

# The Latino Achievement Gap



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## Introduction

In the very near future, Latino students will become the majority in California's public schools and because of their great numbers and presence, the pattern of lackluster academic achievement must be a major concern of teachers, school leaders, and policy makers. Despite having made great strides in narrowing the gap that separated them from their White classmates during the 1960s and 1970s, the academic progress of Latino students declined in the mid-1980s.

Although there has been some improvement in the achievement of Latinos during the past three decades, their achievement gains in relation to the achievement of White students has been insignificant. The poor academic achievement of Latino students is indicative of a complex, multifaceted problem that must be addressed because as the Latino student population continues to grow, their poor achievement especially in mathematics and reading has significant implications not only for California's public educational system, but also for the state's and nation's social, political, and economic future.

According to the Federal Interagency on Child and Family Statistics (2009), although there are a variety of subjects and many combinations of subjects by which to gauge academic progress, reading achieve-

ment and mathematics achievement data not only serve as valid indicators of scholastic success, but also are legitimate indicators of a student's ability to think, learn, and communicate. For example, the California Department of Education employs a number of tests and assessments in reading and mathematics as a basis for measuring academic progress, such as the Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) program, the California Modified Assessment (CMA), and the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE).

The STAR program includes California Standards Tests (CSTs) in reading and mathematics, and two of the three subject areas addressed by the CMA deal with reading and mathematics. Additionally, the CAHSEE assessment array includes assessments in mathematics as well as reading. Thus it is safe to conclude that assessments in reading and mathematics comprise the basic foundation upon which student achievement is measured in California. Furthermore, on a national level, academic achievement is again largely based upon student performance in mathematics and reading.

## National and California Latino Achievement

### National Trends

Although Latino students may have attained some modest gains in scholastic achievement, making gains and closing the achievement gap are not one and the same. The gap between Latino students

and their White classmates persists. For example, from 1975 to 2008 there was no significant narrowing of the achievement gap between White and Latino 17 year-olds based on test data generated by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). According to Rampey, Dion, and Donahue (2009), in 1973 the reading achievement gap in terms of scale scores between White and Latino students was 41, with Whites achieving a score of 293 and Latinos reaching a score of 252. In 2008, the gap narrowed to 26, 295 for Whites and 269 for Latinos.

Regarding mathematics achievement in 1973, White adolescents attained a mean scale score of 310 on NAEP assessments and Latinos reached a mean scale score of 277, a gap of 33. In 2008, the difference narrowed to 21 with Whites achieving a mean scale score of 314 and Latinos attaining a mean scale score of 293.

### California Trends

The achievement gap in California between Latino and White students is similar to what Latinos and Whites have experienced on a national level. As an illustration, according to the California Department of Education (2002) during the 2000-2001 academic year, only 25% of Latino high school students passed the mathematics portion of the CAHSEE whereas 64% of the White students were successful.

Regarding language arts, 48% of Latinos passed and 82% of White students passed. As of March 2010, according to

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the California Department of Education (2010), the mathematics achievement gap between Latino students and White students changed slightly as 68% of Latinos passed in contrast to the 90% passing rate of their White classmates. In language arts, 66% of Latinos passed whereas 90% of White students prevailed.

During the period from 2003 to 2009, according to STAR results released by the California Department of Education, Latinos made little progress in closing the achievement gap in language arts and mathematics (see Tables 1 and 2). What is alarming about the academic achievement of Latinos is that in 2009 Latinos had yet to reach the same levels of achievement as Whites in 2003. Clearly, the gap is not narrowing.

### Factors that Affect Latino Student Achievement

Irrespective of the size of the gap between the achievement of Latino and White students, the achievement of Latinos in language arts and mathematics is dismal at best, which indicates something is amiss not only with the nation's schools, but especially in the K-12 schools in California. The problem is complex and its solution will not be found in a specific program, intervention, or curriculum because the academic achievement of Latinos is affected by many factors including the conditions of the schools in which Latino students are enrolled, the quality of coursework, the manner in which teachers teach, how teachers and school leaders perceive Latino students, the allocation of resources, parents' expectations, parent empowerment, and teacher preparation.

