In Hispanic Education

U.S. Department of Education/Hispanic Dropout Project

Summer 1996 No. 1

Caring, Community, and Personalization: Strategies to Combat the Hispanic Dropout Problem

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Introduction

Hispanic students are dropping out of school at a rate that does not show signs of diminishing--with ultimate perilous costs to society. In 1994, the number of Hispanic students aged 16-24, who had not completed high school and were not enrolled, was 30 percent--as compared to 8 percent for White students and 13 percent for African American students (Hispanic Dropout Project, 1996). In fact, Hispanic students are the largest-growing sector of the population and have the highest dropout rate of any major segment of the U.S. population (Hispanic Dropout Project, 1996).

Why should the public, the business community, policy makers, and school staff be concerned about the ultimate costs to society posed by steady dropout rates of Hispanic students? A sampling of data compiled by the Hispanic Dropout Project (1996) reveals several compelling reasons:

- Hispanics were about one of every ten Americans in 1990 -- and may be one out of every five by 2050;
- The dropout rate for Hispanic students is more than double that of non-Hispanic students;
- Hispanic dropout rates are highest for foreign-born students;
- Hispanics in the United States are diverse: The dropout rate for Cuban Americans is close to the national average. The rate for Mexican Americans is three times greater;
- Fifty-eight percent of all Hispanic dropouts have less than a tenth-grade education;
- Hispanic dropout rates are about double those of other Americans at every income level;
- Low academic achievement is a precursor to student dropping out;
- The dropout rate for Hispanic students is highest for low-income students;
- Two in five Hispanic children live in poverty -- twice the poverty rate for all children.

In order to devise strategies that will reduce the Hispanic dropout rate, we first need to recognize the prevalence of popular perceptions that place blame on the individual, indicting the student or family for laziness, lack of willingness to assimilate into American culture, and reluctance to learn English. A common and pernicious belief condemns Hispanic students for their alienation from school without taking into account the power of contextual factors that influence their school experiences.

Many educators, and the general public as well, believe that outside factors influencing the lives of potential dropouts--whether they include poverty, language difference, or dysfunctional family influences--are simply

beyond the purview of schools. This belief contributes to a feeling of helplessness and a lack of school-based strategies to combat the Hispanic dropout rate.

In this publication, we examine the context in which Hispanic students drop out of school--and what one exemplary middle school has done to battle these contextual factors. A web of interlocking factors synergize to make dropping out of school much more likely for Hispanic students (Hispanic Dropout Project, 1996) (Mehan, 1996). These factors include racial and ethnic identity, gender, socioeconomic status, academic performance, self-concept, family organization, and language fluency.

Mehan points out that these factors alone do not explain why Hispanic youth, in particular, continue to drop out of school in disproportionate numbers when compared to the rest of the American population. Instead, he indicts school practices that sort and classify students--practices that succeed in alienating students from academic work through curricula that have little relation to their everyday life and culture. Long-standing and unquestioned bureaucratic practices that differentiate curricula and curb student access to high-status knowledge and high-quality teaching have insidious effects. Sadly, these practices, in tandem with environmental factors, ultimately disengage many Hispanic students from school entirely and blunt their life chances.

What are schools to do? To answer this question, we feature the strategies employed by Lennox Middle School (LMS) in Lennox, California. We focus on LMS in this publication because of their high number of Hispanic students (approximately 95 percent), the socioeconomic variables present in their community that influence dropout rates, and because they have a multi-faceted dropout prevention program targeted to Hispanic students. LMS has a demonstrable record of success in retaining students over the past five years: less than 0.05 percent of LMS's total student body dropped out--and in 1991, 1993, and 1994 no students dropped out. In addition, daily attendance rates are high: 96%.

Student achievement has improved over the past five years when measured on the California Test of Basic Skills (CTBS) or the Spanish Assessment of Basic Education (SABE). LMS has chosen to focus on reading and language arts as especially critical areas because 93% of their students are classified as LEP (Limited English Proficient). LMS students show substantial growth from sixth to eighth grades, and successive groups of eighth graders have shown marked improvement on the CTBS and SABE over the past five years.

