

BEYOND 2000: IMPROVING EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES
FOR HISPANIC CHILDREN

by

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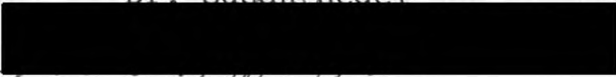
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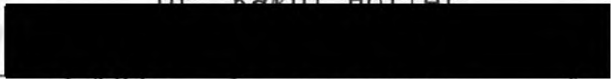
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Although Hispanic children constitute over 12% of the school population, and people of Hispanic origin will become the largest minority in the United States by the year 2000, they continue to be failed by the American educational system. Hispanic students have the highest failure and drop-out rates of any ethnic group, and are overrepresented within special education programs. Part 1 of this paper examines the major causes of low academic achievement among hispanic students, which include: a) environmental factors such as poverty, poor nutrition, low parental education levels, lack of preliteracy skills, and migrant status; b) discriminatory evaluation by school personnel and standardized tests; c) linguistic barriers, and d) the use of culturally and contextually inappropriate curricula.

A number of previous programs have targeted these issues, but they have generally focused on one area and have been insufficient to address the scope of the problems. Part 2 of the paper explains a program I designed which addresses academic difficulties wholistically rather than focally. It is a model for comprehensive intervention which combines new elements with successful aspects of existing programs, and is entitled LETRAS (legislative action, early intervention and community education, teacher training, relevant curricula, appropriate assessment, support from parents). Although significant effort and outlay will be required to implement these measures, they will be highly cost effective, since they will reduce the need for, and increase the efficiency of, special services, while promoting academic success. Ultimately, more Hispanic students will graduate and advance to higher education, thus breaking the vicious cycle of poverty and educational failure which is so common today.

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Beyond 2000: Improving Educational Opportunities
for Hispanic Children

Introduction

As the new millenium approaches, the United States is becoming an increasingly multicultural society. While growth of the caucasian population stagnates, minority groups continue to increase dramatically due to higher birth rates, greater net migration, and lower median ages. African-Americans have the highest projected growth rates, but due to a larger population base, Hispanics will increase in numbers most rapidly, becoming the largest minority group in the U.S. by the year 2000 (Lewis, 1993). By 2050, Hispanics will constitute 25% of the population, while non-Hispanic Whites will fall below 50% (Bureau of the Census, 1996). Although Hispanic people may be of any race, in this discussion the terms White and Black refer only to people of non-Hispanic origin.

Along with the increasing multiculturalism comes increased multilingualism. Approximately 13.5 million of the 45 million elementary and seondary students in the country belong to racial or ethnic minorities, while an estimated 6.3 million speak a language other than English at home (Gonzalez, Brusca-Vega, & Yawkey, 1997). Of those who receive bilingual or ESL instruction, the vast majority speak Spanish (72.9%), followed by Vietnamese (3.9%) and Hmong (1.8%) (Gonzalez, et al., 1997).

Despite the fact that a growing proportion of the population is non-Hispanic White, the American educational system continues to cater primarily to White, middle class students. Poor and minority students are highly over-represented in special education and under-represented in Talented and Gifted programs, and are less likely to graduate or to pursue higher education. Of all U.S. racial/ethnic minorities, Hispanic students fare the worst, with fewer completed years of schooling, lower college enrollment figures, and higher illiteracy rates than any other group (Piatt, 1997). Dunn and Griggs (1995) state that "Hispanics are educationally behind every other minority group. Nearly half of Hispanic students leave before completing high school - more than double the rate for African-Americans and three times the rate for Anglo students" (Dunn & Griggs, 1995, p. 50).

These figures demonstrate clearly the need for educational reform to meet the needs of Hispanic children. While changes must also be made to better serve Asian, African American and Native American students, the lower performance and greater numbers of Hispanic students indicate that their needs should be a priority. If this country is to be economically sound and globally competitive beyond 2000, the success of Hispanic students in education must be ensured.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the causes of Hispanic students' difficulties in the American educational system, and to find ways of reducing or eliminating these

problems. In part one of the paper, the environmental, socioeconomic, cultural, and social factors which contribute to low Hispanic student achievement are examined. The second section explains LETRAS, a comprehensive program I developed which takes a wholistic approach to meeting the educational needs of Hispanic children.

Part 1: Causes of Low Academic Achievement

Among Hispanic Students

The causes of low academic success among Hispanic students are numerous and complex, but several key factors can be identified. In the past failure has been attributed to inherent genetic or cultural inferiority, or to failure to "integrate". These theories were based on racist notions and anecdotal evidence; in reality Hispanic students are just as intelligent and capable as whites, they have simply been discriminated against and disadvantaged in so many ways that it is nearly impossible for them to succeed. These students are not failing, they are *being failed* by an educational system which does not consider their unique backgrounds and living environments, or adapt adequately to their cultural, behavioral, cognitive and linguistic needs.

Economic Factors

One characteristic common to many Hispanic students is poverty. Due to the low educational level of many Hispanic adults, and to discrimination in hiring and salaries, the per

capita income of Hispanics in 1990 was only \$8,400, below both African-Americans (\$8,900) and Whites (\$15,700) (Piatt, 1997). Thirty four percent of all Hispanic children live below the poverty line (Gonzalez et al., 1997), and between 1980 and 1990 the Hispanic poverty population grew a staggering 60.3%, as compared to 11.2% for Blacks and 10.1% for Whites (Frey, 1993, p. 13, table 2). Children living in poverty may lack proper nutrition during critical growth periods, and are often disadvantaged throughout their schooling by poor lighting, inadequate space and resources for study, and insecure or even dangerous environments.

A lack of financial resources has other serious repercussions for children. The struggle to survive means that their parents have little or no time to engage in social and educational activities with their children. Studies have shown that income and educational levels are directly related to the amount of time parents spend reading to their preschoolers, and are highly correlated with the amount of printed materials in the home (Langdon & Cheng, 1992). Children in lower income brackets also receive less conversational and social speech interactions and more directive speech from their parents (Hart & Risley, 1995). All of these factors mean that children below the poverty line begin school with fewer preliteracy skills than their peers, a deficit which in some cases may never be made up. From the outset, academia is more difficult for them, and their parents rarely have the time or knowledge base necessary to help them

with reading and homework.

Cultural Differences

In addition to the economic causes of low preliteracy skills, Hispanic children may also be disadvantaged by certain cultural practices. Hispanic adults do not typically translate their actions into words, a common practice among White Americans when sharing daily activities with young children (Langdon & Cheng, 1992). This direct linking of objects and action with verbal language is an important factor in early language development. Hispanic parents also communicate primarily with other adults in social situations, and children are discouraged from interrupting these conversations. In a 1991 study, researchers found that most Hispanic parents see play as a distraction from household chores and responsibilities, and rarely take part in their children's play activities (Langdon & Cheng, 1992). This reduces the amount of language exposure the children receive, and contributes to later difficulties in acquiring literacy.

