I only have 35 credits, and I'm supposed to have, like, more than 100," said Lara. "When I think about it, I want to do it, but it's hard."



Literacy of adults by school attainment



WHY IT MATTERS



The experiences of students like Martinez and Lara mirror those of others around the nation struggling to find their way. The hurdles are significant.

The average Latino 25 and older has completed 11 years of schooling, compared to 14 years for Asians and whites and 13 years for blacks, according to a 2008 research paper by Francisco L. Rivera-Batiz, professor of economics and education at Teachers College, Columbia University.

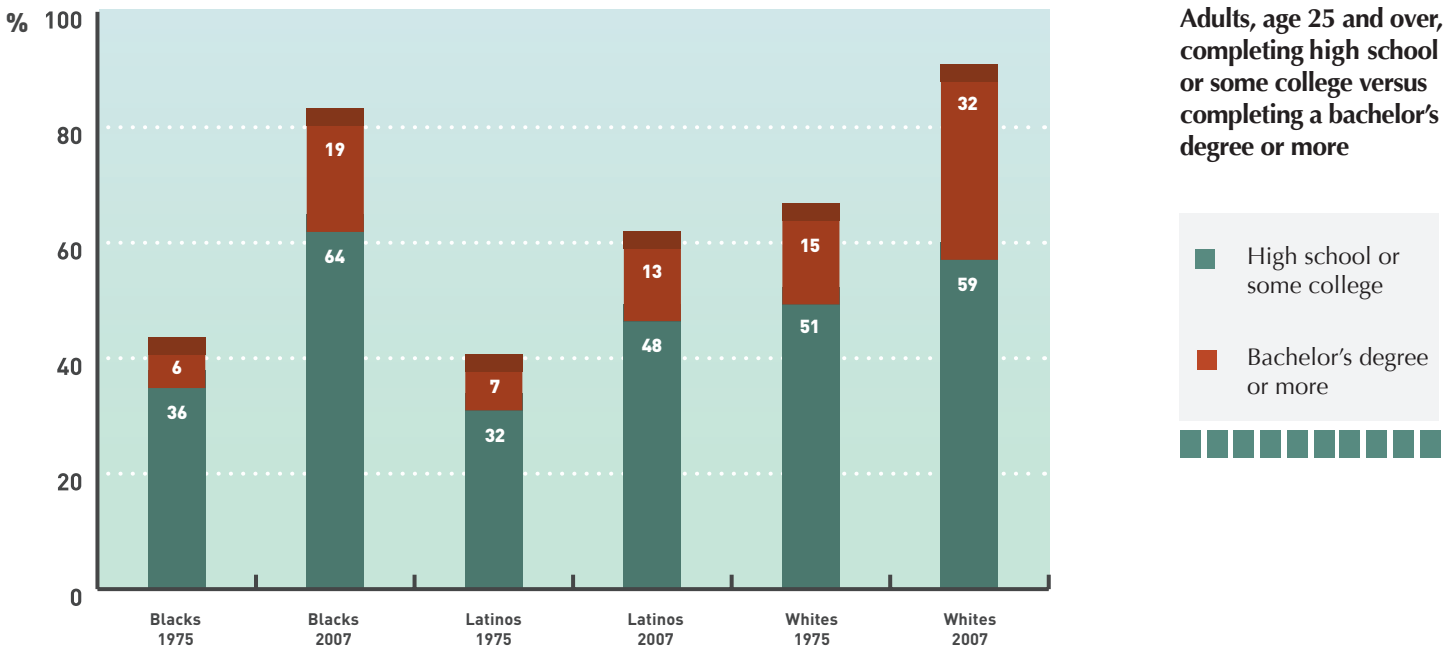
Latinos pay a steep price for leaving school: A 2007 report by the California Dropout Research Project found that, at age 20, the expected lifetime earnings for a Hispanic male dropout will be \$598,000, versus \$825,000 for a high school graduate. The equivalent earnings for a Hispanic female dropout would total \$343,000, compared to \$454,000 for a graduate.

