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Emphasis on Equity: The Calexico School District's Secondary-Level Strategies for Hispanic Youth

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Introduction

To what degree can schools decrease the Hispanic dropout rate--which, at a rate roughly double the national average, ⁽¹⁾ threatens to rob our society of a high number of productive citizens (Hispanic Dropout Project, 1996, p. 7)? What educational strategies show special promise? What can secondary schools do--particularly when confronted with recent Hispanic immigrants who are struggling to learn English? If Hispanic students lack adequate support systems outside school, how do secondary schools not only keep them in school, but interested and eager to learn?

In this issue of *Advances in Hispanic Education*, we turn our attention to secondary-level curricular strategies that have been successful in not only significantly diminishing the dropout rate of Hispanic students, but also accomplishing a variety of other worthwhile goals. We focus on the educational strategies of the Calexico School District in Calexico, California, for several reasons.

- Calexico has faced daunting demographics all too common to those struggling with the Hispanic dropout problem--and through creative and culturally respectful curriculum and pedagogy, has carved out a program and philosophy that serves all its students.
- Calexico High School's annual dropout rate is approximately 2.4 percent--significantly lower than the state average.
- A significant portion of Calexico High School graduates enter two or four-year institutions.
- Graduates of Aurora Alternative High School, Calexico's continuation high school, leave when they are prepared to do so and not before. All graduates have an action plan for future education, the military, or entry into the workforce--a plan that is verified by school staff prior to graduation.
- Continuous refinement of existing strategies and entrepreneurial use of available funding have contributed to increased personalization of the schooling experience in Calexico--clearly seen at the secondary level where large, impersonal classes are usually the norm.
- Hispanic role models in Calexico abound, not only in the community, but also in the schools. Seventy percent of elementary school staff are bilingual as are 40 percent of secondary level staff. In addition, many Calexico graduates return to teach in the district, motivated by a desire to give something back to local youth.

Obviously, Calexico is succeeding on a variety of fronts. Members of the Hispanic Dropout Project were

impressed with its work, especially with the actions it has taken to engage its predominantly Hispanic population in school, to bond youth to adults, and to help students devise plans for a productive future. However, these practices are relatively uncommon, particularly in secondary schools.

As Rudolfo Chávez-Chávez (1996) emphasizes, schools play an important part in filtering and sorting all students--regardless of ethnicity or race--into their eventual slots in society. For Hispanic students, who frequently carry the additional, punishing baggage of poverty and prejudice, such sorting practices can result in severely truncated futures, low-paying jobs, and a pervasive lack of hope for the future. These sorting practices--along with destructive, stigmatizing labels such as "at risk"-- are a primary reason that Hispanic students drop out of school with feelings of alienation and low self-worth (Chávez-Chávez, 1996; Mehan, 1996). Clearly, it is especially critical that they encounter teachers and classrooms in tune with their educational needs--teachers and classrooms who respect and value their native language and culture.

In a time when competing and conflicting mandates from a variety of national, state, and district sources overwhelm school staff, knowing what to do becomes especially problematic--especially when time and resources are limited. Knowing what to do with students who present special needs, such as poverty, lack of proficiency in English, or a lack of knowledge of American society, too frequently can translate into "dumbing down" the curriculum in a way that leaves both students and teachers dissatisfied and unsuccessful.

Chávez-Chávez (1996) points out that "knowing how to do the right thing" often translates into schools' following unquestioned educational practices that force Hispanic students into a narrow educational box in which they cannot succeed. Pushed out and estranged, these students drop out of school and settle for lives of low-paying, dead-end jobs.

Another contributing factor to the high Hispanic dropout rate, Chávez-Chávez maintains, is the degree to which Hispanic students suffer in schools that disparage and marginalize their culture and language. Rather than working with and celebrating the language, culture, and richness of ethnic experiences that Hispanic students bring with them into the classroom, many schools avoid even acknowledging these cultural differences. Uncomfortable with diversity, too frequently schools view their role as miniature melting pots--places where English is the only language that is valued, and academic success means that the native language and culture must be abandoned. Unfortunately, this approach often leads to limited student literacy in both English and Spanish--and alienation not only from mainstream American society, but from the culture and family of origin as well.