When compared against other California students, LMS students show strength. For example, in the Spring of 1990, LMS eighth graders scored well below state averages on standardized, multiple-choice measures of reading and writing mechanics. In contrast, just three years later, on the newer state performance-based, holistically scored assessments of reading and writing, LEP and FEP (Fluent English Proficient) students were as likely or more likely to score at the middle or upper end of the scoring scale (scores of 3, 4, 5, 6 on a 6-point scale) as were LEP and FEP students from other parts of the state.

Another reason we selected LMS as our featured school in this issue is because nationally approximately 58 percent of Hispanic dropouts leave school before tenth grade; moreover, 34 percent of Hispanic dropouts have the equivalent of a middle school education. Middle school is an important period in these students' lives. In later issues of this publication, we will focus on elementary and high school strategies designed to prevent dropping out.

Finally, members of the Hispanic Dropout Project were impressed by their visits to LMS, particularly the wide range of strategies used with students and their families as well as the staff's dedication and commitment to their work.

We asked three of LMS's key staff to respond to the following questions:

- How do you engage students in school?

- How do you work with Hispanic students and their families in a culturally respectful way?
- In what ways do you bond students to the academic experience?
- What works?
- What requirements must be in place in order for school staff to succeed with such an undertaking?
- Is it the responsibility of schools alone to deal with a problem so massive?
- What can policy makers do to encourage sound, effective school-based strategies and programs?

Through the voices and successful experiences of LMS's principal, assistant principal, and a counselor, we provide strategies, ideas, and recommendations for both policy and practice.

The Hispanic Dropout Project (1996) points to "the million dollar difference"--and asks the question: What if all of one school's Hispanic students completed school in just one graduating class? The answer is compelling. ***If the average American high school graduated all its Hispanic students, that class would experience over half a million dollars in increased earning potential during the lives of its members.*** In the average urban high school, the gain is over a million dollars per graduating class.

References

Hispanic Dropout Project. (1996). Data Book. United States Department of Education, Washington, D.C.

Mehan, H. (1996). Contextual Factors Surrounding Hispanic Dropouts. Washington, D.C., Paper prepared for the Hispanic Dropout Project, United States Department of Education.

A letter sent to Senator Jeff Bingaman of New Mexico by high school senior Stephanie Ruybel, West Mesa High School, Albuquerque, New Mexico

Dear Sir,

I am a senior at West Mesa High School in Albuquerque. Today in my ethnic studies class, we were discussing the issue of high school dropouts. Apparently, the highest percentage of these students are Chicanos. I am Chicano and this concerns me. I am watching my friends disappear into a world they are not yet ready for. Some say that school is too hard or that they do not like people telling them what to do. But, what I think is they are scared and do not have enough confidence in themselves. They are afraid of trying and then failing at whatever they attempt to make out of their lives. Why do they succumb to this fear? Because they have no one to say to them, "Mi 'jito, you can do it, believe me, I've been through it and look at me now. I'm a teacher, or a doctor, or an engineer." We have almost no Chicano role models in our schools to look up to.

In my 3 years of high school, I have had two Hispanic teachers. One was a Spanish teacher and the other is my ethnic studies teacher. That means 2 out of the 24 teachers at my school are Chicano. We need more positive, educated, inspirational role models in our classrooms and on our campuses.

Please, do something about this travesty. We need a committee to create programs in order to motivate and encourage more Chicanos to become teachers. I hope to be in the field of education someday because I feel the atmosphere of need all around me. Please, put this idea in your list of priorities, and consider some sort of

action. The children of New Mexico need you now and will thank you in the future.

Sincerely,

Stephanie Ruybel

Caring and Connecting

The educational philosophy that permeates Lennox Middle School extends a life rope to students with stunted aspirations and little sense of a future beyond the constraints of their current environment. School staff firmly believe that support must be provided wherever and whenever it is needed. As Larry Kennedy says: "You don't walk students up to the edge of the cliff, push them off, and say: Survive!"