In trying to answer the question of why more Latinos drop out, researchers cite a combination of poverty, lack of literacy skills and low quality of schooling.

Rivera-Batiz, for example, found that Latino children tend to live in more segregated communities than other children: In 2005, 76 percent of Latino students were enrolled in schools that were at least half minority. In comparison, 72 percent of black students and 11 percent of white students went to mostly minority schools.

Those communities tend to be poorer, with schools staffed by more inexperienced teachers who often lack the training to instruct English language learners.

UCLA psychology professor Andrew Fuligni has found that many Latino students falter because their parents lack the skills to navigate the education system. “They don’t know how to fulfill those aspirations; they don’t have the information they may need to help their kids succeed,” he said. “There’s certain courses you have to take to be college-eligible, that you have to be thinking about in junior high, and if you fall off pace, it’s hard to get back to it.”



Educators say that students do respond to intensive outreach, and a number of preventive programs nationwide are finding success.

Youth Speak Collective in Pacoima is one of a new breed of nonprofit programs, with activities created and directed by young people. The program, which operates from 2 to 8 p.m., offers mentors, peer advisors, tutoring, college preparation, a soccer league and the opportunity to work on a community garden for students.

About 400 students each day participate in programs at the Collective's seven sites. A student may need mentoring to earn just a few more credits to graduate or help writing a college essay, Kietzman said.

While it is hard to measure the success of efforts designed to prevent dropouts, a recent evaluation of one of the Collective's afterschool academic enrichment programs found that nearly all of the 63 participating students graduated from high school and went on to college.

The Collective is part of the San Fernando Neighborhood Partnership, an effort with other local nonprofits and the Los Angeles Unified School District to engage students from kindergarten onward, with the goal of eventually creating schools that will serve as community hubs for the entire family.

In February of 2008, after losing an entire semester of credits, Martinez enrolled in a Pacoima charter school, where he said the curriculum is challenging and the teachers are supportive.

He also began to listen more to his parents, who saw the importance of school and tried to motivate him all along.

Martinez is taking a sociology class offered by the Collective and he's trying to make up for the credits he lost by taking adult classes after school.

"Back then, I didn't think about college," said Martinez, who's maintained a 4.0 GPA at his new school and needs only one more semester of credits to graduate. "I didn't figure out the importance of school until later. Now, to me, it's pretty important."

Programs that Work

Project GRAD (Graduation Really Achieves Dreams) was founded in Houston in 1993 and now serves more than 134,000 low-income students in 215 of the most disadvantaged schools nationwide, with the goal of increasing high school graduation rates and college attendance. The Project GRAD model is holistic and comprehensive, designed to foster a college-going culture in elementary and middle school and engage parents and the surrounding community in students' success. The program provides each high school with a college scholarship coordinator, and 9th graders who maintain a 2.5 GPA and attend two summer institutes at local colleges are promised a scholarship of up to \$1,500 for four years. At the longest operating sites in Houston, students are completing college at a rate of 92% above the national average for students from similar low-income backgrounds, said Project GRAD CEO Robert Rivera. Contact: Project GRAD USA, 4265 San Felipe, Suite 900, Houston, TX 77027, 713-986-0499. www.projectgrad.org

Jobs For America's Graduates was established in 1980 and serves more than 40,000 students each year in 800 schools in 30 states. The goal is to keep middle school and high school students engaged by providing intensive employment counseling, including interviewing skills, work habits, conduct and dress, to build self-esteem and leadership skills. Students also perform community service and engage in social events. The program includes a year of follow-up services to help students gain entry level employment, entry into college or completion of a GED. Ninety-three percent of students who enter the program graduate from high school and participants also have lower absentee rates and disciplinary problems, said president Ken Smith. Contact: Jobs for America's Graduates, Inc., 1729 King Street, Suite 100, Alexandria, VA 22314, 703-684-9479. www.jag.org

Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program is designed to increase the self-esteem and school success of low-income middle school and high school students by placing them as tutors of younger elementary school students. The program is celebrating its 25th anniversary this year and serves about 6,000 students — 1,500 are tutors — in Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Missouri, Texas and Brazil. The tutors spend a class period under the guidance of a teacher helping younger students with math and reading four days a week and on the 5th day enhance their tutoring skills. They also receive a stipend for their efforts, usually minimum wage. The tutoring program keeps 98% of its participants in school, said spokeswoman Christie Goodman. Contact: 5815 Callaghan Rd., Suite 101, San Antonio, TX 78228. 210-444-1710. http://www.idra.org/Coca-Cola_Valued_Youth_Program.html

Teen Outreach Program was established 25 years ago and serves about 15,000 students in middle and high schools, community-based organizations and health clinics in 38 states. Part of what distinguishes the program is its focus on youth development and community service learning as the primary intervention and foundation. A core group of young people, usually 15 to 25, meet on weekly basis with an adult facilitator such as a teacher or guidance counselor, with a focus on communication, how to deal with social pressures, goal setting health and sexuality. The hallmark of the program is creation of a community service plan, with students engaged in either direct or indirect service such as canned food drives or civic action. Participants showed a 60% lower rate of school dropout, 33% lower rate of pregnancy, 14% lower rate of school suspension, when measured against comparison groups of students in the same schools. Contact: Teen Outreach Program, 600 Kiwanis Drive, Eureka, Missouri, 63025, 636-938-5245. www.wymancenter.org

Sources

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In fact, research conducted by UCLA's Fuligni has found that, against common assumption, Latinos in general — parents and children — value education and want to succeed. Their parental involvement in school often outstrips that of other ethnic groups.

But work and other pressures can hamper their ability to support their children, said Neena Agnihotri, an adviser at James Monroe High School in the Los Angeles Unified School District.

Agnihotri works in the Diploma Project, a three-year-old district program designed to monitor and mentor students at risk of dropping out and help those who have already dropped out to reach their educational goals.

At Monroe, a campus in North Hills, Agnihotri works with more than 400 mostly Latino students and their parents.

Some of the parents work two jobs and have little time to check if their children have had dinner or done homework, said Agnihotri. Others are single parents with smaller children at home and assume their 14- or 15-year-olds can fend for themselves.

"They do want their child to graduate, I've never seen a parent come in here and say I don't care about him dropping out," said Agnihotri. She added, however, that many parents have unrealistic expectations that schools alone can ensure that their children remain in school and graduate.

It might be helping: The graduation rate at Monroe has risen to 73% from 66% since the program's inception.

Youth Speak Collective is one of a new breed of nonprofit programs, with activities created and directed by young people.



