

To Nurture the Soul of a Nation:

Latino Families, Catholic Schools, and Educational Opportunity

A REPORT OF

The Notre Dame Task Force on the
Participation of Latino Children and
Families in Catholic Schools



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Rationale

The successful integration of the Latino community, the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population, into fuller participation in the civic and economic life of the United States requires addressing issues of social justice to ensure the welfare of the common good. Nationwide, classrooms are seeing a rapidly growing number of Latino students, but American schools are not serving these children well. There is an achievement gap that affects the Latino community in particular and inhibits the common good. Consider the following:

- Only 53 percent of Latinos graduate from high school in four years.
- Only 16 percent of Latino 18-year-olds are considered “college-ready.”
- Only 25 percent of Latinos aged 18 to 24 enroll in college.
- The achievement gap imposes the equivalent of a permanent national recession on our economic growth.

Catholic schools, however, serve Latino and other underserved students well, and for Hispanic communities, they represent a beacon of hope. In urban America, Catholic schools often provide the highest quality education available to Latino children and families, and research suggests that students who attend Catholic schools enjoy an educational advantage that helps to close the achievement gap. For example, Latinos who attend Catholic school are 42 percent more likely to graduate high school and two-and-a-half times more likely to graduate college than their peers in public schools. Moreover, the effect of Catholic schools is particularly powerful for “the multiply disadvantaged,” that is, minority students from low-income families who have struggled in public schools and whose parents did not attend college.

Despite the Catholic school advantage, only 3 percent of Latinos send their children to Catholic schools. There are nearly 700,000 empty seats in American Catholic schools, representing an enormous opportunity to provide high quality educational options for the Latino community. Most Catholic schools currently operate below capacity



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and will become stronger, more robust institutions, more attuned to their mission, by enrolling more Hispanic students.

The growth of the Latino population presents a demographic imperative to improve educational opportunities for America's Latino students, for the sake of the common good and American democracy. By 2050, more than 30 percent of all Americans will self-identify as Hispanic, and the strength of our nation will depend on the quality of education we provide those Americans and their children.

The American Catholic Church likewise faces a critical demographic moment. In the United States, Latinos now comprise 35 percent of all Catholics and 67 percent of practicing Catholics aged 18 to 34. The American Catholic Church needs to respond with imagination and urgency to serve its growing Latino membership.

Catholic schools are uniquely powerful institutions for the common good that often serve as lifelines for Hispanic families, but they are fast disappearing. Nearly 1,500 Catholic schools have closed since 2000, and the capacity for future generations of Latino children to benefit from the Catholic school advantage diminishes with each school closure.

Mission

On December 12, 2008, Rev. John Jenkins, CSC, president of the University of Notre Dame, commissioned the Notre Dame Task Force on the Participation of Latino Families and Children in Catholic Schools to explore the issues surrounding the Latino achievement gap, the Catholic school advantage, and the demographic imperative to improve educational opportunities for Hispanics. Ultimately, the task force considered one central question: What can be done to narrow the achievement gap by extending the Catholic school advantage to more Latino children?

The goal of this task force, which reflects complementary desires to close the Latino achievement gap and to revitalize American Catholic schools,

is to double the percentage of Latinos attending Catholic schools, from 3 percent to 6 percent, by 2020. Given population growth estimates, this goal means increasing the national enrollment of Latino children in Catholic schools from 290,000 to over 1 million students.

The Task Force Report, published on the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe on December 12, 2009, outlines a road map for achieving this goal. The strategy proposed by the task force relies on a combination of developing demand, building capacity, and transforming institutions to fill empty seats, increase capacity in existing schools, reopen closed schools, and build new Catholic schools in areas that have seen the greatest growth in the Latino population.

Findings: Obstacles and Opportunities

The task force examined demographic trends, conducted focus groups of Latino parents, surveyed Catholic school stakeholders, and investigated high-performing schools that effectively serve Latino communities across the country. The task force identified the key obstacles and opportunities that need to be addressed if we are to succeed in our goal of seating 1 million Hispanic children in Catholic schools by 2020.

In these obstacles and opportunities, the task force recognizes four critical "gaps" that contribute to both the achievement gap that affects Latino children and the enrollment gap that has reduced the educational opportunities available in urban Catholic schools. Each of these gaps also presents an opportunity, and the task force has developed a series of recommendations to overcome the obstacles and seize the opportunities.

There is a financial gap.

Many low-income families simply cannot afford the increasingly high cost of Catholic education, and alternative funding models must be developed to expand access to Catholic schools. Public-private

partnerships, including voucher and tax credit programs, have expanded the capacity to provide the Catholic school advantage to more Latino students in many places.