Hispanic children also have more difficulty learning to read and write because they come from a culture steeped in oral traditions. Adults do not generally own many books or read for recreation. They also do not read frequently to their children, but entertain them instead by recounting past events, usually including many family and place names (Langdon & Cheng, 1992). This makes early educational experiences challenging not only

because the mode of presentation is unfamiliar, but because the content is oriented more toward objects and individuals than to family interactions. Well known Hispanic author and lecturer Richard Rodriguez writes of his first contact with reading:

The sentences of the first books I read were coolly impersonal. Toned hard. What most bothered me, however, was the isolation reading required. To console myself for the loneliness I'd feel when I read, I tried reading in a very soft voice. Until: 'who is doing all that talking to his neighbor?' Shortly after, remedial reading classes were arranged for me (Rodriguez, 1983, p. 59-60).

Another disparity between Hispanic and non-Hispanic White cultures is that adults from the latter frequently ask children to recount shared experiences. For Hispanic adults this seems redundant and unnatural; since they experienced an event or share knowledge with a child there is no reason to ask the child to repeat it. This poses an enormous problem both in mainstream classes and in assessments for special education. Teachers use the ability to repeat previously shared information to verify that children are listening and understanding, while almost all standardized language tests require children to describe pictures and stories known both to them and the examiner in order to evaluate expressive language and comprehension. Hispanic children may perform poorly on these tasks due to their inexperience in demonstrating shared knowledge. They are subsequently labeled as language delayed, when in reality they are being tested on a culturally unfamiliar pragmatic element of communication.

These cultural differences in child-rearing would not cause

problems if students were educated only with others from their culture (and therefore with similar preparedness for reading and writing), but the reality is that Hispanic children enter school behind many of their peers. The head start that others have over them causes a host of concomitant problems, including low teacher expectations for Hispanic students, feelings of failure and inferiority leading to loss of self-esteem, and negative attitudes towards school.

Migrant Status

An additional environmental factor which puts a sizeable portion of the Hispanic student population at risk is migrant status. These students have a drop-out rate estimated to be as high as 57% (Grossman, 1995), a statistic which is understandable given the challenges they face. They are disadvantaged not only by poverty but also by low English proficiency (LEP), absenteeism during harvesting periods, and frequent moves between school districts.

Inevitably this constant interruption of learning, lack of continuity, absence from school during travel time, and often blatant discrimination by local communities and school personnel all contribute to migrant students falling behind and getting disinterested in an educational system which cannot provide the needed continuous education (Grossman, 1995, p. 31).

Children of migrant workers therefore constitute an especially vulnerable subgroup within the Hispanic school population, for whom special educational programs must be developed.

The majority of children of Hispanic origin begin school on

uneven footing due to the aforementioned factors. School personnel should therefore be particularly concerned with treating them equitably once they are enrolled, but this is rarely the case. Rather than compensating for their at-risk status, most school districts and personnel create additional obstacles for Hispanic children.

Biased Evaluation and Expectations

One of the most disturbing problems which hinders Hispanic students in schools is discrimination (usually subconscious) by classroom teachers and other school personnel. Most studies of prejudicial treatment have found that teachers consistently rate the work of children who speak with a Hispanic accent lower than identical work completed by speakers of Standard American English (Grossman, 1995; Grossman, 1998; Lippi-Green, 1997). This may be caused partly by their perception of non-standard forms of English as being less acceptable.

Even when language is not an issue, teachers often place Hispanic students in lower ability groups and give them less challenging work than they are capable of (Grossman, 1995). This biased evaluation of Hispanic students negatively affects their grades, and also extends to referrals for behavioral and learning problems. Teachers with inadequate knowledge of cultural differences may interpret differences in behavior as being deviant, while lack of knowledge about the Spanish language and bilingualism causes an inordinate number of Hispanic children

with normal intelligence to be placed in special education. In discussing the need for fair testing and treatment for minority students, Keller (1991) cites a personal experience which echoes the findings of later studies:

I made my journey as a young educator up the Rio Grande or Río Bravo, depending on which side you view the river. To gloss Conrad and Coppola, there is a "heart of darkness" along that river as well. In south Texas and other places, I found egregious misplacements of Spanish-speaking students into classes for the "educable mentally retarded." These students were bright but not fluent in English, and teachers misplaced them wholesale on the basis of their own subjective, wrongheaded... appraisals. These experiences of subjective appraisals will haunt me to my last breath (Keller, Deneen, & Magallán, 1991, p. 7-8).

In addition to directly causing student failure through biased evaluations and inappropriate placements, teachers indirectly hinder Hispanic students through biased expectations. At every level of the educational system, educators attribute higher intelligence and expect better academic performance from White students, even when previous grades and test scores suggest otherwise. Even in experimental situations, when teachers have no information about students except for their racial and socioeconomic backgrounds, "they attribute higher academic and intellectual potential to European American students than Hispanic students" (Grossman, 1995, p. 32).

While a few students have the drive and self-esteem to excel despite low expectations, the majority of children (of any race) will perform according to what is expected of them. If they perceive that school personnel expect little of them, they begin

to internalize those expectations, eventually believing them to correspond to their capabilities. However, even children of disadvantaged backgrounds will strive to succeed if educators place high expectations on them.

This was demonstrated clearly by the success of the Advanced Placement (AP) Calculus program at Garfield High School beginning in 1978. Over 95% of the student body at Garfield is Hispanic, and 80% have family incomes below \$15,000 (Keller et al., 1991). School administrators had previously offered few AP programs, since they believed the students could not meet the rigorous academic demands. However, when Bolivian math teacher Jaime Escalante established the program with the firm belief that his students could succeed, they lived up to his expectations, performing so well that their scores were challenged by the AP Board. This demonstrated yet again the low expectations the educational world has for Hispanic students; even when they overcome all odds to succeed academically, their achievements are challenged rather than celebrated. This attitude is also evident in Rodriguez's (1983) memoir Hunger for Memory: the Education of Richard Rodriguez, which tells how at every stage of his education he was asked to explain his success, and in which his advancement in higher education was attributed by some to affirmative action rather than to his intelligence and hard work (Rodriguez, 1983). Rodriguez is representative of the small number of students who excel despite the biased expectations they encounter. The majority of Hispanic students, as demonstrated by

the Garfield and other similar programs, fail to thrive in school until educators place high expectations on them and give them the encouragement and quality of instruction necessary to meet their goals.

Inappropriate Assessment Instruments

Due to the problems associated with subjective teacher evaluations of Hispanic students, the use of objective, standardized tests has been proposed as a fair method of evaluation. Unfortunately, neither standardized tests to evaluate children's abilities or college entrance examinations are truly objective. The vast majority of standard evaluations such as IQ, reading, language, and articulation tests were developed using only middle or upper class White children (Durán, 1988). Thus the content material, presentation style, and sometimes language are biased against minorities, while the norms provided by the tests are only accurate for White children. Nonetheless, either out of ignorance or because appropriate tests are not available, these evaluations are used on Hispanic and other minority students, who frequently perform poorly or outside of "normal" limits. This is perhaps the most frequent cause of inappropriate referrals of Hispanic students to special education services (Durán, 1988).