For example, Barton and Coley (2009) identified factors or correlates that characterize achievement, the most prominent being curriculum rigor, the role of the teacher, class size, resources, parent participation, and environmental issues such as poverty, nutrition, and school safety. Flores (2007) also identified several factors that adversely affect Latino achievement, which include poor teacher quality, a curriculum lacking in rigor, insufficient school resources, as well as a lack of high expectations, support, and parent empowerment.

Furthermore, the California School Superintendent's P-16 Council (2008) identified the following factors that inhibit academic achievement: unqualified teachers, inadequate curriculum and instructional strategies and expectations, as well as poor relationships among, staff, students, and community.

### The Nature of Schools That Serve Latino Students

The first factor affecting achievement that must come under scrutiny is the condition of the schools. Current research indicates Latino high school students may be at risk simply because of the conditions of the schools in which they are enrolled. More than 300,000 Latinos attend California high schools that are characterized by overcrowding, a condition that often creates unsafe environments and inhibits learning. Overcrowding of schools has led to countless students being taught in rooms and facilities that were never intended for instruction.

Furthermore, many Latinos do not have access to specially equipped rooms such as science labs, media centers, and libraries because the spaces are being used for other educational purposes. In some schools, overcrowding has forced school districts to use multi-track academic calendars, which often leads to fewer days of instruction than schools that follow a traditional calendar. Due to overcrowded conditions, Latino students are attending high schools that are unlikely to prepare them for academic success and subsequent enrollment in college. Additionally, many of these high schools are characterized by shortages of qualified teachers.

According to a report published by the University of California Los Angeles Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access (2007), nearly 90% of California Latino high school students are concentrated in 16 of the state's 58 counties. Nearly half a million Latino high school students attend schools in which more than half of the students receive free or reduced price meals. More than

600,000 California Latino students attend high schools that fail to offer the number of college prep courses needed to accommodate all the students wishing to enroll in a college preparatory curriculum.

The California Department of Education's Data Quest database (2008) indicates the Los Angeles Unified School District, the largest school district in California, includes 167 high schools. The 167 high schools are comprised of 127 regular high schools and 40 continuation high schools, which serve a Latino high school population of more than 150,000. According to the California Department of Education (2009), of the 167 high schools, 52, or nearly one-third, are subject to *Williams* monitoring. That is, the 52 high schools are being monitored for insufficiency of instructional materials, facility deficiencies, and teacher misassignments. The majority of the 52 high schools are schools in areas of poverty that serve a significant portion of the Latino population.

Although there has been an increase in the number of Latino students who have attained a "proficient" level of achievement in some California high schools, according to No Child Left Behind (NCLB) standards, it is projected that if the achievement of Latinos is not accelerated, nearly three quarters of a million Latinos would be attending high schools that would not meet NCLB mathematics standards in 2010. Furthermore, by 2014, it is feasible that all of California's Latino high school population will be in schools that may not meet NCLB mathematics standards!

### Teacher Quality and How Teachers Teach

According to Dubner (2008), teacher

**Table 1**  
Percentages of Students Scoring at Proficient and Above in English Language Arts on the California Standards Test

Subgroup	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	Change
White	53	54	58	60	62	64	68	15
Latino	20	20	25	27	29	32	37	17
Gap	23	24	33	33	33	32	31	+2

Source: California Department of Education Data Quest STAR Results available at <http://cde.ca.gov/dataquest>

**Table 2**  
Percentages of Students Scoring at Proficient and Above in Mathematics on the California Standards Test

Subgroup	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	Change
White	47	46	51	53	53	54	57	10
Latino	23	23	27	30	30	33	36	13
Gap	24	23	24	23	23	21	21	+3