While financial concerns are important, the task force discovered that economics do not entirely explain why few Latinos send their children to Catholic schools. The task force's demographic and economic analyses suggest that income accounts for only about one third of the low Catholic school attendance rates among Latino families. The task force believes that three other gaps—in information, culture, and leadership—must be addressed to double that rate and meet our goal.

There is an information gap.

Latino families report a lack of information about Catholic schools, and principals and pastors indicate that they need help boosting enrollments through marketing and communications efforts. Catholic schools need to reach out to the Latino population more energetically than they ever have in the past. Catholic school leaders need to embrace the changing demographics of the Church by leading campaigns to educate and inform Latinos about the Catholic school advantage and financial aid opportunities.

There is a culture gap.

Hispanic families often do not view Catholic schools as responsive to their home culture, especially because so few Catholic school educators are themselves Latino, while fewer still are specifically prepared to work with Latino students. While educational research points toward a specific set of practices and dispositions that teachers need to effectively serve students from different cultural backgrounds, Catholic school teachers and leaders need to be prepared to respond to the growing Hispanic population in the classroom.

There is a leadership gap.

Latinos often do not feel a sense of ownership in

Catholic schools. Catholic schools need more Latino principals, teachers, and board members involved and invested in Catholic education. And we need more leaders in Catholic education willing to embrace Latinos and Latino culture in the American Church and its schools. The story of 19th and 20th century Catholic schooling was one of educating European immigrants, their children, and their grandchildren. Now, for this system to survive, those who are the beneficiaries of that legacy must ensure that the story of Catholic schooling in the 21st century will be one of educating Latinos, their children, and their grandchildren.

Recommendations

The task force describes a series of recommendations designed to close the gaps and advance the goal of doubling the percentage of Latinos who enjoy the Catholic school advantage. Each recommendation is targeted to a specific audience, including Church and school leaders, institutions of higher education, Latino leaders and organizations, the philanthropic community, and civic leaders. Also, the task force identifies a series of initiatives to be taken up by the Alliance for Catholic Education, the Institute for Latino Studies, and the Institute for Educational Initiatives at the University of Notre Dame. Key recommendations include:

I. Developing demand. Schools need to inform and attract Latinos and lower financial barriers. Recommendations include personalizing recruiting efforts toward Latinos, promoting Catholic schooling from the pulpit, and filling empty seats through creative tuition assistance. Schools should employ Spanish speakers to reach out to Hispanic families, function as community centers in the evenings and on weekends, develop early childhood programs, and provide high quality after-school care.

II. Developing access. All stakeholders need to work together to expand current capacity, reopen closed

schools, and build new facilities. Community leaders, the philanthropic community, and Church leaders should work for the creation and expansion of parental choice initiatives, explore increased scholarship options, and consider new governance and financing to increase access.

III. Developing leaders. Universities, schools, and dioceses should prepare principals to transform school culture to better serve Latino children, recruit highly qualified Latinos into leadership positions, and invite Latino community leaders to join boards.

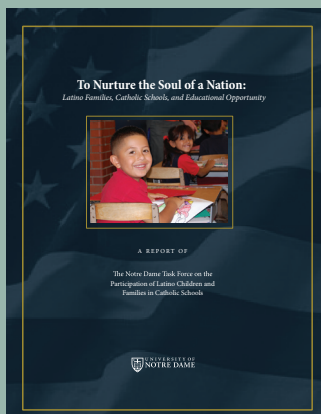
IV. Transforming Catholic schools and systems. Stakeholders need to work together to create culturally responsive Catholic schools. Universities should work with school and diocesan leaders to implement best practices in educating Latinos and diverse learners, expand service to language learners, and create welcoming, culturally responsive school environments. Resources must be dedicated to exploring alternative governance models, developing partnerships between universities and K-12 schools, and strengthening the technological infrastructure of schools.



Conclusion

If we close each of the gaps described above, we can eliminate the achievement gap for millions of Latino children and families, while addressing the enrollment gap that plagues urban Catholic schools. Latino families will benefit from improved educational opportunities, and the Catholic school system will be revitalized.

Most importantly, the common good and our American democracy will benefit from a better educated and more diverse citizenry with the skills needed to thrive in the 21st century global economy. So just as bishops, pastors, Catholic school educators, and parishioners will welcome 1 million Latino children into Catholic schools, so too should local communities cheer the rebirth of a system of remarkably effective educational institutions. These schools do more than nurture the souls of children; indeed, American Catholic schools nurture the soul of our nation by closing the achievement gap and creating opportunities for millions.



To read the full report, learn more, and join Notre Dame's campaign to improve educational opportunities for Latino children, visit:

<http://catholicschooladvantage.nd.edu>