But school experiences do not need to be punishing and alienating. Instead, as demonstrated by the experience of the Calexico School District, school staff can build programs based on the needs of their students, fashioning educational experiences that bond students to school and to adults. As Calexico demonstrates, high standards for conduct and academic performance operate to the advantage of students--along with the refusal to give up on those who are at the highest risk of dropping out.

Calexico's accomplishments have earned it broad national and state recognition as an exemplary district. It has received awards from professional organizations such as the California Association of Bilingual Educators and the National Association of Bilingual Education, from the state of California's Department of Education, and from the U.S. Department of Education.

Why should policymakers and school staff try to make a difference as late as high school? By the year 2000, Hispanics are projected to be 11 percent of the total population. By the year 2050, Hispanics are projected to be 23 percent of the entire U. S. Population (Hispanic Data Book, 1996). If we give up on our Hispanic students now, we abandon up to a quarter of our population and leave them to comprise a permanent underclass.

Future issues of [Advances in Hispanic Education](#) will feature elementary-level strategies and promising

non-school dropout-prevention programs. For a view of a middle school's comprehensive program for students at risk of dropping out, see [Advances in Hispanic Education, Summer 1996, No. 1](#).

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The Calexico School District Boosts School Completion Through. . .

- Emphasis throughout the curriculum on development of strong bilingual skills to ensure biliteracy in both English and Spanish
- Strong inclusive school instructional policies and practices such as heterogeneous grouping, cooperative learning, and personalization of the academic experience
- Proactive work with parents both to communicate the district's instructional goals and assist parents so that both schools and families can unite around strategies (social, economic, and educational) that will ensure that youth will complete high school and move on to post-secondary training, education, or employment
- Continuous improvement of existing programs to ensure that what currently is successful does not become static or stale, incorporating new knowledge through high-quality staff development
- Use of assessment that supplements state-mandated standardized tests with exhibitions, portfolios, and demonstrations of knowledge that require students to articulate and explain what they have learned--thus connecting the classroom to life outside school
- Encouraging student/adult bonds through tutoring, cooperative learning, small group work, and connecting students to teams of teachers through high school-level academies and institute

Emphasis on Equity: The Calexico School District's Secondary-Level Strategies for Hispanic Youth

The Calexico School District in Calexico, California is intimately acquainted with issues related to second language acquisition, the demands of poverty, and the need to combat the high Hispanic dropout rate with school programs that enlist students in the educative process. Calexico, which has a population of approximately 25,000, hugs the Mexican border near Mexicali--which, with its population of close to a million, is the closest large city.

Calexico's demographics typify those of many communities with high Hispanic dropout rates. Fifty-one percent of its 6,856 students are eligible for free and reduced lunch; approximately 30 percent are the children of migrants; the average household income is under \$12,000; the unemployment rate is 25-35%; and approximately 80 percent of its students, K-12, are classified as limited English proficient. As in many communities, substance abuse and gangs are burgeoning threats.

Despite these factors, the Calexico School District holds a fistful of national awards and recognition for the programs it has developed to meet the special needs of its students. During the 1995-96 school year, the

dropout rate for Calexico High School was approximately 2.4 percent.

Calexico's secondary schools led the district's transformation in the late 1960s with a pioneering bilingual education program. Today, Calexico High School is in the fourth year of an ambitious restructuring plan that provides strong academics and emphasizes future career possibilities for all students. The class of 1996 graduated 387 students--15% entered four-year universities, 64% enrolled in the local community college, 4% enrolled in trade or technical schools, and 8.5% entered the military.

Aurora Alternative High School, Calexico's continuation school and last hope for students at the highest risk of dropping out, refuses to give up on its students. Instead, Aurora holds high academic and behavior standards for all students, working with them and with their families to build a sense of social and personal responsibility. The development of strong, workable plans for future education or entry into the workforce post-graduation is an integral part of the curriculum as is a project-oriented approach to learning.

Calexico's insistence on high-quality, research-driven bilingual education, its continuous self-assessment and refinement of existing programs and strategies, and its philosophy that problems are collective rather than individual, contributes to the success of its students--many of whom return to Calexico to become teachers in the district.