Although environmental factors, discrimination, and inappropriate testing and placement all create substantial educational barriers for Hispanic students, most investigations have found that linguistic proficiency is the primary factor in

determining their success (Keller et al., 1991). This means that linguistic barriers form the largest obstacles to their advancement in the academic world.

Although some Hispanic children speak Standard American English as their first or only language, approximately 70% speak Spanish at home, (Piatt, 1990) and are likely to have Low English Proficiency (LEP). From the outset these children are disadvantaged by being tested in their second language, since few standardized tests are available in Spanish. Even when testing is done in the first language, it rarely provides an accurate portrayal of LEP student abilities because the tests are generally literal translations of the original English versions.

There are three problems associated with translation of English tests. First, changing the language does not eliminate cultural bias. Children in different cultures are exposed to varying vocabulary and experiences, and thus develop different lexicons. Translated tests still evaluate them on items and concepts which may not be a part of their culture, and to which they have not been exposed. This has been shown to adversely affect test performance (Keller et al., 1991).

The second problem with translated tests is that the strict translation of any text will result in "unnatural and ambiguous stimuli" (Gonzalez et al., 1997, p. 66). While test items contain words within the child's lexicon, they may be syntactically or pragmatically skewed, especially in the case of expressions, proverbs and idioms.

The third problem presented by Spanish translations relates to the diversity of the Spanish language. Hispanic Americans come from various regions of Mexico (60.4%), Cuba (4.7%), Puerto Rico (12.2%), and Central and South America (14.1%) (Lewis, 1993), each of which has unique speech characteristics. Anyone who has experienced regional dialects of English such as Australian or social dialects such as African American English is aware of the confusion which often results from phonological, morphological, lexical, semantic and pragmatic differences. In Spanish, even a commonplace item such as a kite can be translated as "cometa", "papelote", "chiringa" or "papagayo", depending on the background of the translator (Keller et al., 1991). Even greater problems ensue with more complex passages. "Therefore, when assessing the knowledge, etc. of Spanish-speaking students with Spanish language instruments, assessors should determine which errors are due to dialect differences rather than lack of the knowledge, achievement, aptitude, etc., being tested" (Grossman, 1995, p. 199). An additional problem related to the translation of tests is that the vocabulary level of the translated test will rarely match that of the original, effectively nullifying the norms established by the test's authors.

The limited knowledge of Spanish language tests, lack of professionals able to test in Spanish, and the limitations of translated versions create an environment in which few LEP students can demonstrate their true aptitude or achievement. Thus linguistic bias in evaluation of Hispanic students is a major

factor in their inappropriate placement in special education.

Ignorance about Bilingualism and Dialect Differences

In addition to unfair testing, Hispanic students may also be referred on the basis of informal teacher assessments of their academic and social language use. Most of America's teachers are monolingual and have limited knowledge of Spanish or of second language acquisition and bilingual issues. Language use which is normal for bilingual people is frequently viewed as disordered rather than merely different. For example, most bilinguals use language mixing when speaking to others who share the same two languages (Grosjean, 1989). The speaker first selects a base language, and then mixes in the other language periodically. This is done both by inserting intact words and phrases from one language into the other, called code switching, and by integrating single words completely into the structure of the base language, termed speech borrowing (Grosjean, 1989) or code mixing. Although speech borrowing and code switching are valid, normal uses of language, school personnel often misinterpret them as language problems.

Ignorance and negative views about bilingualism lead to unfair assessments and treatment of bilingual students, as expressed by a Massachusetts teacher of LEP Hispanics:

These poor kids come to school speaking a hodge podge. They are all mixed up and don't know any language well. As a result, they can't even think clearly. That's why they don't learn. It's our job to teach them language - to make up for their deficiency (Lippi-Green, 1997, p. 111).

This all too common assessment fails to distinguish voluntary uses of both languages (the bilingual speech mode) from involuntary interferences resulting from the incomplete deactivation of the second language in the monolingual speech mode.

School personnel with some fluency in Spanish but with inadequate knowledge of its various dialects also misdiagnose Hispanic children with phonological variations of Spanish. For example, Puerto Rican Spanish is characterized by the deletion of /d/ following /l/ or /n/ and the weakening or deletion of intervocalic /d/. The /r/ is replaced by /l/ in most positions, and the trilled /rr/ is pronounced as a velar approximant. There are also grammatical variations, including the elimination of the initial es- in conjugated forms of the verb "to be" (Langdon & Cheng, 1992). These variations would alter the standard Spanish sentence: "la puerta roja estaba cerrado" to "la puelta xoja taba cexao." Such language differences are easily mistaken for abnormal phonological processes (consonant deletion, distortion, and weak syllable deletion), unless the evaluator is familiar with the dialect being spoken. Considering the growth of the Hispanic student population and the current over-representation of Hispanic students in special education, it is imperative that educators are given the training they need to accurately assess and place LEP students according to their needs.

Lack of Legislative Protection and Funding

Today, even when students with limited knowledge of English are given correct placement within the school system, they do not perform up to their potential. There is no comprehensive legislation which outlines the rights of these students or mandates the use of bilingual education, so programs vary enormously from district to district. Under the 1982 Equal Educational Opportunity Act:

No state shall deny equal opportunity to an individual on account of his or her race, color, sex, or national origin, by...the failure by an educational agency to take appropriate action to overcome language barriers that impede equal participation by its students in instructional programs (Piatt, 1997, p. 79).

This act, although well intentioned, is far too vague to accomplish much. It does require that educators make efforts to overcome linguistic barriers to class participation, but does not specify which children are eligible, what kind of services they will receive, when services will be terminated, or the source of funding for necessary programs. The inherent ambiguities have created a continuum of services ranging from immersion in a monolingual English classroom with limited special services, to intensive services primarily in the native language. Nearly 34% of LEP students are instructed only in English, and an additional 33% receive only limited services in their first language (Gonzalez et al., 1997).

Although the Bilingual Education Act of 1994 provided funding for ESL and bilingual education programs, and addressed

the quality of services given to most LEP students by listing the negative consequences of their inadequacy, it again failed to guarantee the right to a bilingual education. Thus the special services which LEP children receive are very much at the discretion of individual school districts. The toothless fragments of legislation which purport to provide equal educational opportunities to linguistically different students leave many Hispanic and other minority students without the help they need to advance in the American school system. More than two thirds of all LEP children are denied a bilingual education (Gonzalez et al., 1997), an unfortunate reality which causes most of them to fall behind in course content, develop negative feelings towards school, and for some, to exhibit disruptive behaviors or to drop out of school (Piatt, 1997). Additionally, LEP students who are taught exclusively in English may suffer language loss, and almost invariably have lowered self esteem. When these children enter the classroom and "discover that their language and culture are totally rejected, and that only English is acceptable as a means of communication, feelings of inadequacy and lower self-esteem develop" (Piatt, 1990, p. 44).

