

Understanding Opportunities to Learn for Latino Students in Washington

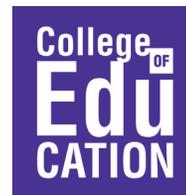


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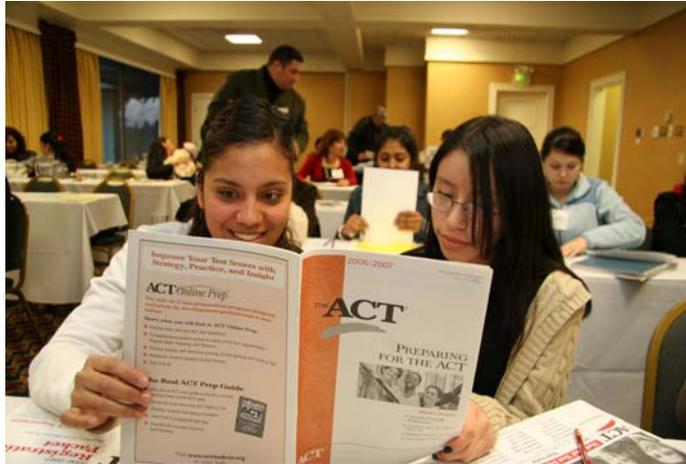
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Executive Summary

The status of Latino student achievement in Washington State requires urgent attention, as well as deliberate and thoughtful action in order to raise the performance levels and outcomes of this state's fastest growing student population. In 2008, the Washington State Legislature and Governor Gregoire approved ESHB 2687, a bill that calls for studies to be conducted on the academic achievement gap as it pertains to students of color. The Commission on Hispanic Affairs has partnered with researchers from the University of Washington's College of Education to examine the achievement gap as well as the likely causes for such disparities in achievement for Latino students. To this end, the research team utilized a multifaceted approach to data analysis, and conducted a mixed-method study (Proyecto Acceso/Project Access) on the profiles, perceptions, and characteristics of Latino students, parents and teachers in select urban, rural and urban ring school districts in Washington State.



Between 1986 and 2007, the non-Latino white student population in Washington's K-12 public schools grew by 6 percent, compared to 372 percent for Latinos. Increasingly, throughout eastern Washington's rural communities, Latinos are the majority not minority, often exceeding more than 75 percent of school district student populations. But recent demographic growth of Latinos in western Washington school districts exceeds statewide growth rates, in some cases, by several hundred percentage points. Additionally, in 2007 there were 43 school districts in Washington State with 1,000 or more Latino students, twenty-three of them located in Western Washington.

While Latino students are distinct in that they represent the fastest growing K-12 public school population, they are distinct, too, in that they consistently rank at the bottom or near the bottom on state assessments and other indicators of academic achievement. Examining test scores, however, does not tell us *why* test scores for Latino students remain worse overall than any other school population in Washington's K-12 schools. This academic achievement study commissioned by the State Legislature goes beyond test scores and examines *why* Latino students are performing at their current levels. For one, understanding the opportunities to learn for Latino students in the state of Washington reveals the underlying basis for the gaps in achievement that is evident today.

This report, "Understanding Opportunities to Learn for Latino Students in Washington State," contains four sections:

- A demographic overview of Latinos in Washington;
- The context for education for Latino students and patterns of low achievement using multiple indicators; including documentation of inequitable access to adequate educational

services for ELL students;

- Findings from key stakeholders in the state based on surveys conducted with students, parents and teachers in eight Washington school districts.
- Discussion of Policy recommendations based on the findings from secondary and primary data analysis

Findings in the study document that a persistent achievement gap exists between Latino students and their non-Latino white peers. This is consistently found on multiple assessments and indicators of academic achievement used in Washington State. In 2007-2008 for example, Latino students did not meet the federal government's adequate yearly progress (AYP) requirements in reading or math at any grade level—elementary, middle school or secondary.

This study shows that over a ten year period, progress has been made in reducing the achievement gap in grade 10 WASL reading and writing, but not in math. Overall, Latinos remain the lowest scorers on WASL assessments, with ELL students having lower scores than any other group across all grade levels. Over 66 percent of ELL students in Washington State's transitional bilingual education program are Latinos.

But it is entirely insufficient to discuss test scores as the sole measure of the achievement gap. This is what leads policymakers and educators to label students as “underachievers.” While there are students who do not perform well in exams or in school, state leaders have not looked deep enough to find out whether this is a result of individual effort, or the opportunities to learn within the educational system. Perhaps policy makers and educators should better examine those who have “underachieving” expectations for Latino students, rather than placing the onus of achievement solely on the student. The findings presented in this report provide useful insight into this perplexing issue of achievement and the multiple forces that shape student performance levels.

In addition to revealing disparate achievement levels, there are several key findings that this study highlights, and corresponding policy recommendations. These findings and recommendations are intended to inform policymakers on how to better ensure that Latino students are equitably served in our education system and prepared for positive life options beyond high school. The persistently low achievement levels of Latino students in Washington State has led to an ominous mix of high dropout rates in high school and low college-going and completion rates.