In this newsletter, we focus on the secondary-level strategies the Calexico School District has used to bond its students to school. Selected district and secondary-level administrative and instructional staff discuss how the Calexico School District attained its present, impressive status through a district-wide and community-endorsed emphasis on a strong bilingual program, a high percentage of bilingual staff, rigorous academic and behavioral standards for all students, a move to heterogeneous grouping, and curricular practices that enlist students in the educative process. These curricular practices, staff believe, prepare students to deal with prejudice, teach them how to be successful academically, and build a sense of self-efficacy that will carry them into productive futures.

When Emily Palacio, Calexico's Assistant Superintendent of Instructional Services, remembers the Calexico schools as they were when she arrived in the district as a teacher in 1969, she looks back upon a time of low expectations, dismal student performance, and scant understanding of students' native language and culture. Despite Calexico's proximity to Mexico and its constant influx of immigrant students, not only were bilingual teachers virtually nonexistent, immigrant and limited English proficient (LEP) students rarely reached college or achieved even a modicum of academic success.

Teachers, Palacio recalls, didn't expect LEP or non-English-speaking students to succeed in academic work. Primary instructional strategies were remediation, an instructional pace slowed to a crawl, and plenty of drill. Not surprisingly, these approaches failed to yield positive results.

Palacio still remembers her frustration. "I knew there had to be another way to teach," she says. "I knew the kids were not dumb, yet we lowered everything because they didn't know the language. We had low expectations and consequently students functioned at a low level. We did what everyone else in the country was doing and as a result, we produced limited bilinguals--students who were limited in English and limited in Spanish."

The lack of Hispanic staff was a serious impediment to academic success for Calexico students, she adds. "In my school," she says, "there were only two Hispanic teachers. I was one of them."

Palacio credits the development of a strong, research-based bilingual education program--in tandem with a commitment to hiring well-qualified bilingual staff-- as the foundation for Calexico's shift to high expectations and academic rigor for all students. In fact, bilingual programs served as the catalyst for substantive reform in

the Calexico schools.

Hiring Bilingual Staff

The presence of bilingual staff throughout the district provides practical and symbolic testimony that students' native language and culture is valued, Palacio points out, and reflects the district's "value position," which insists that staff respect and understand students' culture, language, and background.

"If students come to our schools and are told they can only speak one language, what we have done is invalidate what they have learned at home," Palacio points out. "Until students transition to English, they will have much higher self-esteem in bilingual programs, working with bilingual staff, than if they had been told that their language was wrong."

"Today, 85% of our elementary school teachers are bilingual; approximately 40% of our high school teachers are bilingual," she adds. "All our elementary school principals are bilingual; one of our two junior high school principals is bilingual as well."

Harry Pearson, Calexico High School's principal, points out another dimension of the district's bilingual staff. "We are experiencing a phenomenon," he notes with obvious pride. "Over the past 15 years, students who have come through our program and graduated from college have come home to teach--and they are very successful as teachers. They want to give back to the community."

Commitment to Bilingual Programs

The district's emphasis on bilingual education also had a profound influence on its educational philosophy.

Title VII funding made it possible to establish bilingual education. The Calexico School District wrote a proposal to solicit funds for a secondary-level program, rather than an elementary program, partly because the proposal writers were savvy enough to recognize the potency of community sentiments against bilingual education at the elementary level.

"When you live in a border community where the primary language is Spanish," Palacio explains, "parents believe they are sending their kids to school to learn English. Why would we teach them in Spanish?"

Carefully basing its pilot bilingual program on the work of key researchers in bilingual education such as James Cummins, Steve Krashen, and Tracy Terrell, and beginning at the secondary level, the district witnessed a shift in public attitudes in a relatively short period of time. Parents began to see that LEP students who entered the Calexico schools in junior high or high school graduated and went on to college--"within the first generation," Palacio emphasizes. This fast track to academic success impressed parents, who realized that before the advent of bilingual programs, few such students graduated, let alone went on to postsecondary education. Most of the Hispanic students who graduated and went to college had been almost exclusively middle class and second or third generation.