What about the term "at risk"--frequently used to describe similar student populations? How do staff at LMS view the term? Do they see it as stigmatizing? Useful? Necessary? "We try hard not to classify our kids that way," Kennedy says thoughtfully. "They do take it personally, and they want to know why they are 'at risk.' I can understand that. To me and to them it has a negative connotation."

"Instead, we try to work with kids so that they acknowledge that they are minorities but they don't personalize or internalize that knowledge to the point that it is negative. There is tremendous respect at this school for: 'I am Hispanic. I am smart. I am going to college.'"

Reflecting further on the term "at risk," Kennedy says: "The term is a catch-all and I don't like it. We use it only when we write a grant or need to explain a grant to staff. But we try hard not to go back and refer to that term."

When Sanchez thinks about the term "at risk," she feels compelled to communicate the yearning need of the district's Hispanic students, the not-infrequent dysfunctional or destructive home environments, and the high degree of poverty in the community. All of these variables could create a climate of crisis for teachers and staff--and in many schools, contribute to feelings of helplessness and anger. Instead, LMS's staff addresses the need in a strategic, calm, and optimistic manner.

"It is a given that all our kids are at risk in some way," she points out, "so we do talk about the severely at risk to differentiate. The severely at risk are those whose mothers are prostitutes; they live in a hotel and the kids are locked in a bathroom every night. The severely at risk are youngsters whose mothers and fathers are on drugs, whose brothers or sisters are gang members. The severely at risk are kids who can't read or write and have been in school their whole life. There are not many of those, but they do need extra help. We believe they need an adoptive parent, a counseling group, or we need to investigate the home situation a little bit more."

These attitudes and beliefs have infused the intricate web of strategies LMS staff have devised to propel students past the immediate, seductive dangers of dropping out, gang affiliation, and teen pregnancy. Believing that schools must engage both students and families in a multitude of ways to sufficiently armor and motivate them to stay in school, LMS's efforts include the purely symbolic (covering graffiti with fresh paint overnight to keep the school clean and attractive), the personal (working with youth to develop a sense of personal future), the academic (designing and teaching curricula that are culturally relevant and emphasize high levels of student/teacher interaction), and outreach that is conducted in a manner that is sympathetic to Hispanic culture (designing programs specifically for parents to increase their awareness and understanding of the school's aims).

One umbrella strategy and belief shared by LMS staff is the need to personalize instruction and programs--an emphasis that radiates through a range of activities. LMS restructured itself with intertwined goals: to build a community of caring for students and their families and to boost student achievement. Teams of three teachers work with approximately 90 students in an interdisciplinary approach to instruction at grades six, seven, and eight. These teams are deliberately structured so that flexibility is maintained and teacher choice is respected.

"We have one group of three teachers," Kennedy observes, "that has followed their seventh graders to eighth grade (for two years). Another group is talking about keeping their students for three years."

But instead of mandating that teacher teams retain the same students for the three middle school grades, teachers can choose other arrangements. "Different teachers have different interests," Kennedy points out. "Some prefer sixth graders and like to nurture them as they come in from the fifth grade. Other teachers like to work with older kids. Having teachers select, to a great degree, who they will work with on a team and what grade levels they will teach has worked well to date."

Although most, if not all, LMS students could be termed in danger of dropping out, some students seem especially vulnerable to leaving school early. One key program nurtures these youngsters by pairing them with school staff to provide supportive relationships otherwise missing from their lives. This "Adopt-a-Student" program enlists all school staff--including secretaries, aides, teachers, custodians--urging that each staff member adopt one or two students.

The requirements for staff who participate are fairly extensive--which helps ensure that the program is not patronizing or mechanistic. "We ask that they touch base with that kid every single day. During the course of the week, they should spend an hour with them--and they can spend longer periods of time," Kennedy explains. "Many people will take them to movies on the weekend, or to the beach, or camping, or sometimes have an impromptu picnic right here on school grounds."

If students are not in school, their staff partner checks on them--even intervening to ensure that they get to school. "Kids take this kind of attention seriously," Kennedy points out. "Programs like these allow kids who are outside the loop, who have been failures academically, to see some reason for existing or being successful in school.