Academic achievement can be improved, but to get there will require systemic improvements in educational services, content and attention. Five central components are the basis of a plan for strategic intervention that will reduce the achievement gap and help Latino students to meet statewide AYP goals. These key components include:

- 1) A comprehensive data system and evaluation framework
- 2) Teachers and instruction
- 3) Student support
- 4) Parent engagement and involvement
- 5) A seamless P-20 continuum

The key findings and recommendations presented here begin this critical conversation for raising Latino student achievement:

Key Finding #1: Latino student achievement on the WASL is consistently low in all areas, particularly math. This pattern of achievement is also seen in college entrance exams such as the ACT or SAT. For ELL students, achievement levels are even lower, and do not significantly increase as the student progresses through high school, making them unlikely to pass the WASL exit exam.

Policy Recommendations:

- Increase access to curricular resources, materials, and personnel, to support academic achievement and raise the graduation rate of Latino students by 10 percent annually.
- Remove the use of the WASL as an exit exam for high school graduation. The exit exam feature of the WASL places the burden of achievement on the student rather than taking into account the opportunities to learn that exist for students. Assessment is vital and important, but using assessment as a punitive measure for students does very little to improve achievement for Latino or underrepresented students, as evident in the 26 states that use such exit exams.

Key Finding #2: A comprehensive data and evaluation system is not readily available that monitors annual student achievement and progress longitudinally. Researchers are unable to conduct cohort data analysis, monitor access to curriculum, or to closely monitor student progress using multiple measures.

Policy Recommendations:

- Conduct an audit of school districts with Latino school populations of 25 percent or higher, or with more than 1,000 Latino students, in order to understand the capacity that exists for serving ELL and Latino students in the state.
- Develop a statewide comprehensive evaluation framework to be utilized by schools and districts to examine opportunities to learn for Latinos, including ELL students who are not achieving at grade level. This framework would allow districts to utilize state assessment results in a formative manner, as well as create a mechanism for assessing course taking patterns, credits earned in school, program access, and cohort data on linguistic development. This framework would also serve to illuminate the needs of ELL students, who represent a sizable portion of Latino students in the state and remain largely underserved in all levels of education.

Key Finding #3: Cohort graduation rates among Latino students were approximately 56 percent in 2006, using Swanson's (2004) CPI method. The state of Washington is losing close to half of its Latino students before high school graduation.

By conservative measures, and using the 2008 OSPI cohort data, approximately 30 percent of Latinos dropped out of high school, and 34 percent of ELL students dropped out before graduating. States and districts need to continue ongoing efforts (see Ireland, 2007) to better understand whether students are leaving because they are not likely to have enough credits to graduate, and as a consequence are not at grade level, cannot pass the WASL, or due to other school-related factors. In addition, an infrastructure for academic support should be built into the CORE 24 requirements.

Policy Recommendations:

- The state needs a comprehensive data and evaluation system that closely and accurately monitors graduation rates for Latino and all students, and uses a cohort model to establish tangible goals for significantly reducing dropout rates by 2014.
- The courses taken and credits earned at the time of drop out need to be reported and factored into the calculation of dropouts, and included in the discussions around high dropout rates for students of color at the state level.
- The impact of CORE 24 requirements must be monitored, particularly for ELL students. In addition, academic and advising support within schools must accompany these requirements.

Key Finding # 4: There is shortage of bilingual, bicultural teachers in the state of Washington despite rapid demographic growth of ELL students statewide.

Latino teachers represent a mere 2.7 percent of the total teaching population in Washington, while Latinos are now 14.7 percent of the student population. The survey findings conducted from this study conveyed a largely first-generation Latino population. This survey revealed that the majority of Latino families speak Spanish as the primary language in the home. This presents a unique challenge to our educational system that cannot be overstated.

The majority of Latino parents in the survey sample had either an elementary education or some high school as their highest level of education. This leads to educational, social and cultural challenges. As a Latino teacher commented when surveyed: “Latino students need teachers they can connect with. They come to school only to learn that all they have known all their lives is wrong or taboo.”

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The United States is nearly alone among developed nations where bilingualism or multilingualism is seen as a threat rather than an asset. By increasing the level of multiculturalism and linguistic diversity in the teacher workforce, thereby raising the capacity to better educate first-generation students, the state of Washington would be better positioned to be competitive in the global marketplace.

Policy Recommendations:

- Increase teacher diversity by calling for teacher training programs and colleges of education in the state to develop an infrastructure for a “grow your own” program of bilingual/bicultural teachers, and provide teachers with incentives, such as full tuition scholarships, to work in regions where first-generation families live.
- Require all future teachers in Washington State to develop competencies related to meeting the instructional and socio-cultural needs of ELL students in order to obtain a teaching certificate.
- Require current teachers to participate in cultural competence training and support teachers to attend these professional development opportunities both locally and nationally.

Key Finding #5: There is a disconcerting lack of clarity around models used for ELL instruction and a considerable variation regarding the use of paraprofessionals in the schools with high Latino concentrations.