Palacio notes that the high school program was the forerunner of the bilingual program that Calexico has today, "a true bilingual program," she adds. This pioneering project, "El CID," broke new ground at Calexico by mixing students who were proficient or native English-speakers with students whose primary language was Spanish.

Rather than insisting on the use of one language only, to the possible detriment of both languages, staff in the Calexico District recognized the personal, social, and economic benefits that accrue to people who are bilingual and biliterate--and built their bilingual program accordingly.

When the district added its elementary bilingual program, its progress was informed by the way in which it

implemented the secondary bilingual program. "The elementary program truly was a bilingual program," Palacio says, "although the secondary program was definitely the forerunner for it." The program, which gradually encompassed the entire district, incorporated a Spanish as a Second Language (SSL) component, rarely encountered in bilingual programs. This SSL component was targeted toward students who had lost their proficiency in Spanish.

Teachers team-taught in the program; one teacher as the English model, another as the Spanish model. But success was far from certain. Lack of commitment to the program inside the district was an ongoing source of tension. "Most of the teachers were not bilingual," Palacio says. "We had a battle on our hands. Obviously, there was jealousy because we had funds from Title VII that the other program didn't have. We were embarking on a whole new philosophy, and it was not a popular philosophy. But suddenly, teachers working in the program saw a difference, and parents saw a difference too."

Long-held staff attitudes about the capabilities of LEP students changed dramatically as a direct result of bilingual programming. "We saw our students as active learners," she adds. "The kids who never participated began to participate. Suddenly they could read, because Spanish is a very easy, phonetic language in which to develop literacy. That created an excitement in all of us."

Harry Pearson, Calexico High School's principal, sees district commitment to comprehensive bilingual education that targets both languages as a primary reason students stay in school. "At the high school, we have a very strong English Language Development (ELD) program," he explains. "Students receive this language development at the same time they receive their four subjects in their primary language or in sheltered English. It is possible for students to take the same curriculum that other students have in their primary language and move all the way through the system to graduation--which is a main factor in keeping many students in school."

English is not slighted. All students must pass a proficiency test in English and complete a senior project to fulfill graduation requirements at Calexico High School. Although late-entry immigrants graduate with varying degrees of English language proficiency, a common course of action is to continue their education at the local community college where they continue to develop their English language skills.

Parent Outreach

Palacio believes that district commitment to bilingual education also validates parents and families. "These programs mean that parents can become involved in the literacy of their child. We also work to reach a nontraditional population in nontraditional ways. Our parents, by and large, didn't graduate from high school so they don't know how the system works. We have to demystify the system and make it accessible to them."

Making the system accessible translates to an intensely practical approach that emphasizes academic achievement and the importance of college. Almost 100 percent of the district's clerical staff and instructional aides are bilingual. "This provides parents with better access in their interactions with schools," Palacio notes. "They know they can go there and somebody is going to understand what they have to say."

The insistence on college and education after graduation means that parents are informed by school staff about what courses their children need to take for college admission and, when students and parents reach the college admissions process, they are aided by counselors, if necessary.

"They assist them in filling out financial aid applications if needed," she says. "Another system might say: If you want to go to college you come in and show up on Monday at 3 p.m. That is not going to work because the parents do not know what they have to do."

A Culture of Continuous Improvement

The district's bilingual education program served as the starting point for its commitment to continuous improvement of existing programs. "It has been a transformation," Palacio says with gentle irony, "for 25 years. The difference at this district is that we have been into research and experimentation."

The district also has encouraged--and pushed-- collaboration. "It may sound like a stereotype," Palacio acknowledges, "but bilingual teachers, by nature, are more collaborative in their approach. Moving to team teaching, therefore, wasn't a big deal for us. But in a traditional program where teachers see the classroom as their domain, it is much more difficult to break down those barriers."

Team teaching brought about a collective sense of responsibility throughout the district, an ethos that problems were to be shared rather than handed off to someone else.

"That changes the culture of the school," Palacio emphasizes. "In addition, our Title VII funds allowed us to bring in the best staff development. Because Title VII demanded an evaluation of our program, we were able to follow students longitudinally and see how they were doing.

"This longitudinal evaluation allowed us to look closely at what we were doing and what we needed to do differently. The funds provided us the release time to reflect about what we were doing and to collaboratively come up with solutions."