"They see," he emphasizes, "that someone does care about them."

Meg Sanchez agrees. "Kids would much rather be here in school than on the street," she emphasizes, "because this is where it is happening. This is where people really care about them--and they know it. We have kids who come back to see us from the high schools and the one theme that runs throughout their conversation is: They do not care about us the way you do."

This kind of caring isn't some trendy form of psycho-babble or an excuse to ease up on academic demands, Sanchez points out. Instead, this climate of caring permeates LMS's approach to curriculum and instruction. It affects their teacher recruitment, hiring, and retention--and it shapes how school staff deal with significant issues Hispanic students often bring to school.

One School's Perspective - Lennox Middle School

Larry Kennedy, Meg Sanchez, and Pam Rector are staff at Lennox Middle School in Lennox, California--a densely populated community governed by Los Angeles County. Located close to Los Angeles International Airport, the community is a port of entry for immigrants from Mexico and Latin America. Lennox Middle School's student population of 1,850 is approximately 95 percent Hispanic, 3 percent African American, 1

percent Asian/Pacific Islander, and 1 percent "other." The poverty level of students and their families is pronounced: over 85 percent of students qualify for free breakfast and lunch--and perhaps most tellingly, the majority choose to eat the meals to which they are entitled. Classified as one of the economically poorest school districts in the state, school staff believe in a concerted, preventive approach to the Hispanic dropout problem --attacking it at a variety of levels and employing a diverse range of strategies. If schools can succeed in bonding students to them and their goals, respect their culture and issues related to second language learning, and work productively with students' families, the staff whose perspectives are presented here maintain that a large part of the Hispanic dropout problem will be solved.

Larry Kennedy, LMS's principal, has spent 23 years as a school administrator in the Lennox School District. He has been principal at LMS for 8 years and has overseen the school's restructuring process. In addition to his administrative experience, Kennedy was a teacher for 8 years in different districts.

Meg Sanchez is assistant principal at LMS, where she holds primary responsibility for curriculum and instruction. A former bilingual education teacher, Sanchez believes strongly in staff development that is culturally sensitive to Hispanic students, in teacher teaming that breaks down disciplinary barriers, and most of all, in engaging students in school as a place that exemplifies a caring community of learners.

Pam Rector is a counselor with primary responsibilities for LMS's college readiness program, working to bond students to school at the middle school age so that they will be motivated sufficiently to persist academically through high school. Both Meg Sanchez and Pam Rector are bilingual.

Engaging Students Academically

Engaging students in school--including students not in imminent peril of dropping out--is no small task. How do the staff at LMS approach the challenge? At the outset, instruction is much more lively and noisy than in many schools, Sanchez says. "We are very much against the teacher who does nothing but lecture. That turns kids off. We use a lot of instructional conversation, a lot of cooperative learning. If I walk into a classroom and it is silent, I get very nervous.

"But if I go into a classroom and the teacher is on the sidelines, all the kids are in groups of four and are arguing about a novel, that is what we like to see."

An extremely strong program of bilingual education--combined with careful teacher selection--is imperative for a population of Hispanic students, she says. "We select the teachers who teach ESL very carefully based on what we know about them and their ability to teach ESL. There are so many levels within ESL: kids who talk faster, kids who are in a different place, kids who arrive late in the year.

"We never put all ESL kids together on one team. Instead, they are mixed in with English readers in teams of 90 to 120 students."

Much of the literature taught at LMS is written by Latino or Latino-American writers, Sanchez emphasizes, and the largely bilingual staff fluctuate easily between English and Spanish in everyday speech. "We do a lot of code switching, but not while teaching."

How are other cultures brought into a school with such a heavy emphasis on Hispanic culture? "We don't have a large African American population," Sanchez responds, "but we have a lot of African American teachers. We also have a small population of Tongan kids. We emphasize justice and peace and tolerance. These are big issues at this school, just a part of the regular classroom discourse." As an example, teachers bring up current events for class debate and discussion, such as the current wave of church burnings in the

South.