Premature Exit from Language Programs

Even for the Hispanic students lucky enough to be placed in high-quality bilingual programs, a successful transition to mainstream classes is not guaranteed. Again, the lack of legislation governing bilingual education is to blame. There are

no national standards or tests to determine when a student is proficient enough in English to enter mainstream classes, so teacher judgement is the method most often used for reclassification (Gonzalez et al., 1997). Most students exit bilingual or ESL programs in two and a half to three years, with a maximum period of three and a half years (Gonzalez et al., 1997), but this period is thought to be inadequate.

Although LEP students usually display good oral communication after about two years of instruction, this is not indicative of the ability to perform well academically in English. Oral communication is "context-embedded", meaning that gestures, facial expressions and contextual clues facilitate understanding. It also contains mostly informal language and discussion of concrete and familiar objects. In contrast, academic work is "context-reduced" and contains abstract discussions and infrequently used vocabulary. Teachers who move students into mainstream classes as soon as oral proficiency appears are only setting them up for failure, since they will have difficulty comprehending readings and will perform below their ability levels on tests. A full five to seven years are required "for language minority students to approach language proficiency levels equivalent to their monolingual peers" (Keller et al., 1991, p. 43). Therefore, it is clear that the two to three and a half years of language instruction currently allowed are not nearly enough to transition students successfully into monolingual English classes.

Limited Availability of Programs

While the lack of program specifications has created unequal levels of services and the lack of exit proficiency tests causes students to be dismissed prematurely, the failure of the government to mandate and monitor bilingual education is responsible for the worst problem: the absence of programs in many schools. This is the primary reason why one third of LEP students are not taught at all in their native languages. It also accounts for a significant portion of the minority students who are misplaced in the special education system. According to the Office of Civil Rights survey and the Office of Special Education Child Count, "districts with the highest disproportion [of Hispanic students in special education] have the smallest proportion of students in bilingual programs" (Durán, 1988, p. 179). Conversely, when special education programs for Spanish speaking children are lacking, Hispanic students with disabilities are placed in bilingual or ESL classes (Durán, 1988). Since the provision of special education is mandated under IDEA (the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990, amended 1997), special learning services must be made available in every school district, but they are rarely available in LEP students' first languages (Grossman, 1998).

Current estimates suggest that there are fewer than 1,000 bilingual special educators to fill 23,000 positions nationwide in which they are needed (Grossman, 1998). This clearly demonstrates the lack of protection all LEP students, and LEP

students with disabilities in particular, are given under the law. While their rights to adequate linguistic and special education services are expressed implicitly in the IDEA, and directly but non-specifically in the Equal Educational Opportunity Act, the past struggles of people of color, women, and people with disabilities have shown that legal rights must be expressed explicitly and in detail before they will be recognized.

Inappropriate Curricula

A final reason why so many Hispanic students do poorly in school is found both in special education and regular classrooms. The use of culturally and contextually inappropriate curricula create an environment in which learning is more difficult and less rewarding for them. Course content, teaching styles, testing methods and classroom management techniques which function well for White students are not always effective with Hispanic children. For example, the emphasis on competition within the classroom, which has been used by American teachers to motivate students, conflicts with the Hispanic culture's emphasis on cooperation. Thus Hispanic students are made to feel uncomfortable and may perform poorly on tasks requiring individual decision making and competition with peers (Dunn & Griggs, 1995). Fortunately, the current trend toward cooperative learning is decreasing the frequency and severity of these difficulties.

Another common difficulty relating to cultural differences is that due to different time management practices and perception of time, Hispanic students often perform poorly on time based tests. Many other differences exist between the home cultures of Hispanic students and the mainstream school culture, and teachers should be aware of these variations so that they can make accommodations for them and avoid misunderstandings. School personnel need not (and could not) alter everything which is culturally unfamiliar to Hispanic students. They should, however, make sufficient accommodations so that the cultural differences do not cause culture shock or inhibit the ability to learn.

Along with the problems caused by culturally unfamiliar instruction, learning is also hindered by a curriculum which is extremely contextually removed from students' lives. Some separation of home and school environments is normal for all children, but when educators fail to consider and make accommodations for the vast differences many Hispanic students encounter in their environments, the school curriculum may appear so removed as to be irrelevant.

Unlike many middle-class children, he [the working-class, minority child] goes home and sees in his parents a way of life not only different but starkly opposed to that of the classroom. (He enters the house and hears his parents talking in ways his teachers discourage) (Rodriguez, 1983, p. 47).

The best way to remedy this divide between the home and school environments is to secure parent involvement in the educational process. Hispanic parents are unlikely to be

significantly involved in their children's education for a number of reasons. First, for many Hispanic adults, the roles they are expected to play in the American school system are unfamiliar. Within their culture the functions of the school and parents are sharply defined:

it is the job of school professionals--principals, teachers, and counselors--to use their tools and knowledge to make the best decision for the child's academic success; it is the parents' responsibility to teach them to obey, behave properly, and show respect for others (Lewis, 1993, p. 29).

These expectations are also typical of many White, Black, and Asian working class families. The implication of such expectations is that these parents are often unaware of or unsure of how to fill the active, collaborative role expected of them.

Another reason for the lack of school involvement among Hispanic parents is the low median income level. Almost 24% of families live below the poverty level, and 60% have a household income of less than \$25,000. In comparison, only 7.9% of White families are below the poverty level, and less than 35% have earnings below \$25,000 (Lewis, 1993). Since so many Hispanic parents are working long hours or multiple jobs to survive, their schedules simply do not allow them to attend school functions. The travel distance from their homes or workplaces to the school can be problematic if transportation is not available, and the cost of child care for younger siblings is often prohibitive.

Finally, some parents avoid involvement in the educational process due to linguistic barriers, a lack of formal education, or both. For parents who do not speak English or have had little education themselves, the school system can be intimidating (Durán, 1988). It is often difficult for them to read notices and forms sent out by the district, and communication with school personnel is frequently impaired. They may also feel that they cannot contribute to issues in education due to their own lack of schooling.

If Hispanic students are to succeed in our schools, educators must facilitate the involvement of Hispanic parents despite these impeding factors. Parent involvement has been shown not only to close the contextual and cultural gaps between the home and school environments, but to improve overall student achievement and likelihood of educational advancement (August & Hakuta, 1997).

In addition to improving their own children's education in the short term, involving Hispanic parents in the schools will help them to become advocates for all Hispanic children in the future. Parents are integral parts of efforts to improve schools and create educational legislation, but when they are not involved in the schools they have no way of knowing what their parental rights are or what kind of services are being rendered to their children (Tiegerman-Farber, 1995). They simply do not have the information needed to "defend [the child's] interests, to unionize, to petition, to speak up - to challenge and demand"

(Rodriguez, 1983, p. 138). Only by opening communication between parents and educators will there be a viable force advocating for a better education and equal educational opportunities for Hispanic students.