What about staff who resisted collaboration? Who didn't buy into bilingual education and the new philosophy that the schools needed to adapt to the needs of their students? Who rejected the district commitment to students' languages and cultures?

Attrition was helpful, Palacio notes. As older teachers gradually retired, the district had an opportunity to replace them with bilingual teachers.

The district also demonstrated its commitment to the needs of its students. In the 1980s, the district faced the possibility of teacher layoffs due to a projected shortfall in district funds. During the layoff process, the district made a decision that layoffs would be based on student needs rather than teacher seniority. This decision--which saved bilingually certified teachers--sent a message through the community that the needs of the children of Calexico would come first in the priorities of the district. Although the layoffs were based on an administrative error and never occurred, the message retained its power, Palacio notes.

"The resistance was no longer so obvious," she recalls. "And when the push in the 1980s was to get kids into English as soon as possible, we were able to use that as leverage to include all of our teachers in training for LEP students. That sent the message that all our students needed assistance and support in becoming proficient in English. We were able to train the monolingual English teachers as well as the bilingual teachers."

Another obstacle vanished. "Now, we were talking about our children, not those children," she says.

Curricular Practices For All Students

In keeping with its philosophy of continuous refinement and improvement, Calexico High School and Aurora Continuation High School received one-year restructuring planning grants and five-year demonstration grants from the state of California beginning four years ago--which has resulted in a revamped curriculum at the secondary level.

Tenth graders at Calexico High School take the same college-preparatory curriculum in academies; eleventh and twelfth graders are housed in four career path institutes and have the choice of fifteen career path majors from which to select. All classes within the academies are heterogeneously grouped. The academies house students with a cluster of four teachers (English/language arts, science, social science, and foreign languages)

who work collaboratively with their colleagues from mathematics and physical education to meet the goals of each academy.

The institutes focus on investigations in engineering and technology, the environment and society, the visual and performing arts, and business and economics. "The important part of the institutes," Pearson states, "is that we are getting kids to focus on careers in a way that is meaningful. We are not looking just at amassing 220 credits for graduation from high school, but instead at a diploma that says they have some skills that will take them into the workplace."

One goal Calexico staff do not hesitate to articulate is the need to increase the numbers of LEP students in advanced math courses. Juan Orduña, a Calexico graduate who returned to teach mathematics and computers at Calexico High School, points out that although students are grouped heterogeneously, mathematics remains "naturally tracked" as courses become progressively more difficult.

"We continue to work on this," he says. "Some EDL students felt intimidated by the courses because they were afraid of the language barrier. But I believe that math is such a universal language that it has its own vocabulary. The language barrier can be downplayed or eliminated."

Orduña doesn't hesitate to switch into Spanish while teaching one of his calculus or math analysis classes if he sees that students are stumbling because of difficulty with English. "The concept is the important part," he says, "not the language."

He also works to boost math achievement by building upon success. "I am a believer in success," he adds. "When you work with students and encourage them, you watch for success because it will then create more success."

"But," he adds emphatically, "I am also a believer in challenging students. I have developed a little culture within my classroom where kids feel free to come in and get extra help. Sometimes kids come in after their activities, form little study groups, and do their work."

Obviously, this type of culture demands a willingness from Orduña to be available on an extended schedule from students--something to which he is committed.

"The trick to getting kids to learn is making them believe in themselves," he notes. "Yes, you are somebody and you can accomplish your dream."

He adds pragmatically, "But then you have to make it possible for them to accomplish their dream. One way is to be around and help them on a regular basis."

One of Orduña's colleagues, Gilbert Mendez, works with students at Calexico High School--those considered at the highest risk of dropping out-- in a computer-assisted program of instruction called the Academic Support class. "Part of the day they work with four teachers in the Academies," he observes, "and part of the day directly with me on writing, reading, or another skill."

Students, mostly tenth-graders, are identified for the program on the basis of their academic progress. If they are faltering, they are eligible for the Academic Support class. "They work 20 minutes at a time on the computer and the rest of the time either with my aide or with me. The computer time is tightly structured."

Mendez adds, "Keeping students in school is one thing. Keeping them interested is another."

