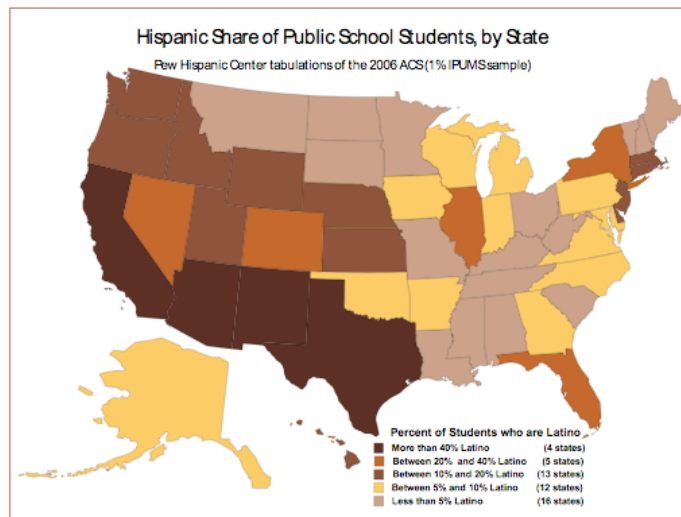


## INVESTING IN THE EDUCATION OF LOW-INCOME HISPANIC PARENTS

By Jose-Pablo Fernandez. Founder, Parents Alliance, Houston. July 1, 2013

The number of Hispanic students in the nation's public schools nearly doubled from 1990 to 2006, accounting for 60% of the total growth in public school enrollments over that period. In 2006 there were approximately 10 million Hispanic students in the nation's public schools representing about 20 percent of public schools students.<sup>1</sup> By 2011 this percentage was almost 25 percent.<sup>2</sup>

According to the Pew Hispanic Center, in 2012 California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas—all states bordering Mexico—had already majority Hispanic students in their public schools. More than two-thirds (69%) of them were from Mexican origin, and seven-in-ten (70%) spoke a language other than English at home, although this percentage decreases with each generation.<sup>3</sup>



Hispanic children underperform dramatically in their earlier years of school, less than half graduate from high school, and even less pursue a post-secondary education with an overall higher education attainment rate of only 17.9 percent, which is 2.5 times lower than that for non-Hispanic whites. They perform poorly in school **not** because of their race or ethnicity, but because they come from low-income, low-education households.<sup>4</sup>

Parents—mothers in particular—are a key factor to reverse this low accomplishment trend because they are the most important influence on their children's education. Research shows that parental education is an important and significant unique predictor of child achievement.<sup>5</sup> However, immigrant parents from Mexico and Central America are more likely to be low-income and low-education and computer illiterate; they don't speak English and don't understand the American school system. All these deficits keep them from helping and guiding their children towards academic success.

It is clear that what is needed is a decisive approach to provide parents with educational programs specifically designed for them in Spanish and in the manner they learn. In our 13-year experience offering education to low-income Hispanics parents in Texas we have identified six basic needs: digital learning, ESL, personal finances, GED, civics, and how to plan for college. With this tool-kit parents will be able to help their children increase their educational attainment and plan for a college education, with high school graduation as the stepping-stone.

But education by itself is not enough. For parents to become agents of change several efforts must materialize: parents need to partner with the schools and get involved in the education of their children; schools must include parental education as an integral part of the curriculum; federal, state and local governments, businesses and foundations must provide the necessary funds

specifically for this purpose; and school districts should include well equipped Parent Centers when passing bond issues. Every school should have a Parent Center because they are the ideal environment where parents learn online and have access to computers and Internet connection, precisely at the same schools where their children can look up to them.

Investing in the education of low-income Hispanic parents will allow their American-born children to have significant potential to greatly improve educational attainment, family income and a brighter future. There is a wealth of evidence that increased attainment improves health, lowers crime rates, and yields citizens who are globally aware and participate more in civic and democratic processes such as voting and volunteering. All of these factors have enormous implications for our democracy.<sup>6</sup>

However, a return on this investment is hard to grasp. So let's consider it as the opportunity cost –the forgone alternative of doing absolutely nothing about it, as if parental education were not the critical issue that it really is. If we don't make this investment now, we will end up with a large population of undereducated U.S. citizens that would be hard to employ at a time when America needs the best people to compete in the new world economy. Doing nothing would become a huge burden to future generations.

*“Clearly, if the socioeconomic disparities are not substantially reduced, if too many Hispanic youth remain unprepared to succeed in the knowledge economy of the twenty-first century, it is difficult to envision a prosperous future for our country.”* Dr. Stephen L. Klineberg, Rice University.

**WE NEED TO TAKE ACTION NOW!**

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<sup>1</sup> *A profile of Hispanic Public School Students*. Richard Fry and Felisa Gonzalez. Pew Hispanic Center, August 26, 2008

<sup>2</sup> *Hispanic Students Enrollments Reach New Heights in 2011*. Richard Fry and Mark Hugo Lopez. Pew Hispanic Center, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, note 1.

<sup>4</sup> *Freakonomics*. Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner. Harper Collins 2005, page 164.

<sup>5</sup> Duncan GJ, Brooks-Gunn J. *Consequences of growing up poor*. New York, Russell Sage Foundation, 1997.

<sup>6</sup> *A Stronger Nation Through Higher Education*. Annual Report, Lumina Foundation, June 2013.