Part 2: Solutions

We have seen that the low achievement of Hispanic students in the U.S. educational system is due to a large number of external factors which conspire to cause failure, and not to any personal faults or deficits.

Hispanic students who are experiencing failure or frustration in school because of mismatches between their cognitive and learning styles and the teaching styles of their teachers, lack of culturally relevant material in the curriculum, instruction in their non-dominant language, etc., may react to this frustration and failure by loss of interest, withdrawal, resignation, anxiety, rebelliousness. These...problems are the *result* of, not the *cause* of these students' difficulties in school (Grossman, 1995, p. 209).

Limitations of Existing Programs

Many attempts have been made to improve opportunities for these students, but most have been isolated to individual schools or districts, and have focused on only one of the causes. The majority of programs are designed to advance language minority students by eliminating linguistic barriers, but have proven only partially effective. The almost exclusive focus on language proficiency reveals the pervasive assumption that Hispanic students are not succeeding because they cannot speak the mainstream language well enough. This is far easier to believe than to consider that the school system might be at fault, but is simply not true. Based on worldwide research into minority student education by Brumfit et al. (1985) and McGroarty (1986), Handscombe concludes:

It was thought that once students had learned English they no longer would be at a disadvantage and could be fully integrated into the work of the regular classroom. But experience, as well as research...has raised some questions as to the wisdom of putting so much faith in a single solution to such a complex problem (Rigg & Allen, 1989, p. 4).

LETRAS: A Comprehensive Plan of Action

Given the complexity, severity and widespread nature of the problem of low achievement among Hispanic students, it is clear that it must be approached systematically rather than as a single problem to be eliminated. In order to make substantial gains in improving education for Hispanic children, a comprehensive program which addresses and attempts to eliminate *all* the causes of school failure must be implemented. LETRAS is a model for the development of programs to meet Hispanic students' needs. Based on the hindrances to educational success which have been discussed, six target areas for action have been identified.

They are: Legislative action

Early intervention and community education

Teacher training

Relevant curricula

Appropriate assessment

Support from parents

LETRAS is not a program in and of itself, but rather is an outline of the necessary components of a successful plan. Its purpose is to aid teachers, parents, or other concerned parties in the development of individualized programs to better meet the

educational needs of their Hispanic student populations.

Legislative Action

The first, and possibly most important element of LETRAS is legislative action. Although the passage of educational laws is a lengthy and difficult process, especially in the wake of property tax limitations in many districts, it is absolutely integral to the success of Hispanic students in the schools. Without the kind of detailed protection which is given to students with disabilities under IDEA law, minority students will not be consistently and adequately served.

Given that linguistic barriers have been identified as the largest factor in Hispanic students' educational difficulties, the passage of bilingual education laws should be a primary focus of school reform movements. Many schools persist in efforts to promote English proficiency as rapidly as possible, without regard to the development of the first language. Such programs provide little, if any, native language instruction, essentially requiring LEP students to "sink or swim". This approach is not only harmful to children's confidence and self-esteem, but is actually counter-productive to learning a second language. "A student's first language is the base on which the second language is built" (Rigg & Allen, 1989, p. 9), so failing to provide a link between the languages delays, rather than accelerates the acquisition of English. First language (L_1) proficiency is a strong predictor of second language (L_2) development (August &

Hakuta, 1997), so the purpose of teaching in the native language is to promote L₁ proficiency as well as to facilitate second language learning. Programs which include significant amounts of native language instruction have also been shown to promote greater academic success among LEP students (August & Hakuta, 1997).

Almost every study conducted, in addition to the personal experiences of the overwhelming majority of second language learners, have shown that bilingual education is the optimal learning environment for LEP children. If educators know that bilingual instruction can reasonably be expected to benefit these children, why is this chance to succeed denied to so many? Simply put, because it is not mandated by law. There is no shortage of proof that it works, or of exemplary programs; "the tragedy is that we know what to do, but we've yet to master the national political will and financial will to do these things" (Lewis, 1993, p. 56). The right of LEP children to receive a free, appropriate public education (including bilingual instruction) must be secured, just as it was for children with handicaps with the passage of the Education for all Handicapped Children (PL 97-142) in 1975. A language difference is *not* a disorder or disability, but it does constitute a significant handicap to learning in a regular classroom situation. As such, the special needs of children with language differences should be accommodated as are the needs of children with physical, mental or emotional handicaps.

Although bilingual education would be one of the main focuses of legislative action for the protection of minority students, other causes of difficulties in school must also be addressed. Even Hispanic students who are proficient in English encounter obstacles to success due to cultural differences, limited parental involvement, lack of preliteracy skills, inappropriate assessment procedures, and teacher bias. Many of these problems could be reduced or eliminated if parents, school personnel and the public as a whole make the education of culturally and linguistically different (CLD) children a priority, and lobby for the reform of IDEA to include individuals with cultural and linguistic differences under its protection.

IDEA currently provides early intervention, special education and related services, and transitional services for individuals with disabilities. Under the law, an Individualized Educational Program (IEP) is constructed for each child, taking into account his or her special needs and strengths, and promising to provide appropriate services which will allow the child to progress. This individual approach to education is also appropriate for CLD students, whose needs are not being met in mainstream classes. The use of IEP's for these students would allow each child's linguistic abilities, family situation, cultural heritage, and learning style to be accommodated, thus greatly improving their chances of academic success.

The creation of IEP's would also be of enormous benefit to migrant students; provided that the IEP was kept with the

student's family it could be implemented regardless of frequent moves between districts, providing continuity and allowing new schools to begin serving the students immediately.

It is clear that protection under a law similar to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act would be feasible and highly beneficial for Hispanic and other CLD students. All that is required is that parents, educators and others demand legislative action, perhaps altering IDEA to the Individuals with Disabilities and Differences Education Act.

The legislation of bilingual education standards and equal education rights for CLD students will alleviate many of the problems which face Hispanic students today, but the current reality is that "for the majority of Hispanic students, particularly for limited English proficient Hispanic students, a free and appropriate public education has not yet been achieved" (Durán, 1988, p. 182). Until legislative action has achieved this goal nationally, responsibility must be taken by individual districts to improve services to their Hispanic student populations.

Early Intervention and Community Education

At the same time that legislative reform efforts are being made, the last five elements of the LETRAS program should be implemented to make immediate improvements in the school system for Hispanic children. The second element of LETRAS, early intervention and community education, can make both immediate

and long term changes in the lives of Hispanic children and their families. As discussed previously, by the time Hispanic children enter school, many are already educationally disadvantaged by poverty and its associated problems, and by limited preliteracy skills. If these at-risk children are not identified until their school years, then even if they receive optimal services they are destined to play "catch up" for a number of years. For this reason, National Education Goal 1 is that by the year 2000, all students should enter school at age 5 ready to learn (Odden, 1995). In order to reach this goal, at-risk children need to be identified early, thereby reducing later educational difficulties.