"For that reason, I try different approaches. Some things are more successful than others, so it is necessary to continue to try new things. If we want to make education relevant, we have to tie it in with students' lives, conflicts, and ideas--not remain in the abstract."

Another important thread in the fabric of Calexico's success is the presence of Hispanic role models. As Orduña says, "Students that I work with don't see their ethnicity or their culture as a barrier to success. Many of our faculty, especially in the math department, are Hispanic. Our kids have grown up with role models. They have been taught to eliminate the view that their ethnicity or culture will interfere with their success. Plus, here are these folks who have succeeded. They are Hispanic--and yet they are as American as they can be.

"This reinforces the idea," Orduña adds, "that to succeed is great."

High Standards and "Back Doors" for Potential Dropouts

Exemplifying Calexico's stance that it will not abandon its students--no matter how difficult their problems--is the philosophy and programs of its continuation high school, a philosophy which has developed over the past 24 years. Aurora Alternative High School came into being following state legislation that mandated continuation high schools in districts that had high school graduating classes that exceeded 100 students.

Patrick Peake, Aurora's principal, is quick to point out that there are continuation high schools that are "holding pens" for students identified as problems. Much less frequently, there are schools like Aurora which stress personal and social responsibility, high standards, and a tough discipline system.

"In the beginning, we had about 25 students," Peake says. "A good number of those were heroin and drug addicts. Today, the enrollment is over 150 and many more students come to us because of the need for a non-traditional academic environment."

The rise in enrollment is not a negative sign, Peake maintains, because these are students who would otherwise slip out of the system. Instead, they come to Aurora for a variety of reasons: discipline problems, lack of academic success, substance abuse, but usually the fact that they cannot accommodate to the size of the high school or get along with other students and with teachers.

"Kids get disenchanted with the bigger system," Peake points out, "because it is big. The system cannot hold that many high-risk kids without developing some sort of individual approach for them. In our case, we used the continuation school as a key to that approach.

"Because our students have usually had difficulty in getting along in the system, we stress the development of a personal/social conscience," he explains. A shrewd understanding of adolescents guides all instructional and curricular decisions at the school.

"Students spend three quarters of the year in heterogeneous groups, but they are not placed with their friends," he says.

Peake emphasizes that Aurora's students could easily be written off as hopeless--rejected by an educational system into which they don't fit. Instead, Aurora refuses to give up on any student.

There is no permanent exit from the school short of violence--"a weapon, for example," Peake points out. "That would be the one exception because of the safety of the campus. Our philosophy is that there is no exit. We always provide a back door for students so that they can return to the school."

Aurora's day program focuses on three learning outcomes: personal/social responsibility, communication, and thinking skills. "We focus kids on the three factors that we have found to be the most necessary for them to be successful in life, and we found those through interviewing members of our community." How rigorous is this alternative program? "Each semester, they must focus on one of the learning outcomes, always returning to personal/social responsibility. If they don't master that, they enter the Service Recovery Night School program."

Each of the three learning outcomes is tied to content standards, Peake explains. "Their projects have to focus on the particular content area in question and we have a checklist of elements of the standard that they cover in their particular project.

"How rigorous is it?" Peake asks rhetorically. "It is not close to matching the California curriculum standards. On the other hand, at graduation our students produce a portfolio of material that shows they have investigated in depth these areas and have learned to give an oral presentation to adults with confidence. They also have developed action plans for themselves which means that they must enroll in college, technical school, or made the contacts they need to make with people who will see that they have a future or they do not graduate."

Students who cannot adjust to Aurora's day program are able to enter its Service Recovery Night School Program. "In this program," Peake says, "students are not allowed to come to the day school because they haven't been able to adjust to it. But they must attend two nights per week for two and a half hours each night. During the day, three hours a day they have to do a service project in the community, usually in a school, the hospitals, preschools, or special education centers."

Students earn the right to come back into Aurora's day program through completion of service hours, a journal, and attendance at night school. "They are not, however, allowed to be with the mainstream," Peake observes, "which as teenagers is their main need. Therefore they are motivated to work their way back into the program."

