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School Programs Help Latinos Achieve, Study Finds

Intervention programs -- even at the high-school level -- can improve educational achievement among at-risk Latino students in California, and the state should increase funding for such programs, concludes a study by University of California professors.

The four researchers from the Davis, Santa Barbara and San Diego campuses also call for rigorous evaluations of existing programs in their report, "Capturing Latino Students in the Academic Pipeline." The study was funded by the UC Latina/Latino Policy Research Program, administered by the California Policy Seminar in Berkeley.

The professors found three school-based programs, which target different segments of the Latino population, effective in improving the rate of both high-school completion and college attendance among Latino students. Program costs per student ranged from \$485 to \$792 a year.

The findings are particularly significant, the professors say, because Latinos are the single largest ethnic group in the state's schools, and their educational attainment is far lower than that of other ethnic groups in both the state and the country. "To remain economically competitive in the 21st century, California must improve the educational achievement of its growing number of Latino students," they write.

"All three evaluation findings point to the critical importance of interventions that are consistent, intensive, well-articulated from grade to grade, and provide heavy monitoring of students throughout the secondary years," they note in the report.

One pilot project, known as ALAS (Spanish for "Wings"), targeted, among others, 46 Los Angeles-area middle-school students most at risk of dropping out of high school. Over three years, the program trained and counseled students in problem-solving, provided frequent positive reinforcement, monitored attendance period-by-period, gave frequent teacher feedback to parents and students, instructed parents on how to shape their child's behavior and provided parents with information on relevant community services.

Katherine Larson, a researcher in UC Santa Barbara's Graduate School of Education, and Russell Rumberger, a professor of education on the same campus, found that, in comparison to a control group, program participants had doubled or tripled their success on almost every indication of school performance and engagement measured when they completed grade nine.

Hugh Mehan, associate director of the Center for Research on Educational Equity and Teaching Excellence at UC San Diego, evaluated eight of the 71 San Diego sites of a program, known as AVID, that places capable but previously low-achieving students in regular "college prep" courses and provides support for the transition. Through follow-up interviews with 394 students, he found that participating African American and Latino students -- two major groups underrepresented in college -- enrolled in college in numbers that exceed local and national averages.

Patricia Gandara, a professor of education at UC Davis and director of the Education Policy Center of the Linguistic Minority Research Institute, evaluated the Puente project, which features a special college prep English class in grades nine and 10, college preparatory counseling and a community mentor for participating students in 18 high schools.

Gandara found that the college-going rate of participating students was about double that of the comparison group and approximately three times that of all Hispanic students in California. Program students were more likely to stay in school, take and pass more college preparatory courses, and have both higher aspirations and more positive attitudes toward school.

Much of the three programs' successes, the researchers say, was based on two common features: At least one advocate in the school setting took personal responsibility for each participating student, and specially created peer groups reinforced achievement-oriented behavior.

Other elements important to effective intervention programs, the researchers say, include increased time, outside of school hours, to be devoted to the pursuit of academic goals; mixing students to provide both models of academic achievement and access to college-bound curriculum; and sensitivity to the particular circumstances of the participating students and their families.

Note: The complete report is available from the UC Berkeley Chicano/Latino Policy Project at (510) 642-6903.

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