Source: California Department of Education Data Quest STAR Results available at <http://cde.ca.gov/dataquest>

effectiveness is essential for academic growth and achievement. He indicated,

Good teachers can actually close or eliminate gaps in achievement . . . . When at-risk students have a couple of lousy teachers in a row, it almost irreparably harms them. Consequently, policy makers should be unyielding in their efforts to ensure that there are effective teachers in every classroom. (p. 6)

Haycock (2001) found many minority and low income students are being taught by incompetent, mediocre, and poorly prepared teachers. As one student aptly indicated, "what hurts us more is that you teach us less" (p. 8).

The likelihood that Latino students would receive instruction from ineffective and poorly qualified teachers is great. As an example, Flores (2007) found Latino students are more likely than White students to have teachers who are not prepared in the subjects they teach. Haycock (2001) found many Latino students are being taught by "teachers who often do not know the subject . . . and . . . they literally bore the students right out the school door" (p. 8).

According to Esch et al. (2005), in California, 25% of the teachers in schools with the lowest passing rates on the mathematics and reading sections of the CAHSEE were underprepared and/or novice teachers. In comparison, only 14% of the teachers in high schools with the highest passing rates were underprepared and/or novices.

Eighty-five percent of California's English learner population, more than 1.2 million, is Latino, the majority of whom are being served by underprepared and novice teachers. As an illustration, during 2004-2005 in schools with 40% or more English learners, 18% of the teachers were underprepared and/or novices. Additionally, Esch et al. (2005) found 53% of California's intern teacher force, teachers who have yet to complete credential program coursework and requirements, were concentrated in schools with 91% to 100% minority students. Conversely, the schools with the lowest minority populations had teaching staffs that were only 3% intern. Furthermore, high minority schools have four times as many underprepared mathematics and science teacher than low minority schools, and they continue to struggle to find and attract qualified teachers.

#### **Programs and Services for Limited English-Speaking Latinos**

In California, during the 2008-09 academic year, the California Department of Education (2009) identified 1,513,233 stu-

dents who were English learners. Nearly 85% were Spanish speakers. That is, five in six were Spanish-speaking. Over 19% of the Spanish-speaking English learners were high school students.

Although California's high school Latino English learners are united by their primary language, they truly are a diverse group characterized by different backgrounds, different English language proficiency levels, varying levels of primary language literacy, disparate content area knowledge, and greatly varied educational experiences. Some are new arrivals and others are long-term English learners. Simply put, the complex nature of California's Latino English learner population poses a variety of instructional challenges to the educational system and classroom teachers.

Based on current levels of student achievement, it is obvious many teachers do not have the skills to work with English learners regardless of having been required to possess appropriate certification for teaching such students. New teachers emerging from teacher preparation programs are required to take coursework pertaining to the needs of English learners, but one can only speculate how a course or two dealing with second language acquisition could provide the skills needed to facilitate second language proficiency, which, according to Collier (1987), encompasses "full proficiency in all language domains . . . and language skills for use in all content areas" (p. 618).

Countless Latinos are not receiving appropriate instruction because many programs for English learners are not grounded in sound, research-based instructional practices relevant to linguistically and culturally diverse populations. Additionally, according to the American Federation of Teachers (2004), English learners are often subjected to instructional programs that not only lack rigor, but also are not aligned to content standards.

#### **Educators' Perceptions of Latino Students**

Not only are Latino students being taught less, but many of them are receiving instruction from teachers who perceive them in a negative manner. That is, teachers frequently attribute the achievement gap to a deficient work ethic and a lack of parental and family support. Furthermore, Bol and Berry (2005) found secondary teachers considered work ethic, peer relationships, laziness, and a lack of discipline as the basis for poor academic achievement by Latino students as exemplified in the following statement from one of the teachers in their study:

From my point of view, students will not take home books to study or to review and homework is out of the question. So they don't spend enough time thinking about the concepts. They are lazy and give up way too easy. (p. 38)

The issue of whether or not a student's ethnicity affects the manner in which a teacher perceives the student is crucial to understanding the nature of the achievement gap between Latinos and White students because it implies that a student could be denied access to an equal educational opportunity simply on the basis of race. Unfortunately, many teachers believe that being a minority is a disadvantage. Teachers also fail to realize that a student's academic failure could very well be indicative of deficiencies in their own teaching.