Many of the schools the team visited used an “inclusion model” for ELL student instruction, but the definition of such a model varied significantly. In most instances, ELL students were not receiving supplemental bilingual academic support while enrolled in mainstream classes delivered in English. In addition, due to language barriers, students or paraprofessionals were often used as translators in these contexts, to assist their peers to deliver math content, rather than the teacher.

In addition to the inconsistent pedagogical strategies, paraprofessionals are being asked to carry a great deal of the responsibility for educating ELL students. During scheduled visits to schools to administer survey and conduct teacher interviews, the research team found a heavy reliance on paraprofessionals, from translating in classrooms, to direct delivery of curriculum content. Teachers commented that they “had to rely heavily on their ‘parapro’ to assist the ELL students” in their classrooms. Paraprofessionals do not possess the same level of qualifications as classroom teachers, and this overreliance on paraprofessionals calls into question the quality of educational service delivery for Latino students, particularly ELL students.

Policy Recommendations:

- Change state teacher certification to require that initial licensure include training on meeting the needs of ELL students and provide for ongoing professional development on effective pedagogical strategies to raise achievement levels among ELL students.
- Paraprofessionals should not be allowed to substitute for teachers in Washington classrooms. While many are bilingual, and capable of providing academic support, the state and districts need to monitor, improve, and clarify the role of staff and the use of paraprofessionals in schools, because they do not possess the qualifications of classroom teachers. The statewide evaluation framework recommended above would monitor these practices.
- Invest in paraprofessionals currently working in high concentration Latino school districts to earn their degrees and become certified teachers, and work with districts to provide their staff with support to return to college. This can be a feature of the “grow your own” approach described above, as a strategy to diversify the teacher workforce in the state.

Key Finding #6: Latino parents experience a considerable level of isolation with schools, in part due to a language barrier, but also largely due to an environment in the schools where parents feel unwelcome.

Language was found to be a significant barrier to Latino parent participation in schools. Parents frequently commented that they would like to see more effort by school staff to personally communicate with them about their child’s performance in school. In addition, a considerable percentage of parents (48.5 percent) responded that they needed bilingual services to communicate with teachers and staff, yet over a third of the survey participants (35.4 percent) were not offered a translator when interacting with school personnel. Just as we use WASL and test scores to hold students accountable for their learning, an instrument should be developed to hold school districts accountable for the capacity not only to communicate effectively with parents, but also to make it possible for parents who do not speak English to be involved in their child’s education.

Policy Recommendations:

- The state should require schools and districts (in addition to those required by federal grant requirements) to communicate effectively with parents whose first language is not English, and utilize multiple approaches of communication. Specifically, the state should require: 1)

correspondence be sent home translated in English and Spanish; 2) translators should be offered for parents who do not speak English; 3) greater efforts by school staff should be made to verbally communicate with parents over the phone and in person; and 4) Require school districts to utilize a common, state-developed instrument for principals and parents to determine their effectiveness in communicating with parents whose first language is not English. For parents who are not literate in English, they should be offered the opportunity to complete the survey using a qualified translator. The statewide comprehensive evaluation framework would monitor these practices as well as the capacity of districts to provide these services for Latino parents.

Key Finding #7: A seamless continuum to college does not exist for Latino students. In particular, information about college and financial aid for students is lacking, especially for 1079 students.

The survey results indicated that a very high percentage of Latino students wanted to attend a four-year college after high school (60.2 percent). They also wanted “to know how college works” and greater information on the college application process and requirements. There was also clear misunderstanding of House Bill 1079 (HB 1079), a law approved by the state Legislature in 2003 that allows undocumented students who meet specified criteria to pay in-state tuition to attend Washington colleges and universities. Knowledge and accurate information was lacking in many of the schools and regions that the research team visited to obtain student and parent data.

Policy Recommendations:

- Promote a P-20 continuum by providing early knowledge about college for all Latino students and their parents by hosting parent workshops with information provided in English and Spanish.
- Education about HB 1079 should start prior to high school. The state should provide support to school districts to offer information in English and Spanish for 1079 students and their parents to better understand college admission standards and funding sources.
- Audit the implementation of HB 1079 in higher education systems to determine whether college and university admissions offices are responsibly implementing the law as intended by the state Legislature.
- Allow students who qualify as 1079 students to compete for state-funded need grant financial aid.

Moving Forward to Collectively Address the Needs of Latino Students

Washington is not the first state to witness a major demographic shift in its Latino population. There are several other precedent states that have had both a dramatic increase in immigration as well as growth in the birth rates of Latinos. Thus, there is a great deal we have and continue to learn from the gains as well as missteps of other states.

This report includes a detailed listing of several best practices in Washington and other states with high concentrations of Latinos, including an analysis of best practices for ELL students, models for school reform, and intervention programs that have a record of success for Latino students. This report reveals a snapshot of education service delivery, performance, and views of key stakeholders in the education system—an important context that must enter the policy arena if this state is to significantly reduce the achievement gap. A commitment from policy makers is necessary to ensure that investment in Latino students occurs equitably, responsibly, and optimally.