



Listening to Latinas:

Barriers to High School Graduation



The National Women’s Law Center is a nonprofit organization that has been working since 1972 to advance and protect women’s legal rights. The Center focuses on major policy areas of importance to women and their families, including employment, education, health and reproductive rights, and family economic security.

Founded in 1968, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF) is the nation’s leading nonprofit Latino legal organization. Often described as the “law firm of the Latino community,” MALDEF promotes equality and justice through litigation, advocacy, public policy, and community education in the areas of employment, immigrants’ rights, voting rights, education, and language rights.



Executive Summary

Listening to Latinas: Barriers to High School Graduation addresses the challenges facing Latina students in the United States today and explores ways to overcome obstacles that undermine their chances for success. With this report, the National Women’s Law Center (NWLC) and the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF) bring new voices to the conversation: those of Latina students themselves and the adults who work with them on a daily basis.

Latinas are dropping out of school in alarming numbers—a pattern that has serious and damaging repercussions for their future prospects and economic security. Yet little research has been done on the particular barriers that Latinas face or the strategies that might maximize their chances for success. This report aims to start filling that gap.

Toward this end, MALDEF and NWLC conducted surveys, interviews, and focus groups with Latina students across the U.S. These qualitative research tools yielded both uplifting and disheartening stories about Latina students’ hopes and dreams, their life challenges and educational experiences, and issues that can affect their expectations and success. Additionally, teachers and program staff who work with Latina students added their perspectives on the barriers these students face and how schools and policymakers might improve Latinas’ educational experiences and prospects for the future.

This report shares many of the Latina girls’ stories, as well as input from teachers and program staff. It compares, contrasts, and in some cases weaves together these qualitative research findings with the existing literature and research on these issues from a variety of sources.

From this qualitative research and review of current literature, some clear themes emerge:

- ▶ **Latinas have high aspirations, but too many doubt their ability to reach their goals.** Many of the Latina girls surveyed and interviewed for this project had very high aspirations for the future. Substantial numbers of them want to have professional careers as doctors, lawyers, nurses, and scientists and understand that they cannot reach those goals without education. In fact, 80% of the students we surveyed want to graduate from college and perhaps go further. And 98% reported that they wanted to graduate from high school. Yet the dropout rates of Latinas are extremely high. The latest data show that 41% of Hispanic female students do not graduate on time with a standard diploma, leaving them with severe short- and long-term consequences for their economic security and health. And these realities affect the expectations that many Latinas have for their futures. One-third of the girls we surveyed do not expect to achieve their educational goals. With survey responses and through follow-up interviews, focus groups, and a review of existing research, NWLC and MALDEF explored the reasons for this disconnect.

- ▶ **The Latino community faces many challenges that help to explain the discrepancy between Latinas' dreams and actual expectations.** Latino students' academic achievement and dropout rates can be profoundly affected by the challenges that many of their communities face.

- ~ Poverty impacts students' preparation for school. Too few Latinos attend early childhood education programs, for a variety of reasons; many of the schools Latinos attend receive limited resources which can restrict learning opportunities; those whose families move to find work are forced to change schools frequently; and having inadequate community supports, such as parks and after-school programs, can affect Latino students' ability to succeed in school.
- ~ Immigration status creates instability for many Latino students. Students who are undocumented or who have family members who are undocumented experience anxiety and uncertainty about their futures, and face added financial barriers to higher education opportunities.
- ~ Limited English proficiency can make students more likely to fall behind and increase the risk of dropout.
- ~ Parental involvement, which has been correlated with better engagement in school and can increase the chances of graduation, is limited for many Latino parents due to a number of factors, including their own low levels of formal education, lack of familiarity with the American school system, and feeling unwelcome at their children's schools.

In addition, Latinas and Latinos face some similar challenges at school, such as concerns about school safety, attendance problems, disciplinary issues, and poor academic performance, all of which tend to limit student engagement in school and increase the risk of dropout.

- ▶ **Latinas face particular challenges related to the intersection of their ethnicity and gender.**

- ~ Gender and ethnic stereotypes. Many Latinas are influenced by family and societal expectations, often based on stereotypes of Latinas as submissive underachievers and caretakers. When these stereotypes are internalized, they may cause Latinas to doubt their chances for academic and career success and hurt their self-esteem, which can hinder their motivation and engagement in school. Also, many Latinas lack educational and career role models among their family members and peers to help them set goals and envision themselves reaching those goals.
- ~ Discrimination based on ethnicity and gender. Some Latinas still find that their teachers and classmates treat them differently—in both subtle and blatant ways—or have different expectations for them because they are Latina. This treatment makes them feel unwelcome at school and can affect their academic performance and graduation rates. Some feel unwelcome at school as non-native English speakers, some experience sexual harassment, and some do not get equal access to or encouragement in career and technical education programs for fields that are traditionally male but that tend to offer higher wages and better benefits than do traditionally female fields.
- ~ Pregnancy and parenting responsibilities. Pregnancy and parenting responsibilities are dropout risk factors for almost half of the girls who drop out of high school. Latinas have the highest teen pregnancy rates and teen birth rates of any racial or ethnic group—almost twice the national average. Many do not discuss pregnancy prevention or contraception with their parents, and many attend schools in states that limit sex education to abstinence-only curricula. Once

they have children, all girls, including Latinas, face enormous challenges to staying in school, graduating, and pursuing post-secondary options. Some of those challenges are financial and logistical, such as finding affordable, quality child care and safe transportation to school. Others are less tangible, such as discrimination and stigmatization by teachers and school administrators or policies.