For an early intervention program to be successful, it must include three approaches: preschool education, parent education and assistance, and community education. Once at-risk children have been identified, high quality preschool placements should be made available to prepare them for school. The Ypsilanti Perry Preschool Project, a long term study of at-risk children, demonstrated that preschool programs promote educational success and reduce the number of disadvantaged children who require special education. Of the children involved in the study, 39% of the control group were later placed in special education, while only 19% of those who attended preschool needed special services (Tiegerman-Farber, 1995). Despite the cost of implementing the preschool program, overall educational costs were significantly reduced by the project, since less students had difficulties in

school, and fewer years of special education were required to help those who did.

While the identification of preschool children with potential learning problems is preferable to their identification at school when the problems begin to manifest themselves, the prevention of learning difficulties is better still. This can be achieved by improving access to health care for low-income families, and by educating Hispanic parents and communities on the development of preliteracy skills. Although improving access to health care is not within the realm of LETRAS, it is an important step toward the success of Hispanic students. Adequate health care reduces the number of low-birthweight babies through prenatal care, and ensures that children receive the nutrition they need to start school with healthy minds and bodies. These services are not currently available to many Hispanic families due to financial constraints, and so children continue to arrive at school at risk of failure.

Parent education and assistance, along with a developmentally appropriate preschool education, are the keys to successful early intervention. Certain Hispanic cultural practices, while in no way inferior to those of the mainstream culture, have been implicated in Hispanic students' difficulties in the American school system. Parents should not be made to feel that their cultural practices are harmful or should be changed; rather, suggestions can be made about additional activities they can engage in to help their children perform well in school.

The most important of these activities is oral reading. By the late 1950's and early 1960's, researchers such as Fodor, Irwin, and Templin identified the importance of storybook reading in early literacy development (Strickland & Morrow, 1989). Even before infants can understand spoken language, they enjoy the physical contact and sound of speech provided by story reading. As children mature, oral reading promotes literacy by providing "abstract knowledge of the sound and structure of language" (August & Hakuta, 1997, p. 52), as well as vocabulary development and the concept that printed words correspond to spoken language. It also teaches them that reading is an enjoyable activity which can open whole new worlds to them, not a burdensome task applicable only in the classroom.

Hispanic parents are no different from other parents in that they want the very best for their children, and care about their education. For this reason, even if reading to children is not a familiar activity, most will be willing to do it if they understand the benefits for language development and later academic success.

Since many Hispanic families do not own children's books, an excellent way to introduce the importance of reading and to facilitate family literacy is to hold family reading hours at a local library. Early intervention staff would provide information on story reading and other ways to promote literacy, as well as aid parents in the use of library resources and the selection of developmentally appropriate literature. Children could meet by

age groups and be entertained with stories, after which they could choose from a selection of books to take home.

For families who are unable to attend this type of program, other options for promoting literacy need to be explored. These could include neighborhood reading circles, volunteers reading to children in day care or home settings, or even early intervention staff circulating books among at-risk families. Regardless of the method, the goal is the same: for Hispanic parents to realize that they are their children's first and most important teachers, and that making reading a part of their daily routines is integral to the future academic success of their children.

The last task of a good early intervention program is to educate the larger community on issues relating to child care, health, and education. This will only work if pertinent facts are presented in a clear format and in a setting which is comfortable and convenient for community members. One of the simplest ways to disseminate information is through fliers, which should of course be printed in the home language. These can inform community members of free health clinics or vaccinations, as well as educating them on their entitlements to services such as low cost health insurance and prenatal care. By making information available, power is given to the community to give all of their children, born and unborn, the gift of health.

In order to educate and motivate the community about more complex issues, early intervention staff need to find ways to reach large groups of people. Rather than trying to assemble

people for the express purpose of discussing educational issues, existing organized activities such as church gatherings can be used to reach the community. If at all possible, knowledgeable individuals from within the Hispanic community should participate in or run meetings, so that they are seen as a community effort on behalf of children rather than an externally imposed set of expectations.

One of the goals of these meetings should be to expose the current state of education for Hispanic students, and to motivate the community at large to demand changes from policy makers in government. The Education for All Handicapped Children Act was only passed after many years of political activism (Tiegerman-Farber, 1995), so the sooner that Hispanic communities take a stand for their children, the sooner they will be protected by law. Hispanic people also comprise a large portion of the voting population, who, if they are mobilized behind a cohesive agenda of equal rights and educational reform, have the power to bring about local and national changes to benefit their children.

Teacher Training

As Hispanic children and families are being prepared for the demands of the educational system through early intervention programs, teachers must be given the preparation they need to serve this portion of the student population. First, the biased expectations and assessments which hinder Hispanic students'

progress must be addressed through anti-discrimination seminars for all school personnel. Many teachers are unaware of the subconscious prejudices they exhibit, so these must be demonstrated before they can be eliminated. In addition to refuting biased expectations of Hispanic students with facts about their capabilities and reasons for frequent failure, cultural sensitivity training and discussion of the differences between Hispanic and White behavioral norms, parent expectations, attitudes etc. should also be done.

Beyond training for all educators to reduce bias towards Hispanic students, additional training is needed for classroom teachers and specialists such as speech-language pathologists who evaluate and serve LEP Hispanic students. Wherever possible, people who work with these students should know Spanish, but as this is rarely realistic, teachers should at least be required to know about the language and its dialects. Given the limited funds and time constraints of most school districts, extensive foreign language and linguistics education for teachers is not feasible. However, clear, basic training can and should be provided to reduce inappropriate referrals and placements of LEP students.

Critical information includes the role of language mixing, the characteristics of different Spanish dialects, and a contrastive analysis of the Spanish and English languages. The information could be imparted at a weekend conference or even at a standard staff meeting, provided that handouts were made available. Code switching and speech borrowing should be

discussed as normal methods of communication among bilinguals, and it should be stressed that they are not substandard forms of speech or indicators of language difficulties.

Teachers must also be taught to identify differences in speech which are due to dialect variations rather than actual speech disorders. Some common phonological variations of Spanish include deletion of /d/ in medial and final positions in Mexico and Panama, weakening of final /s/ to /h/ in Cuba and Puerto Rico, and substitution of /ɜ/ for /j/ in Argentina (Langdon & Cheng, 1992). Southwestern dialects are characterized by a number of syntactical, as well as phonological variations. These include the use of regularized versions of irregular past participles (ie. *volvido* for *vuelto*), deletion of prepositions, and the feminization of all nouns ending in /a/ (Langdon & Cheng, 1992).

In addition to covering the topic of dialects to reduce over-identification of speech and language disorders, teacher training should include a detailed comparison of the English and Spanish languages. This will enable teachers to identify areas of difficulty due to interference, and to use similarities between the languages to help children learn. The following lists of common errors for Spanish-speaking learners of English, which were compiled by Langdon and Cheng (1992), would be an excellent resource to provide.

