

Nationally and in the Austin Independent School District (AISD), a gap persists between the postsecondary enrollment of Hispanic seniors and that of students of other races and ethnicities, especially with respect to enrollment in 4-year institutions (Alderete, Coneway, & Schmitt, 2006, 2007; Garland, 2008b, 2009; Gossman, 2009, 2011). Estimates of educational levels needed for jobs through 2018 showed 62% of jobs requiring at least some college (Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011). If Hispanic students lag behind non-Hispanic students in postsecondary enrollment, their future economic prospects could suffer lasting repercussions.

A report published by AISD's Department of Research and Evaluation, [*A Focus on Hispanic Seniors: 2011 High School Exit Survey and Postsecondary Enrollment*](#), explores differences in the high school experience of AISD's Hispanic and non-Hispanic seniors that might help explain the low postsecondary enrollment rate of Hispanic seniors and inform strategies to address the issue. The report also provides a review of existing research that demonstrates the influence that topics explored in the High School Exit Survey (e.g., family influences, postsecondary intentions, steps taken to prepare for postsecondary education, teacher-student relationships, school engagement, and academic self-confidence) could have on postsecondary enrollment.

This research brief provides easy access to the full report's numerous recommendations for increasing the postsecondary enrollment of AISD's Hispanic seniors. The recommendations, categorized by the High School Exit Survey topics listed in the previous paragraph, support the creation of a college-going culture at every elementary and secondary campus, and work toward providing the support students and parents need to make a postsecondary education a reality. All recommendations are a response to the particular experience of Hispanic seniors in the district and to existing research. Please refer to the full report (<http://www.austinisd.org/dre/search>) to gain an understanding of the foundation for these recommendations and why implementing them could have positive results in our community.

Family Influences

1. Inform parents about the importance of their child taking advanced courses, and how doing so could improve that child's chances of becoming college ready and enrolling in college. One modest, experimental intervention, funded by the National Science Foundation, involved sending parents of high school sophomores two brochures about the importance of science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) in daily life and for various careers. The brochures and a dedicated website with more detailed information resulted in mothers giving more importance to these courses: students whose parents received the brochures took more advanced science and math classes their last 2 years of high school than did students whose parents did not receive the brochures (Mikulak, 2012).

2. Inform counselors and teachers about the impact taking advanced math courses can have on a student's future, and encourage them to share this information with students.
3. Conduct outreach to Hispanic parents to provide information about college and application assistance in a manner that is culturally sensitive and that is effective for the parents' level of education. Include information about the benefits of attending college, what to look for in a college, how to afford college, how to afford living expenses, and enrollment processes. Do not presume knowledge about concepts such as government-guaranteed loans, grants, and scholarships. Use resources that provide suggestions about how school districts can reach and communicate with Hispanic parents more effectively, from the language used in bilingual written communications to staff development opportunity ideas (see Waterman & Harry, 2008).
 - a. The district recently launched Educa Austin, a weekend, hour-long radio show on a commercial Spanish radio station, with the goal of increasing parents' engagement. This program also could be used as a vehicle for discussing parents' questions and concerns regarding college, and for sharing information about postsecondary education.
 - b. Some nonprofit organizations have used house parties to disseminate information within neighborhoods. Although the strategy is labor intensive, it can reach parents who would not attend a meeting at a school. Trained volunteers can serve as facilitators. The basic idea is to have a parent invite other parents in the neighborhood to his or her house, apartment, or a meeting room in a public housing complex, for an event to discuss college, for instance. A volunteer or staff member shares food, makes a presentation in the appropriate language, and facilitates a discussion. Having the event in a familiar place and being invited by a neighbor make people more receptive to the message and more comfortable asking questions and sharing experiences, and in general, decreases anxiety. It is likely the same parents would attend a future event at the school if the presenter personally invited them.
 - c. The district partners with the Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce to assist parents with completing financial aid forms. Some of these events are in Spanish. Although these are effective and necessary efforts, if parents are unaware of the necessary steps toward college enrollment, are unconvinced of the benefits of college, or believe college is unattainable for their child, they are unlikely to participate. Perhaps the Austin Chamber or the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce can partner with the district to develop and implement a plan to effectively disseminate information about postsecondary education to Hispanic parents.
4. Provide parents information about the tuition and fees associated with attending college, and what living expenses might be. In AISD, about half of seniors had "no idea" what the costs of community, state, and private colleges were (Pazera, 2011). Being informed earlier (i.e., when their child is in middle school or a freshman in high school, rather than in the