Kennedy sees a clear but unanticipated benefit as a result of the change to teaming: improved relationships with parents. "We have conferences with the three teachers on a team and a student, sometimes with the student and parent, and ask: Why are you not turning in your homework? Maybe they don't have a notebook. Maybe they need a backpack. So we get them a notebook and a backpack. We tell them: 'You are going to be here and have your homework.' Then we set up a system to monitor that. Part of it is arm-twisting, and the other part is seeing that the kid goes away knowing that those people at school care and are going to get me if I don't do it."

The familiar complaint that such an extended role for school staff is not the school's responsibility is not heard at LMS, Kennedy says. "We do not lay the responsibility on the parent by saying, 'If he would just come to school,' or 'If she would only do this or that'."

Instead, responsibility for student achievement and engagement in school is shared. "In this kind of support system, kids don't fall through the cracks," he observes.

Recruitment of New Staff

In order to engage students academically, LMS begins with definite notions about how teachers must work with students--and these beliefs strongly influence their hiring and teacher evaluation. "We must have teachers who care about children and who respect them," Sanchez says firmly. "During the hiring process, we find that one telling way of discovering candidates' attitudes is to pose a scenario in which a student blows up at the teacher in the classroom. We want to know how the prospective teacher would handle the situation."

A teacher who immediately would discipline the student or send him or her to the office is not what LMS wants, she maintains. "That teacher's first instinct is not to care about the kid but to care about his or her own status in the classroom," she says conclusively. "Instead, we want a teacher who will calm the student down and talk quietly with him or her outside the classroom--not one who turns the situation into an issue of power and control and ego."

While interviewing prospective teachers, LMS staff also ask candidates which five rules they would choose to govern their classroom. "Some people have rules that students can't stand up; they can't speak without raising their hands. That is not what we want here," she emphasizes. "We want a community of learners. We want a place where the classroom is the student's home for two hours at a time. It is just as much the student's place as our place as teachers."

Once teachers are hired, they are monitored to make sure they maintain a respectful stance toward students. "We have three teachers who are not coming back next year," Sanchez says bluntly. "Two of them are not bad instructors, but they are not sensitive enough to our kids. They are both fluently bilingual. Other schools would keep them; they would not even think about letting them go. But because they model behaviors that aren't respectful to the kids--such as a tone of impatience--we won't ask them to return."

Although these attitudes toward teacher hiring and retention may sound much tougher than policies in many schools, Sanchez emphasizes that LMS's climate is not strict and punitive, but instead collegial and committed to students. She credits the staff for enormous dedication to their work--and remembers how teacher attitudes toward Hispanic students have evolved in a positive direction.

"In 1979 and 1980, the population in Lennox was shifting rapidly from Anglo to Latino. Some of the old-timers who had been here for 15 to 20 years were complaining: 'I don't know if I can deal with these kids. You just can't talk to these parents.' But as soon as we got new teachers and some of the old-timers retired, the ones who didn't retire heard this new sensitivity. They began to be called upon for some of their

comments--and they began to change. Currently we have a very powerful group of people who have subject-specific skills and people who are extremely nurturing and caring."

The Lennox School District now requires that staff be bilingual to ensure that staff can communicate with students and their families. "We have a strict and stringent hiring policy because of the ethnic makeup of the students," Kennedy states. Although he is not bilingual and would not be hired under the current policy, Kennedy supports it whole-heartedly, showing his support for Hispanic culture outside school through participation in community celebrations and events.

"For instance, I wouldn't think of missing the Cinco de Mayo festival," he says. "That kind of participation is so appreciated by the parents, the kids, and the older kids who are coming back. This is their community, and you are sharing it. A tremendous amount of respect goes with that."