Table 1. Common Phonological Errors for
Spanish-Speaking Learners of English

Substitution Error	Example
/s/ for /z/	sebra for zebra
/ʃ/ for /tʃ/	shair for chair
/tʃ/ for /ʃ/	chip for ship
/d/ for /ð/	den for then
/t/ for /θ/	tief for thief, bat for bath
/f/ for /v/	fan for van
/b/ for /v/	berry for very, cabe for cave
/u/ for /ʊ/ *	pool for pull
/i/ for /I/	cheap for chip
/a/ for /ou/ *	call for coal
/esp/ for /sp/	Espanish for Spanish

Note. Items marked with an asterisk have been altered. In the original source, the authors stated that /ʊ/ would be substituted for /u/, and /ə/ for /ou/. Based on my knowledge of the Spanish language, such substitutions seem unlikely.

From Langdon & Cheng, 1992, p. 154.

Table 2. Common Syntactic Errors for
Spanish-Speaking Learners of English

-
-
- omission of the auxiliary "is".
 - transference of the possessive form
("the coat of the boy" instead of "the boy's coat")
 - incorrect negative
("he not play" instead of "he doesn't play")
 - incorrect interrogative form
("how the story helps?" for "how does the story help?")
 - incorrect use of pronouns
 - substitutions of prepositions
("in" for "on" and confusion between "of" and "from")
 - word order difficulty with adjectives
("house white" for "white house")
 - lack of agreement of subject and verb
 - omission of "to" in the second verb
 - omission of articles
 - omission of pronouns
("then flew back" instead of "then he flew back")
 - addition of pronouns
("the bird he came, too" for "the bird came, too")
-
-

Adapted from Langdon & Cheng, 1992.

The process of increasing teachers' knowledge about Spanish, its dialects, and how it affects the acquisition of English as a second language will enable them to make more confident and accurate distinctions between language differences and language disorders, as well as to provide better instruction to their students.

In addition to training existing school personnel to provide better service to Hispanic students, the teacher training component of LETRAS refers to the training of future teachers. In accordance with the growing number of culturally and linguistically different students in American schools, "trainees will need to know or learn native languages" (Gonzalez et al., 1997, p. 88). This is not a harsh or unfair requirement, but a simple recognition of the changing demographics and needs of the school population. Monolingual teachers are no longer a wise investment, since additional staff become necessary if they are unable to accomodate CLD children. The education and hiring of more minority teachers is also necessary both to act as role models for minority youth, and to increase the use of culturally relevant curricula.

Relevant Curricula

Despite the best efforts of school districts to train teachers in the fair treatment of minorities, CLD students may still struggle in school due to disparities between their home and school environments and cultures. For this reason, the fourth

goal of LETRAS is the development of relevant curricula for all students, not just middle or upper class Whites. The optimal way to accomplish this is through the use of IEP's for CLD children, but this may not come about for some time. Until then, the development of cross-cultural curricula will benefit all students by widening their world view and understanding of others. Cultural and contextual aspects of Hispanic children's lives can be incorporated into the curriculum by studying the regions their families originate from, interviewing parents on the types of activities and foods which are common in the home, and by using bilingual materials and books by Hispanic authors.

Teachers can augment the curricular changes by adjusting their teaching styles and classroom management techniques to encompass the needs of Hispanic students. The goal is not to completely alter the school system for CLD students, but to engage in mutual accommodation. This means that children must adapt to the behavioral and structural expectations of the schools, but that in return educators will accommodate their different cultural backgrounds and learning styles. Research has demonstrated that "learning styles differ within both the cultural and individual context (Kagan, 1965; Cornett, 1983)" (Baca & Cervantes, 1998, p. 233). Thus modifications made for Hispanic students will also benefit other children who learn differently.

Two modifications which have been recommended for Hispanic students are learning by "seeing, manipulating, and experiencing

concrete objects" (Durán, 1988, p. 201) rather than discussing or reading about them, and the use of more visual stimuli in place of auditory input (Baca & Cervantes, 1998). These methods of teaching allow both Hispanic children and children from the mainstream culture who are visual, kinesthetic or tactile learners, or who have auditory processing problems, to perform better in school.

Appropriate Assessment

The fifth element of the LETRAS program is the use of appropriate assessment practices and instruments. The current use of tests which were not designed for Hispanic students is one of the main reasons they are misrepresented within special education and gifted and talented programs. Ironically, although this is a pervasive and serious problem, it is also one of the easiest to tackle. The first part of the solution is to make educators aware that they should not use tests normed on or designed for White children when testing Hispanic students, and the reasons why such instruments are inappropriate. They should be introduced to the Spanish language and multicultural tests which are available, such as Aprenda, a comprehensive reading, listening and math test which was tested on 30,000 students in bilingual programs and standardized in 34 districts around the nation (Langdon & Cheng, 1992).

The second part of the solution is to work toward the development of more and better tests of all types for Hispanic

students. These should include not only tests in Spanish, but also cross-cultural tests for Hispanic children who speak English. Such tests would contain culturally familiar content and would be normed on Hispanic children.

In order for tests to be linguistically and culturally sound, they must account for the origin of the child being tested and the dialect he or she speaks, so that appropriate vocabulary and concepts are used. The frequent use of translations of tests which were not designed to meet the cultural and linguistic needs of Hispanic children "places the student in double jeopardy - not only will the cultural values of the test remain intact, but there is now the risk that the translation will not be adequate for the target group" (Keller et al., 1991, p. 46). To provide appropriate tests for Hispanic children of differing linguistic and experiential backgrounds, regionally based versions of national tests need to be developed. For example, the lexicon used and items presented on an expressive language test would differ significantly for children of Mexican background living in California and children of Puerto Rican descent living in Florida. Even greater differences could be expected in a test designed for Hispanic students from the Southwest.

In the absence of appropriate standardized tests, teachers can make a number of changes to existing assessment techniques to more accurately evaluate Hispanic students. The first of these is to have a team of professionals assess children, rather than relying on the subjective opinion of a single evaluator. By

utilizing personnel with different specialties who contact a child in various contexts, a more complete and accurate evaluation will be made. This approach is also beneficial because it encourages evaluation of the whole child instead of focusing only on identified deficits.

An excellent framework for evaluating CLD students is portfolio assessment. Rather than referring and placing students on the basis of isolated tests or behaviors, a collection of the student's work is used to measure abilities and determine if special needs exist. Portfolio items need to be collected on a systematic basis by all members of the evaluation team, so that samples are representative of work which is not included in the portfolio (Gonzalez et al., 1997). Examples of work which may be placed in the portfolio include: classroom assignments (which typically constitute the majority of the portfolio), checklists of skills, and observational data such as taped formal and informal expressive language samples in different situations, parent reports of academic or behavioral progress in the home, and videotaped examples of behavior. Other pertinent information, such as standardized and district test scores, results of formal evaluations, and medical data may also be included.

According to Reading Framework (1992), the following criteria should be used to evaluate the portfolio:

- 1) Thoroughness of work samples
- 2) Variety and type of products shown in the portfolio
- 3) Children's generations of ideas and interpretations

- 4) Types of understandings, skills and attitudes exemplified in the work samples
- 5) Examples of transfer between native and English language levels

(Gonzalez et al., 1997). In this way the portfolio as a whole, rather than performances in contrived situations and on inappropriate assessments, is used to make judgements about the child's skills and to determine his or her needs.