PHOTO CREDIT: ANNIE WELLS

FAMILY SUPPORT IS THERE

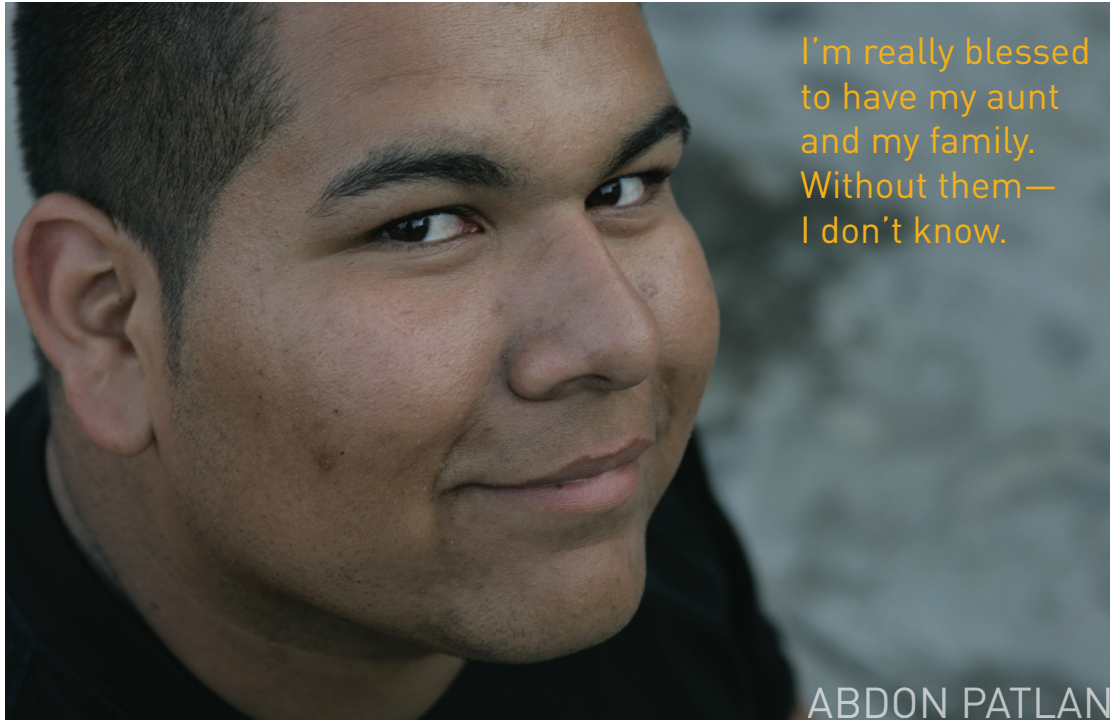


PHOTO CREDIT: ANNIE WELLS

I'm really blessed to have my aunt and my family. Without them—I don't know.

ABDON PATLAN

You've got to speak up for yourself. There are doors open somewhere.

—Connie Patlan

Abdon Patlan is an example of the crucial role that families can play in fueling ambition.

The 17-year-old junior said he always struggled with low grades and nagging doubts that he would be able to finish the work needed to graduate. In 9th grade he had so many F's that he thought he could never catch up.

"I had low expectations for myself," said Patlan. "I had family and friends, and they're dropping out and their life is not so good, people going to jail, people dying."

Patlan lives with his grandparents and an aunt, Connie Patlan, who always pushed him to do better and provided a role model. Connie Patlan also grew up in Pacoima amid gangs, drugs and poverty. She graduated, went to college and is now a pathologist's assistant at a local hospital.

As she raises her nephew, she tries to inspire him to remain in school. He's a good kid, she said, but faces harrowing odds.

There are far more students crowding classrooms than in her day, and each day in the emergency rooms at her hospital she sees the tragic impact of drugs that Abdon tells her proliferate in school hallways and bathrooms.

"If a teacher cares about a student, they will see that, and it does affect whether a kid will learn," said Connie Patlan. "But I tell Abdon, you have to push on the system to get something. You've got to speak up for yourself. There are doors open somewhere."

With his aunt's urging, Patlan joined a police-sponsored boot camp-style program, and his grades and attitude have dramatically improved this year. The Saturday program combines a vigorous physical regimen with in-class speakers. Parents attend separate classes that cover topics such as life planning.

Patlan, a cheerful youth with a buzz cut, said the boot camp has taught him discipline, integrity and decision-making skills. On his last report card he got three A's, a B

and 2 C's, and he wants to attend summer school to make up the 20 credits he needs to be able to graduate next year.

With good grades have come more privileges: He's helping to coach Little League baseball and volunteers at the hospital where his aunt works. He too is interested in pursuing a career in nursing. He's in a youth council sponsored by Youth Speak Collective and recently helped to organize a graffiti removal program.

"I'm really blessed to have my aunt and my entire family," Patlan said recently before the family sat down to a meal of quesadillas, rice and beans. "Without them—I don't know. They kept me off the streets."



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