Program and Policy Recommendations

- ***Establish a sense of community and an atmosphere of inclusion in the ethos of the school.*** Accomplish this through the use of teacher teams who work cooperatively on curriculum and instruction, through flexible student assignments to teacher teams, and outreach programs that include the student's immediate and extended family.
- ***Make instruction proactive rather than passive and didactic.*** Place a premium on cooperative learning, a high degree of interaction between students and teachers, and the appropriate use of ESL instruction.
- ***Provide flexibility in rules governing hiring and retention of teachers.*** In some cases this may require exemptions from rules which prevent schools from hiring teachers with qualities uniquely needed in specific settings. It also may require transferring teachers who are unable to fulfill particular school expectations.
- ***Establish a district policy that encourages or requires the hiring of bilingual teachers.*** Bilingual teachers respectful of Hispanic language and culture better communicate the goals and aims of the school to students and their families.
- ***Develop, maintain, and continuously evaluate programs that further a sense of personal future for Hispanic students.*** Integrate college readiness programs and mentoring programs with school staff and college students.
- ***Target parents and extended families for extensive outreach.*** Conduct after-school programs (e.g., computer classes, consumer economics) tailored to their needs in both Spanish and English.
- ***Avoid language that serves to label and distance students and their families from school staff.*** Avoid extensive and thoughtless use of the term "at risk".

Building a Sense of Future

Another critical strategy at LMS is building and extending a sense of a personal future to students who may come from families where graduation from the eighth grade is the ultimate educational accomplishment. Signals of potential dropout emerge early, and are taken seriously by school staff.

What warnings indicate that dropping out looms on students' personal horizons? "We see it in different ways related to gender," Kennedy says. "We see girls taking a back seat to boys in class. Part of this is related to

the growth cycle they are going through.

We also see girls beginning to date older boys or dressing in short skirts, bold colors, and heavy makeup. We also see students quit doing their homework and get negative attention by being the class clown. They come late to class, they don't get up on time, they mess around with other kids in a non-constructive ways."

Rector notes that congested, compressed living conditions common to the impoverished urban neighborhood play a role in teen pregnancy, simply because they facilitate interaction between girls and older men. If a girl is already alienated by her school experiences, with little or no sense of a personal future, she is much more likely to choose pregnancy--usually with a man well into his twenties. Culturally, parents also may give tacit approval to these relationships, if the men are employed and seen as good providers.

For all those reasons, school staff concentrate on eventual admission and graduation from college as one way that students can see a productive future for themselves beyond what they may witness around them in their neighborhoods.

"We have concentrated heavily on the college futures of the kids for the last eight years," Kennedy says. "At first it was difficult to convince the parents, but we now feel we have turned a corner."

Why might Hispanic parents resist the idea of college? According to Kennedy and Rector, many believe that contributing economically to the family is more beneficial than extended education. Even high school can be viewed as unnecessary when poverty is a grinding daily reality.

Although Rector points out that overcoming attitudes that a college education is either out of reach or unnecessary is not an easy task for school staff, yet they are encouraged by student response to the college readiness programs they have developed. "The average level of education for our parents is fourth grade," she explains. "For many parents, eighth-grade graduation is a big deal. It means you have really made it." With obvious empathy, she adds: "High school is a bonus, and college is a dream."

Other parents, she states, expect no less than college--but uneven expectations, coupled with the press of severe poverty and previous distasteful school experiences, combine to make many Hispanic youth feel shut out of school. In these cases--which are far too frequent--youth drop out and get a low-level, dead-end job.

Rector observes, "They feel successful because they are earning some money and helping their moms. They are not getting what they need out of school, so they get it out of work. Now they have new shoes. They have something to show."

However, Kennedy says that LMS counters the desire to "have things now" with a heavy emphasis on college as something accessible to its students, both academically and financially.

"Counseling staff," Kennedy notes, "work with a program called College Readiness, which pairs students with Hispanic college students who come in and tutor our kids two times a week. During the course of the year, our students also go to the college campus and spend an overnight. When they come back, they say: 'I can do this too.' And of course, their college tutor has been telling them that they could."

Another college readiness program pairs students with Latino college students in the area, providing them with supportive mentors and role models. "We have a program called El Espejo," Rector explains, "which means 'The Mirror.' It is a tutorial program with Latino college students who come and work with our Latino kids. The idea is that young kids look in the mirror and hopefully see themselves in the future; the college kids look in the mirror and hopefully see themselves as they were."