As an illustration, Buriel (1983) found Mexican-American students received less teacher affirmation of correct responses, a powerful form of positive reinforcement, than did White students. Plata, Masten, and Trusty (1999) concluded Latino students were perceived by teachers to have less potential than their White counterparts. Contreras and Stritikus (2008) found Latino students were frequently placed in courses of study lacking rigor and quality.

Flores (2007), after analyzing and synthesizing a large body of research pertaining to Latino student achievement, concluded Latinos frequently are placed in lower level tracks or courses despite having scores or other measures of performance equal to or better than their White or Asian classmates. Flores (2007) also concluded Latinos are not only perceived as having less academic potential than White students, but also are less likely than Whites to be nominated for enrichment or accelerated programs.

#### **Educators' Perceptions of Latino Parents**

According to Vega (2010), many educators maintain the false belief that Latino parents do not value education. Additionally, Haycock (2001) indicated,

During that time we've learned a lot about what people think is going on . . . no matter where we are . . . they make the same comments, "They're too poor." "Their parents don't care." "They come to school without an adequate breakfast." "They don't have enough books in the home." "Indeed, there aren't enough parents in the home." Their reasons, in other words, are always about the children and their families. (p.7)

But Latino parents *do care* about education. In 1987, Buenning and Tolleffson investigated the alleged cultural gap between

Mexican and White students. They found the students of Mexican descent and their parents held a value orientation that was not significantly different from the orientation of Whites. Recent research conducted by Johnson and Sengupta (2009) indicated California Latinos, more than any other group, recognized the value of a college education. Additionally, Mark Lopez (2009), associate director of the Pew Hispanic Center, found Latino parents place a great emphasis on the value of education. That is, three-quarters of Latinos ages 16 to 25 said their parents felt that going to college is the most important thing to do after high school.

According to Zarate (2007), Latino parents tend to define parental involvement as having two elements: one being academic involvement and the other being life participation. Latino parents acknowledge the value of parent conferences, classroom visits, and homework, but they also recognize the importance of teaching respect and ethical behavior. Latino parents generally provide advice on life issues; they encourage siblings to care for each other; they offer encouragement; they interact with the parents of their children's friends; they monitor their children's peer groups, and they consistently warn their children of the dangers outside of the home, e.g., drugs, gangs, etc.

Garza (2009) concluded teachers and educators tend to blame the student and direct their attention on changing student behavior as opposed to implementing and fostering conditions that would engage students. Many teachers tend to limit their interactions with Latino parents to discussions pertaining to inappropriate behavior and/or poor academic performance, which only reinforce a parent's reluctance to initiate communication with school personnel.

### **Reversing the Trend: Programs and Practices that Work**

There is a tendency among educators to implement programs and practices that seem appropriate for a given problem, or as Jesse, Davis, and Pokorny (2004) indicated, doing something even if there is no credible evidence indicating that the something is viable. A good example is the popular *Open Court Reading* program, a curriculum whose effectiveness is inconclusive according to Moustafa and Land (2002).

Is *Open Court Reading* yet another brick of good intention with which the road to Hell is paved? Of course, *Open Court Reading* is one of many programs whose benefits are dubious at best, but the point is the selection of curricula and materials

should be based on sound evidence of effectiveness. Therefore, in the subsequent section dealing with recommendations for addressing the Latino achievement gap, only programs and efforts that have a proven record of effectiveness will be reviewed.