Although portfolio assessments provide a more complete, accurate and fair assessment of CLD students' capabilities, the use of standardized tests is legally required for many entitlement and special education programs, as well as district and national monitoring of schools. When such tests must be used with Hispanic students, especially those with LEP, test accommodations and modifications are necessary. Based upon the specific language abilities and cultural experiences of the student, test conditions and content should be adapted to promote the best possible performance.

Some alterations which may be necessary are: a) giving instructions and/or test questions in the native language, b) providing explicit instructions beyond those allowed in the administration criteria, c) using cues, d) deleting culturally inappropriate items, e) omitting concepts to which the child has not been exposed due to cultural and contextual differences, and f) substituting dialectally appropriate vocabulary.

In some cases scoring criteria may even be changed based on the examiner's knowledge of the student's cultural and linguistic background (Baca & Cervantes, 1998) Care should be taken to provide thorough instructions and examples of the desired behavior on tasks which may be culturally unfamiliar, such as retelling shared experiences. All such modifications in test administration must be clearly documented on the test and in diagnostic reports in which it is included. This technique of modifying standardized tests to maximize performance, called testing to the limits, greatly reduces assessment bias and thereby will reduce the number of inappropriate referrals of Hispanic students to special education programs.

Support from Parents

The sixth and last element of the LETRAS program is the establishment and maintenance of parental involvement in the educational process. Many circumstances contribute to the low level of involvement of most Hispanic parents, and so each of these barriers must be addressed to allow them to participate in their children's education. School personnel must actively seek and reinforce the role of the parent in education, and must facilitate involvement by overcoming existing obstacles.

An exemplary program to promote Hispanic parental involvement is currently functioning in Bexar County, Texas, and is a good model for other districts to follow. It is called Padres a la Escuela (PAE), and was begun as an experimental

program to improve the educational achievement of Hispanic students. Schools in the district are underfunded and serve mostly minority children, with Hispanics constituting up to 96% of the student population in some schools (Lewis, 1993). Low achievement and high drop-out rates persisted despite adequate language programs, so the district implemented a trial program to bring parents into the educational process. This was successfully accomplished through six avenues: information, outreach, advocacy, collaboration, trust-building, and leadership (Lewis, 1993).

The provision of bilingual, culturally sensitive information to parents through newsletters, information sheets, community training sessions, and a national parent hotline allowed parents to be informed of educational news and events which they might otherwise have missed due to language barriers or lack of communication with school personnel.

Outreach efforts were designed to address the primary reasons for lack of involvement among Hispanic parents, namely uncertainty about their role in education, inability to attend school functions, and language barriers. The primary method for reaching parents was the home visit. Home visits have many benefits over school meetings: they promote more relaxed and natural interaction between teachers and parents, are less intimidating than teacher-parent conferences (which parents associate with poor conduct or achievement), and allow teachers to observe the child's home culture and family interactions

(Gonzalez et al., 1997). They also overcome scheduling, transportation and childcare problems which frequently prevent Hispanic parents from becoming involved in the schools. Finally, by making the effort to contact parents in their own environment, educators demonstrate that parental input is desired and valued. This contributes to trust building, which is enhanced by providing teacher training sessions on cultural awareness and appreciation of parent participation.

The leadership, collaboration and advocacy portions of PAE were designed to inform parents about educational issues and enable them to become community leaders and advocates for their children. Periodic parent education and leadership training sessions were held to give parents the knowledge they needed, while networking with community businesses, national advocacy networks, and the Mexican-American Legal Defence and Education Fund began the process of educational reform and legislative action on behalf of Hispanic students. For more information about the PAE program see Beyond Barriers: Involving Hispanic Families in the Education Process (1993), by Magdalena Lewis.

Although Padres a la Escuela was very successful in recruiting parents to the educational team, and made significant improvements in the performance of Hispanic students in Bexar County, parent involvement alone is not sufficient to solve the problems which face Hispanic children in education. If the failure of our schools to serve these students is to be solved and not just ameliorated, a comprehensive program of

action involving the all of the elements of LETRAS must be developed and implemented.

Funding for LETRAS

Although the LETRAS model is more complex than most existing programs, it is designed to be carried out at the grassroots level. With the exception of early intervention, the various elements require significant time and planning, but relatively low expenditure. The basis of LETRAS is in education and advocacy, so a few dedicated individuals in a school can bring about significant improvements for hundreds of children.

For example, teacher awareness of cultural and linguistic differences could be increased through information packets or a staff meeting. This would then enable them to make fairer assessments of CLD students, and to increase curriculum relevance by choosing diverse materials and eliciting parent involvement. While these changes were taking place in the school, concerned parents or educators could rally others to demand legal protection for the right of Hispanic children to an appropriate education. Finally, the legislative changes brought about by this lobbying would secure funding for more extensive efforts, including early intervention programs, language training for teachers, and new test development. This demonstrates how initial grassroots efforts requiring minimal financial outlay can eventually secure extensive government funding and protection for Hispanic students.

Conclusion

By addressing the numerous economic, cultural, social, and political factors which contribute to the failure of the school system to meet the needs of Hispanic children, LETRAS provides a framework for the development of adequate programs to meet their needs. It stresses the importance of approaching each student as an individual with special needs, and of viewing educational problems globally rather than in isolation.

The success of LETRAS is dependent on the first element: legislative action. While a great deal of progress can be made at the local level by concerned citizens, as described in the funding section, the program cannot be initialized in its entirety without laws mandating the provision of services to culturally and linguistically different children. This legislative protection is also necessary to ensure a free, appropriate public education to all Hispanic and other CLD students nationwide, regardless of local financial resources or public sentiment.

"For these are *all* our children...we will all profit
by or all pay for whatever they become." James Baldwin

Appendix: Specialized Vocabulary

bilingual education: an educational program in which two languages are used for instruction, and in which each is used approximately 50% of the time.

CLD: Culturally and Linguistically Different.

code mixing (speech borrowing): bilingual speech mode in which words or phrases from one language are assimilated into the grammatical and morphological structures of another language.

code switching: bilingual speech mode in which words or segments of speech are inserted into another language without alteration.

ESL: English as a Second Language. Educational programs designed to teach English to speakers of other languages, which may or may not contain native language instruction.

IDEA - Individuals with Disabilities Act.

IEP: Individual Education Plan.

language loss: a phenomenon in which proficiency in a language is lost due to reduced exposure and use.

language mixing: general term for the use of elements of two languages for communication by bilingual speakers when conversing with other bilinguals. Includes code mixing and code switching.

LEP: Low/Limited English Proficiency.

LETRAS: Legislative Action
Early Intervention and Community Education
Teacher Training
Relevant Curricula
Appropriate Assessment
Support from Parents

PAE: Padres A la Escuela.

pragmatic: social use of language.

testing to the limits: modification of testing to maximize
performance.

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