final years of high school) about these costs and available ways to cover them would allow parents and students to better decide whether they could afford a postsecondary education.

5. Facilitate college visits for low-income Hispanic parents. Provide translators and address other obstacles that might prevent them from attending.
6. Inform families of middle and high school students about community resources that offer the type of assistance immigrant teens might provide for their parents, especially those who are not proficient in English.
7. Inform families about financial aid and scholarship opportunities for both documented and undocumented students. The reluctance and misconceptions families may have about sharing their financial information with the government need to be understood and addressed.
8. Share information with parents about the impact their expectations can have on the academic choices and achievement of their adolescents. Informing parents about the benefits and availability of higher education might change what they imagine is possible for their child, and could help raise their expectations. Many parents may not be aware of the influence their expectations can have on their teens.
9. Investigate the reasons some Hispanic families might discourage their child from attending college, and assess the scope of the issue. Having a better understanding about these reasons would be instrumental in developing efforts to conduct outreach to Hispanic parents and address their concerns.
10. Increase efforts to share information with parents about ways to be engaged in their teen's education at home, including the types of home involvement that are most effective in encouraging higher achievement and postsecondary enrollment. Parents need to know they continue to have an influence on their children's behavior and decisions throughout high school.
11. Investigate how Hispanic families support the education of their children at home because these practices might differ from those of parents of non-Hispanic students. The 2012 High School Exit Survey included additional measures of parent involvement at home. Data analyses should be conducted to see if these measures capture the practices of Hispanic parents.
12. Include a question on the High School Exit Survey about the level of education parents expect their teens to achieve.

Postsecondary Intentions

1. Introduce the possibility of attending college to students in elementary school so that by the time students enter high school, they have already given thought and consideration to whether they want to continue their education after graduation. High school students would then understand that all their choices with regard to courses, attendance, behavior, and homework could affect their plans for the future. Students introduced to the idea of

college in elementary school might feel empowered by the idea's familiarity to actively seek the postsecondary information they need. In some districts, pre-kindergarten students wear college t-shirts for a day, and elementary school students take field trips to local colleges. Inviting parents as chaperones helps introduce some parents to the idea of college for their children, perhaps for the first time.

2. Help raise Hispanic students' college aspirations. Most students make their postsecondary education plans between 8th and 10th grade, so interventions to influence their aspirations should occur by 8th grade (Choy, 2001). Teachers and administrators need to encourage Hispanic middle and high school students to set their sights as high as possible.
3. Make students aware of the low rate of bachelor degree completion for students who attend a 2-year college with the intention of transferring to a 4-year college, and how to possibly overcome the obstacles such students face.