### **Organizational Changes**

In California, educational reform of low performing schools may include the replacement of the principal, an action that supports Manwaring's findings (2010) dealing with the importance of school leadership. However, merely substituting one administrator for another may not have a positive effect on the achievement of Latinos unless the new person exhibits effective leadership skills.

For example, Jesse, Davis, and Pokorny (2004) found effective leaders to be those who are characterized by visionary, collaborative, and collegial management styles and who were able to provide "support for teachers" while maintaining a "climate of mutual respect" (p. 33). Additionally, leaders of schools that serve underachieving Latinos must maintain high expectations and regard Latinos as being capable while working to eliminate weak curricula and teaching practices that foster student failure.

Dynarsky (2008) found in addition to having a visionary and collaborative leader, the school should provide interventions that not only foster high academic performance, but also re-engage students, such as small class size, homework and tutoring assistance, credit recovery, Saturday school, and summer enrichment programs. Hoxby, Murarka, and Kang (2009) found a longer school year had a positive effect on student learning and achievement, and Haycock (2001) indicated schools should extend the learning time for low performing students, perhaps doubling or tripling the instructional time devoted to reading and mathematics.

Finally, Jesse, Davis, and Pokorny (2004) found successful secondary schools that serve Latino students are characterized by a daily planning time that enabled teachers to articulate the delivery of content as well as maintain a comprehensive instructional program.

### **Changes in Curriculum**

Some school reform efforts, such as the corrective action required by NCLB, call for changes in the course of study, but any new curriculum according to *Closing the Achievement Gap*, a report published by the California Department of Education

(2008), should enable Latinos to acquire various levels of understanding, develop higher order thinking skills, and apply their knowledge to different and even unfamiliar settings. In other words, the coursework must be rigorous, which according to Dubner (2008), is an important factor affecting academic success. Unfortunately, Latino students seldom are placed in rigorous courses or even encouraged to enroll in challenging courses.

According to Hansen (2005) and Haycock (2001), rigorous coursework, in addition to being aligned to state and national standards, should have clear, consistent, and articulated goals and benchmarks. Coursework should include progress monitoring measures that not only are based on goals and benchmarks, but also are linked to the materials and the methodology. The coursework must engage the students in learning and must teach relevant skills. The courses should be characterized by problem-solving and analytical reason, i.e., higher-order thinking skills.

### **Teachers**

When school district personnel interview prospective teachers they try to determine a candidate's background, general knowledge of the curriculum and standards, ability to discipline students, and interest in extracurricular activities such as coaching or club sponsorship. Seldom are candidates queried about their ability to establish meaningful relationships with students, a key element for motivating and engaging students according to Garza (2009). Garza found teachers who maintain meaningful and respectful interactions with students create a sense of belonging, which had a positive effect on student interest and motivation. When a teacher displays an engaging attitude, the students are more likely to participate in the learning process because they want to be in class.

According to The Institute of Education Science (2008), which is the research branch of the U.S. Department of Education, students' academic needs can be addressed successfully through a meaningful personal relationship in which the teacher engenders the student's sense of belonging and identification with the teacher and the school. In a meaningful relationship, the teacher would feel accountable for the students' academic progress; she would accept the students as they are; she would attend to the complex needs of her students; and her teaching style would be characterized by flexibility and individualization of instruction. Unfortunately, according to Flores (2007), teachers frequently perceive

students as having deficits as opposed to perceiving deficits in their own practice.

For Latino students to succeed, it is essential that teachers maintain high expectations. Clark (2002) found high achieving students were likely to have a teacher who believed in their academic potential and believed they were capable of learning and completing college. Regrettably, many secondary school teachers maintain low expectations not only for Latino students, but also for other students of color, which often inhibits student engagement and student achievement.

### Parents

According to Gandara (2010), many Latino parents feel incapable of helping their children learn because they lack formal education and because they do not speak English or do not speak English well. Making matters worse is the tendency among teachers to ignore the skills and abilities of their Latino parents; but if parents are encouraged, they can influence their child's academic success. Therefore, it behooves teachers of Latino students to not only solicit parent support, but also foster an environment in which parent support is appreciated.