When students enter Aurora, their parents go through training simultaneously, Palacio says. "If you change the student and you don't change the atmosphere at home, it doesn't work. And if you change the home atmosphere and not the student, it doesn't work either.

"We were able to see that, so we provided parents the support they needed to be proactive in monitoring their kids. We use a project that the L.A. Police Department uses with hard-core kids. It is a very structured program with six sessions on big issues, such as gangs, alcohol and substance abuse, suicide and emotional problems, and communicating with kids. The next six sessions focus on developing a discipline plan and support groups form to help implement that plan."

This program helps parents see which behaviors are enabling their children to be behavioral problems in school. "If the kids are wearing gang clothes," Palacio says, "the parent gets rid of them. Once the parents are in control, the kids see they can't get away with those behaviors. And once the kids go through the continuation school and are in control, they see that they can do something with their lives.

"It doesn't work with everybody," she adds, "but it works with a lot of people. Even the ones for whom it doesn't work see that the quality of their lives improves. Some take baby steps; some take giant steps. We tell parents that we want their kids to come back, but we want them to come back and succeed, not come back and do what they did before."

Peake makes it clear that although staff maintain a warm and caring relationship with students, this relationship has evolved over the years to avoid what he terms "enabling."

"I used to think we were there to love the kids, spend some time with them, and then graduate them in an unfair system. I used to think that the system was the thing that destroyed them."

Today, stiff guidelines on behavior and a policy of "tough love" make that attitude a thing of the past. "As one example, we have a zero tardiness policy," Peake points out. "If a kid is 15 minutes late to class in many schools, he stays after school. But if a person is 15 minutes late to work they don't get to make up that time. They are fired."

If students are late, they must return to Aurora with their parents and explain why they were late. "After two weeks of this policy, kids weren't late anymore--and by the end of the year, we had no truancy problem.

"We heard for years that if we held high expectations for kids they would move up to the expectations, but I didn't really believe it. It is true, however."

High expectations and intensive contact with adults are key to the success of Aurora's program, Peake believes. "Students connect to adults in their learning exhibitions, in their service projects, and in their academic projects. If students can connect to adults, they begin to see that adults are resources, not the enemy. That is one of the key reasons this school is successful. We have taught the kids that there are adults who can take them where they want to go. Not only that, there are adults who are warm and supportive.

"Our old motto was to be their second mothers and fathers and encourage dependency. As a result, they would graduate and fail. The new motto is: We love you, we are going to challenge you, and we are going to require that you go out and find other adults and listen to their feedback so you can develop your own support system in the world instead of only relying on us."

Part of Aurora's new philosophy also relates to the length of time each student spends at the school--which is highly individual. "They don't have to graduate when they are 18," Peake says emphatically. "They have to graduate when they are ready. Under the old philosophy, we got them, we accelerated them, and we graduated them quickly. The new philosophy says that we are in no hurry."

When Aurora's students graduate, they are well-prepared for the future--and must demonstrate their level of preparation with through an exit interview.

"They come to it with a three-inch binder full of their work," Peake continues, "done on both IBM and Macintosh computers because they have to be proficient with both. They show up dressed in their suits and ties, ready to take interview questions on their individual and service projects, equipped with letters of recommendation, a resume, job applications, and an action plan."

These exit interviews, Peake says with obvious feeling, "can be very emotional. They put so much into their school experience. It is very powerful, and it demonstrates what can be done. It is so simple, if you restructure your program to match what you need to create."

Continuing Challenges for Calexico

Despite Calexico's achievements, it cannot remain static, Palacio emphasizes. "We have been fortunate to have tremendous stability in the district in that our superintendent, our director of personnel, and I have been here since 1968. We have been teachers, coordinators, principals, and we are still here. The superintendent is a graduate of Calexico High School. I have worked with him and the personnel director for 25 years."

But Calexico's restructuring process demands, Palacio says, "that we redefine our roles as teachers, administrators, and learners. We truly believe we must continue to change our curriculum and our practices so that students are challenged to be better problem-solvers, take more responsibility for their learning, and be creative and critical thinkers."

Pearson voices his own concerns. "We need time for our staff, time to talk," he says. "I worry about the physical and emotional health of our youngsters, since we are a very poor community."