- ~ Other caretaking responsibilities. Family caregiving responsibilities—typically for younger siblings or elderly relatives—may fall more heavily on Latinas than on Latinos. As a result, Latinas who have such responsibilities may be absent from school more often than are their brothers. And missing school can lead to disengagement, poor academic performance, and school discipline, all of which are correlated with higher dropout rates.
- ~ Lower involvement in school activities. Latinas tend not to get as involved in school activities or sports as Latinos do, which disadvantages the girls in a number of ways. In particular, there is a strong correlation between involvement in school activities and greater engagement in school, so students who are involved in sports and other school activities are more likely to stay in school and stay focused on goals and successful behaviors.

Latinos are the fastest growing minority group in the country, and Latinas are the fastest growing group of female school-aged youth. Latinas who drop out of high school encounter far more severe economic consequences (such as unemployment, low wages, and dependency on public support programs) than do Latinos. And Latinas have the highest teen pregnancy and birth rates of any subgroup. Therefore, it is critical—for Latinas, their children and communities, our nation’s health and prosperity, and the realization of the American values of fairness and equality of opportunity—that serious resources be devoted to improving their graduation rates and chances of success.

Recommendations

The good news is that there is much that schools and policymakers can do to enable Latinas to overcome the barriers they face. *Listening to Latinas: Barriers to High School Graduation* makes a number of recommendations, many of which will help not only Latinas but also boys and students of other races and ethnicities. In summary form, they are listed below.

- ▶ **Invest in the Future of Latino Children.** Congress should fully fund and promote quality early childhood education initiatives including child care; conduct outreach to Latino families so they are aware of these opportunities; and provide access to education and training for child care providers. Congress should also expand access to family supports including housing, health care, nutrition assistance, and tax benefits.
- ▶ **Connect Latinas with Role Models and Engage Them in Goal-Setting.** Mentoring, dropout prevention, and college access programs that provide Latina students with access to positive role models and support to meet their goals must be better funded, more widely adopted, and further expanded. Schools must do more to connect Latina students with caring adults who can help them to develop and achieve their educational and career aspirations.
- ▶ **Ensure That All Students Can Pursue and Are Prepared for Post-Secondary Educational Opportunities.** Schools and community programs should undertake initiatives to get all students “college ready.” Congress should fund such initiatives, enact bills to enable immigrant

students to attend college, and increase financial support for students in need to secure higher education. The Department of Education should ensure that Latinas learn about funding opportunities and how to apply for them.

- ▶ **Ensure That School Environments are Culturally Inclusive and Free of Race/Ethnicity and Gender Discrimination.** School officials must rigorously enforce anti-discrimination policies. Schools and policymakers should support dual language programs for English Language Learners, work to create inclusive, multicultural environments, and offer quality after-school and summer enrichment programs. The Department of Education should enforce civil rights laws that prevent sex and race discrimination in educational programs and activities. And Congress should adequately fund civil rights enforcement and the development of multicultural curricula, and pass legislation that holds schools fully accountable for sexual harassment.
- ▶ **Help Latino Parents Get More Involved in the Education of Their Children.** Schools should develop and implement—and federal, state, and local governments should fund—parent involvement initiatives for the parents of Latino students, and ensure that Latino parents are made to feel welcome at school. Schools should conduct outreach to Latino parents and encourage them to attend college information sessions and meetings with college representatives. States and local communities should work to expand educational opportunities for Latino parents, including adult ESL and GED programs.
- ▶ **Improve Efforts to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, Including the Provision of Comprehensive Sex Education to Students.** Schools should provide students with comprehensive, medically accurate, and age-appropriate sex education that includes information about contraception, abstinence, and how to avoid sexually transmitted diseases, in a culturally appropriate manner. Congress should end funding for abstinence-only programs, create a federal program dedicated to providing teens with comprehensive sex education, expand efforts to reduce unintended pregnancy rates among minority youth, and expand access to affordable contraception.
- ▶ **Support Pregnant and Parenting Students.** Schools can and must do more to support those students who do get pregnant and have children. Federal, state, and local governments should make funding and technical assistance available for such efforts. The most successful approach likely will be one that is comprehensive—addressing the physical, social, emotional, financial, and academic needs of pregnant and parenting students. Federal, state, and local governments should enforce Title IX and ensure that school personnel do not discriminate against pregnant and parenting students or impede their ability to stay in school.
- ▶ **Require Better Data Collection and Promote School Accountability.** To enhance accountability, schools should develop longitudinal tracking systems to enable the gathering and comparison of data on the performance of individual students. Congress and the U.S. Department of Education should require that schools maintain and report graduation rate data disaggregated by—in addition to other categories—gender and pregnant and parenting status, and such data should be maintained in a format that can be cross-tabulated for further analysis.