Parents as well as educators must be cognizant of situations and circumstances that impede and prevent parents from working with teachers and school officials. For example, Vega (2010) found many parents worked long hours merely to put food on the table and found it difficult to attend meetings or school events. Vega (2010) also identified other factors such as socio-economic status, beliefs about the role of parents in school, deference for school authority, and parents' limited English proficiency, all of which not only impede Latino parent participation in school-related functions, but also prevent them from serving as partners in their child's education.

School events and activities that involve parents should be scheduled at times that are convenient to parents. Vega (2010) recommended that schools should provide materials in the parents' primary language, and deploy translators to facilitate their participation at school functions. If a mother and father are unable to understand what is being discussed, it is unlikely they would return for future meetings.

Zarate (2007) indicated teachers and school administrators should initiate positive communication with parents as opposed to limiting parent contact to matters pertaining to a child's negative behavior or poor academic performance. Clark (2002) found parent beliefs are influenced by their

communication and would benefit from well designed teacher-led communication. When instructors cultivate partnerships with parents, it then is likely the parents would support their child in the home as well as in the classroom. Zarate (2007) also recommended that teachers should "expend extra energy and resources to successfully engage parents" (p. 8). Furthermore, teachers should respect parents.

It is imperative that Latino parents maintain interest in their children's education irrespective of socio-economic issues and level of education. For example, maintaining high expectations for one's child is a relatively simple behavior that has many benefits. Research indicates Latino students would be more inclined to not only remain in school, but also perform well academically if they sense parents and others who care about them feel education is important. According to Clark (2002), parents who maintained high standards and expectations for their children's education had a positive effect on their child's academic achievement.

Antrop-Gonzalez, Velez, and Garret (2005) indicated children whose mothers spent time with them and helped them with their homework exhibited significant gains in achievement. Ceballo (2004) identified several factors that contribute to a child's academic success, including parental commitment to the value of schooling and support of educational goals and tasks. Clearly, expressing an interest in a child's school work and experiences is essential for a child's academic success.

For many Latino students, academic success is contingent upon their language competency and proficiency and, therefore, it would behoove teachers to work with Latino parents to encourage and foster activities that directly affect literacy development. For example, Clark (2002) found certain language enriching activities such as completing homework under the supervision of parents, reading and writing in the home, and composing text on computers promoted and augmented literacy skills among a student population that was 40% Latino.

### Conclusion

The academic success of Latino students should be a major concern of educators, policy makers, parents, and community leaders. Too much is at stake. Although Latino students made some significant academic progress in the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s, their current achievement in reading and mathematics when compared to White students is dismal at best. The

achievement gap is vast, and closing the gap is not merely a matter of making a year's growth on a standardized test, because if a student is academically behind he or she must learn at a faster rate.

But current conditions in the public schools are preventing Latinos from learning at even an acceptable rate. For Latino students to succeed academically, substantial and significant changes in the educational system must be in the offing, especially what is taught, how it is taught, the manner in which Latino students are perceived by teachers and administrators, and the condition of the schools in which Latino students are enrolled.

Some might argue that to lay blame at the door of the schools and expect school administrators, teachers, and board members to repair an educational system that seems to be failing is unreasonable and unjust insofar as the problem is complex, pervasive, and often exacerbated by declining budgets, the burgeoning Latino population, and large numbers of Latinos who enter school as English learners.

On the other hand, there is nothing reasonable or just about an educational program that consistently fails to meet the needs of Latino children and there is nothing reasonable or just about denying a student access to an educational opportunity on the basis of race or ethnicity. School administrators, teachers, and board members must not only recognize that they are part of the problem, but they must also assume the responsibility for initiating and implementing reform in the curricula and programs that serve Latino students.

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