

E&R RESEARCH ALERT

Fragile Futures: Risk and Vulnerability Among Latino High Achievers

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Overall:

The concepts discussed here are not new; only the student group has changed. The report reminds me of the types of observations made in earlier years regarding White rural (particularly southern and Appalachian) students and Black/African American students. I recall being on a state task force in the late 1980s with Mark Applebaum (then of UNC-CH's Thurstone Psychometric Laboratory) and Gary Barnes, then VP of Research, UNC General Administration. The data presented then were similar: the gap between SAT scores of top NC students (upper quintile) and top scores of "northern" students (upper quintile) was persistent, with NC students lagging. The governor wanted a plan for improving NC SAT scores, and the argument was that attention must

be given to the top scorers for more immediate reduction of the gap. Applebaum wanted to concentrate on students in GT programs, AP courses, etc. in order to raise the state's SAT average more quickly. When stated in that manner, it created an outcry from those who wished to ensure attention and resources for every child "across the board." However, when presented as one of several strategies for increasing performance, this strategy was acceptable with everyone. In other words, it was important to focus resources on students at the bottom of the SAT distribution in order to raise overall scores, but attention and support for all students (including those scoring in the upper quintile) were recognized as necessary.

SAT Scores

As reported in *Fragile Futures*, the top fifth of Latino (term used throughout) students in 2002 had an average SAT verbal score of 598 vs. 663 for the top fifth of White students, and an average math score of 646 vs. 720, "a difference of two-thirds to three-fourths of a standard deviation" (page 4). How is this discrepancy explained? As shown in previous studies, high performing students, in general, tend to come from families of higher income and higher education, but high-achieving Latino students (just as other high-achieving minority students experiencing racial, ethnic, and linguistic discrimination) present a different likelihood. They are:

- less likely to come from economically and educationally advantaged backgrounds;
- less likely to attend schools with rigorous curricula and AP classes;
- less likely to have "highly qualified" teachers and necessary resources for classes;
- more likely to have lower aspirations (and experience lower expectations by peers, teachers, and family), thus being at higher risk for not fulfilling academic promise.

Related issue: Legal/residency status of students and/or parents can be not only an impediment but also a disincentive for pursuing higher education.

Higher Education

High-achieving Latino students (especially those of Mexican and Puerto Rican ancestry) who do enter higher education are likely to "shoot low" or under-enroll in more selective institutions (with higher graduation rates than less selective institutions). Too, these students more often consider the relative costs of attending institutions and "lack familiarity with the differential benefits of attending more selective colleges." (Fry, 2004; Bowen & Bok, 1998.)



Characteristics of Latino and White High Achievers Along the K-12 Continuum

- Analyses of two national long-range databases (ECLS and NELS) indicate that Latino students from low SES backgrounds were more likely than White students to move into the top 20% of achievers after kindergarten, suggesting a greater influence of early learning experiences on the outcomes of Latino students than on White students.
- Nationally, high-achieving Latino students tend to live with both biological parents, have parents with higher education and income than the mean for their group, and attend non-public schools.
- Nationally, gender appears to be a less important predictor of staying in the top quintile for Latinos than for Whites. A relatively higher percentage of male Latino students were in the top quintile for reading. (*The pattern for WCPSS differs; similar percentages of male and female Latino students remained at the highest EOG performance level between 2004 and 2005 in both reading and mathematics and, at the high school level, in English I and Algebra I.*)
- Stringfield *et al.* (1997) found that large achievement gaps between White and Latino students in Title I schools remained relatively constant across grades 1-5. Similar gaps were found in 2003 4th-grade NAEP results.
- On the 2003 eighth-grade NAEP reading assessment, 41% of White students vs. 15% of Latino students scored at/above the proficient level.
- NAEP high school results are usually higher than middle school results for Latino students, but by 12th grade, many Latino students have dropped out.
- Under-representation of Latino students in GT programs: In a study of randomly sampled NY middle schools, Forsbach and Pierce (1999) found that training of teachers in the identification of gifted minority students increased the nomination of Black and Asian American students, but not Latinos. Reasons posited for this outcome were “teachers’ limited understanding of the effects of language on classroom performance” (p.7), and language differences that depress standardized scores. (*Note: 5.5% of Latino students in WCPSS, compared to 22% of all students, were identified for AG services in 2004-05.*)
- Overall, the ECLS and NELS data point out large differences in socioeconomic and family support resources between White and Latino high-achieving students.
- ETS author Gandara followed 28 Latino students from three West Coast high schools from 1996 to 2002. Conclusion: Hurdles that high-achieving students from low-income backgrounds faced were similar to those of low-achieving students. Often the daily dynamics of poverty prevented high-achieving students from following through on educational commitments.

Policy Implications

- A dual strategy is needed for maintaining initial high achievers and continuously adding others.
- One way to sustain early high achievers (and raise others to that level) is to provide targeted, intellectually rigorous preschool and kindergarten experiences.
- Because literacy skills appear to be closely tied to socioeconomic advantage, programs may want to focus on “academic English” (p. 18), those skills needed to thrive in intellectually demanding settings, but that are seldom explicitly taught.

References

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