Taking Steps to Postsecondary Education

1. During high school freshmen orientation activities, have high school seniors inform incoming freshmen about how their course and behavioral choices could affect their future opportunities.
2. Ensure all middle school students are aware of the opportunity to attend college, and know by their freshmen year what steps they need to take to get there.
 - a. Have high school seniors speak to middle school students about their high school experience and how to prepare for college as high school freshmen. One question on the High School Exit Survey asked seniors what advice they would give freshmen (Pazera, 2011). The majority of the advice seniors provided emphasized taking school seriously: focusing on schoolwork, attending classes, managing time well, and preparing for college. Research has shown the encouragement students receive from peers has the potential to influence these very behaviors (Bregman, 2010).
 - b. Encourage sponsors of school clubs and athletic coaches to facilitate discussions that motivate students to work hard in school and to take advantage of existing resources to improve their grades, if applicable, and learn about postsecondary opportunities.
 - c. Establish a peer-mentoring program to inform students about the steps toward postsecondary enrollment and to assist students in accessing resources. A study of such a program at a large, urban high school found that both the students receiving the mentoring and the mentors themselves benefitted (Bregman, 2010).
 - d. Use advisory periods to inform students before they are juniors or seniors about the necessary steps on the road to a postsecondary education.
3. Systematically integrate postsecondary information and preparation into the middle and high school curriculum to increase opportunities for all students.

- a. Make college application essays an assignment in every 8th grade and freshman English class, and in every English class for the following 3 years. Students can use their freshman or 8th-grade essay and revise or refine it each year. Encourage students to share their essays with their parents.
 - b. Introduce students to the state financial aid application in every freshman math class. Create math assignments based on the application. Have the homework signed by a parent.
 - c. Have students in economics and math classes investigate differences in income and employment rates associated with different levels of education.
4. Increase the percentage of Hispanic seniors who consult with school staff about college and careers.
 - a. Provide school counselors and Project ADVANCE staff with the time and capacity to inform Hispanic freshmen and sophomores about college and career opportunities and steps to postsecondary enrollment.
 - b. Ensure these staff have time to reach those Hispanic juniors and seniors who might not be inclined to visit a college and career center or take the initiative to consult with a school counselor about college or career options.
5. Have counselors and Project ADVANCE staff encourage Hispanic students to apply to more than three colleges to increase their likelihood of acceptance. The district may need to partner with community groups to investigate ways to make applying to a number of colleges affordable for low- and middle-income students.
6. Continue to monitor seniors' work status and time spent on homework and studying outside class. Inform students and parents about the relationship between studying and GPA: that studying and doing homework can make a difference academically.
7. Educate students and parents about the higher pay-off in future job earnings, and other potential benefits a student could obtain by limiting work hours to fewer than 20 hours a week while in high school. Continue the work of the district's Child Study Teams, which currently identify students who work long hours by necessity, and help facilitate a flexible class and work schedule to meet the students' needs.
8. Have school counselors focus efforts on the students who work long hours, to explore these students' career interests and encourage them to reach beyond what currently seems possible to them for their future.
9. Investigate the non-work-related reasons Hispanic seniors, on average, spent fewer hours studying and doing homework than did non-Hispanic seniors.

Student-Teacher Relationships, School Engagement and Academic Self-Confidence

1. Increase efforts to incorporate sensitivity to cultural and economic differences into the district's curriculum and its implementation, and offer more professional development opportunities to teachers to increase their awareness of cultural differences and how to embrace these in the classroom.

2. Educate teachers about the importance of the relationships they develop with all their students. Publicize resources that offer teachers strategies for developing good relationships with their Hispanic students. The district demonstrated an understanding of the importance of giving students the opportunity to develop a close relationship with a teacher by implementing advisory periods (i.e., a class period during the school week when teachers work with the same group of students on issues not directly tied to a particular academic subject). Yet, a lower percentage of Hispanic students than of non-Hispanic students appeared to be developing close relationships with teachers. This issue is not unique to Austin. More research is needed to find the types of interventions that can effectively address this disparity.
3. Explore any obstacles that might exist to Hispanic students' participation in music, theater, sports, and academic clubs, and then actively recruit more Hispanic students into these activities.
4. Continue efforts to improve or maintain a positive school climate at each campus. A positive school climate contributes to school engagement. Overall, Hispanic seniors had positive feelings about their schools and were confident about their academic abilities regarding high school work.
5. Provide teachers with professional development opportunities for increasing the academic self-efficacy of their students.

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