"We are not perfect," Palacio concludes. "But in another district that is 98% Hispanic, they could have a mentality that says English only, allows putdowns, and asks: What are we going to do with these kids? That is not our message."

EQUAL ACCESS PRACTICES

Calexico Unified School District

To ensure equity for all students, the Calexico Unified School District aligns its instructional and curricular strategies with its equal access practices.

- Tracking has been eliminated; instruction occurs in heterogeneous groups.
- All students, including Limited English Proficient (LEP) students, have access to the core curriculum.
- The district has been aggressive in recruiting qualified bilingual teachers, administrators, and support personnel to provide students appropriate services.
- The classes and services for LEP students are an integral part of the total school program (not a separate entity).
- All students, including LEP students, have access to college prep classes.
- All students, including LEP students, have access to counseling and assistance in preparing for higher education.
- Secondary counselors are aggressive in linking students to scholarships and financial aid.
- The district has committed extensive funds and resources to provide staff development to all teachers on powerful learning strategies.
- All students, including LEP students, have access to extracurricular activities.
- All students, including LEP students, are required to complete a senior project as part of a graduation requirement.

Source: The Calexico Unified School District, Calexico, California

Program and Policy Recommendations

- ***Eliminate caste-like tracking and ability grouping that limits students' exposure to and awareness of high-quality instruction***, substituting flexible learning arrangements such as small groups with shared responsibility for learning and an emphasis on individual and group projects that demonstrate the quality and content of the knowledge that has been gained.
- ***Establish high-quality, additive bilingual programs at all grade levels to ensure that students can learn appropriate content without losing facility in the native language.***
- ***Rather than searching for a culprit (i.e., high school staff blaming elementary teachers; elementary teachers blaming families), establish an ethos where problems are collective, responsibility for solutions is shared, and solutions are communicated to all stakeholders in the educational process.***
- ***Employ structural arrangements such as academies or houses which group students with interdisciplinary teams of teachers to strengthen the quality of both the material students learn and the way in which it is taught.*** In this way, the educational experience can be personalized for students through purposeful interaction with adults.
- ***Encourage a sense of students' futures post-graduation by linking them to institutions of higher education or the workforce.*** If students require financial aid to attend two or four-year colleges, such aid needs to be both available and easy to access. Community

members who are contacted by schools and social service agencies can offer useful internships to students during their high school experience through which they can test their skills, acquire new capacities, and make contacts for future employment.

- ***Establish a climate of high expectations for student conduct and performance, but also extend genuine adult nurturing and "tough love" to students to ensure that students bond both to school and to adults.*** This climate of high expectations--combined with coaching and tutoring-- demands that adults abandon behaviors that enable poor student performance and relinquish the belief that students who present risk factors such as lack of proficiency in English or poverty cannot succeed academically.
- ***Support and develop dedicated staff through substantial investment in high-quality, intensive staff development that expands teachers' knowledge and expertise of key curricular areas identified as clear priorities within the school and district.*** Through focused, ongoing staff development that is part of a district's instructional goals and strategies, staff can avoid the "one-shot," didactic, and fragmented approach to staff development found in many schools and districts.
- ***Partner with parents in a way that corresponds to their needs and the needs of their children and in ways that communicate clearly the instructional goals of the district.*** If students present behavioral problems in schools, develop concrete strategies to work with parents in a systems approach, such as parenting classes and support groups. Alternatively, when parents and students need help negotiating entry into college, provide that assistance flexibly and respecting parents' many other obligations. Communicate instructional priorities and goals need to parents and negotiate dissent or disagreement so that all educational stakeholders can buy into the educational process for their children.

Note:

1. Estimates for the Hispanic dropout rate vary. For example, in 1994 the National Center for Education Statistics reported a Hispanic cohort dropout rate of 10.9 percent, as compared to a national average of 5.6 percent based tracking a group of students--that is, a cohort of students--from eighth through twelfth grades (National Center for Education Statistics, 1994, p. 16).

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 of 1995, the U.S. Secretary of Education, Richard W. Riley, established the U.S. Department of Education Hispanic Dropout Project. Funded by the U.S. Department of Education, the Hispanic Dropout Project mission 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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