Although students' initial suspicion of the program needed to be overcome, El Espejo has blossomed. Currently the program utilizes 65 tutors, who work with 120 students, volunteering their time. "The college

kids bond with our kids because everybody is Latino; everybody knows the struggle", Rector says. "We work with parents through inservices that focus on getting the kid ready to go to college, what scholarships are available, and telling them not to be afraid, to carry on, that they can make it."

Entrance into El Espejo is determined mostly by teacher recommendations of students who either have college potential but lack role models in their families, or students who suffer such impoverished family backgrounds that the tutoring provides them some positive attention. "We have many boys without mentors in their lives, so we match them up with college guys," Rector says.

Focusing on college in the middle school years, she believes, is one way to inoculate students against cultural insensitivity, low expectations, and the pull of outside forces that make dropping out an alluring possibility. "We are the last chance they get to hear the message loud and clear. That message is: 'It doesn't matter what color you are. It doesn't matter what your money source is. You can go to college--and you can finish college.'"

Getting to know actual college students from similar backgrounds helps make the idea much more tangible, she says. "When our kids saw that these college kids were just like them--only older--it made them realize that college is for them. It is not just for white, entitled people.

LMS students also visit college campuses in the vicinity, go on tours, and return with college memorabilia. "This may seem frivolous, but they have never been there, never seen it, never done it," Kennedy adds. "By doing these things they start to get a picture that they really can do it or it really can happen to them."

School staff insist on taking the long view. "When we set goals," Rector explains, "we talk about where we see ourselves in five years. Since they have been on campus, they can see themselves in a dorm, with school posters on the wall, with a roommate, studying chemistry. If they can picture it, I think they can get there. But to say: Yes, college is important but never to experience it will not make them work for it."

Outreach to Parents

Understanding and respecting Hispanic culture is imperative for educators, Rector believes. "Schools often don't understand the culture that the kids and parents come from. They have parent programs at night and only in English. We can't do that because a lot of our parents walk. If we have something at 7:30 at night, nobody can go because they are not going to walk at night in this neighborhood."

Instead, LMS holds parent functions at 5:30 or 6 p.m. "We always have food. Parents feel good about bringing the food in and making their contributions. I think that in this way, we value parents. We make them feel like we need them--because we do."

LMS has a heavy emphasis on the practical, on grappling with poverty in productive ways. "We have computer classes for parents. We have nutrition classes, because they tend to shop locally in markets that overcharge them for everything. They learn it is probably worth it to get out of the neighborhood to buy bulk groceries since they live in such big families."

In another program, Rector works with a core group of parents who will educate other parents in a peer approach--drawing them into the school and its goals. "We hope that this group will be our link to the parents with whom we are not in contact. Each one of these parent leaders will work with a team of other parents and with teachers.

"Part of this is, again, that sense of bringing them in and having them feel accountable for the whole school. These parents are looking at the huge picture of what it means to be a parent, what it means to have a kid in this school, and what they want for their kids in the school."

She says with some poignancy, "What we in schools haven't done well is clear. We haven't realized the potential that parents offer us because they are bright people who don't speak this language--but not infrequently, many were important people or held important positions in their own country but came here and now can't do that. They are underemployed. There is some shame in that," she adds, "in cleaning rooms in a hotel because that is the best you can get."

Do staff ever rail against the pressures upon them to contend with forces many schools shrug off as outside their control? "Not at all," Sanchez says, somewhat fiercely. "It goes back to caring about kids. How can you turn your back on any issue that affects them? You can't."

The views expressed in this report, developed under contract to the U.S. Department of Education, do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the Department, and no official endorsement by the Department should be inferred.

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In September 1995, the U.S. Secretary of Education, Richard W. Riley, established the U.S. Department of Education Hispanic Dropout Project. The mission of the Hispanic Dropout Project is to shed light on this national crisis, to produce concrete analyses and syntheses and to recommend actions that can be taken at all levels in order to reduce the nation's dropout rate of Hispanic youth. The project is composed of seven independent individuals whose backgrounds include scholarly research, teaching, and administration across grade levels in U.S. schooling and post-secondary education.

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