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Race-Race Initiative Policy:
Education-Hispanic Dropouts

Race Initiative Policy –

Educate – Hispanic Dropouts

The Hispanic dropout mystery

A staggering 30 percent leave school, far more than blacks or whites. Why?

BY SUSAN HEADDEN

The atmosphere at Denver's North High School is electric with the start of a new school year. On a warm autumn morning, teenagers are storming the hallways, all blue nail polish, baggy pants, and promise. Principal Joe Sandoval plays the traffic cop, lassoing a kid here, feinting a punch there, urging one and all to "*¡Apúrate!* Hurry up!" The air at this nearly all-Hispanic school is so charged that it effectively conceals a grim fact: Of the 1,500 students expected to register for school this week, more than 350 have failed to show up. Sandoval has launched an ambitious effort to find them. The odds are great, however, that most of them will never come back.

CHRIS ANDERSON—AURORA FOR USNWR (2)

Shileene Martinez, 14, is thriving in a new program.

North High School illustrates one of the most serious and stubborn problems in U.S. public education. The dropout rate for Hispanic students nationwide is 30 percent—nearly three times the rate for whites and twice the rate for blacks. It crosses income lines, transcends language ability, and persists despite a dramatic decline in the dropout rates for other groups. Most discouraging, the dropout rate for children of American-born Hispanics is even higher than for those born to immigrants, suggesting that the longer a family lives in the United States, the more entrenched the problem becomes.

In an upcoming report, the Department of Education is expected to call for heightened legislative and public attention to Hispanic dropouts. Last week, New Mexico Sen. Jeff Bingaman proposed spending $100 million on prevention programs and designating a federal "dropout czar." The issue is of concern not only to Hispanics. In just eight years, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, Hispanics will surpass blacks as the nation's largest minority group. Already they fill nearly half the desks in many of the nation's urban public schools.

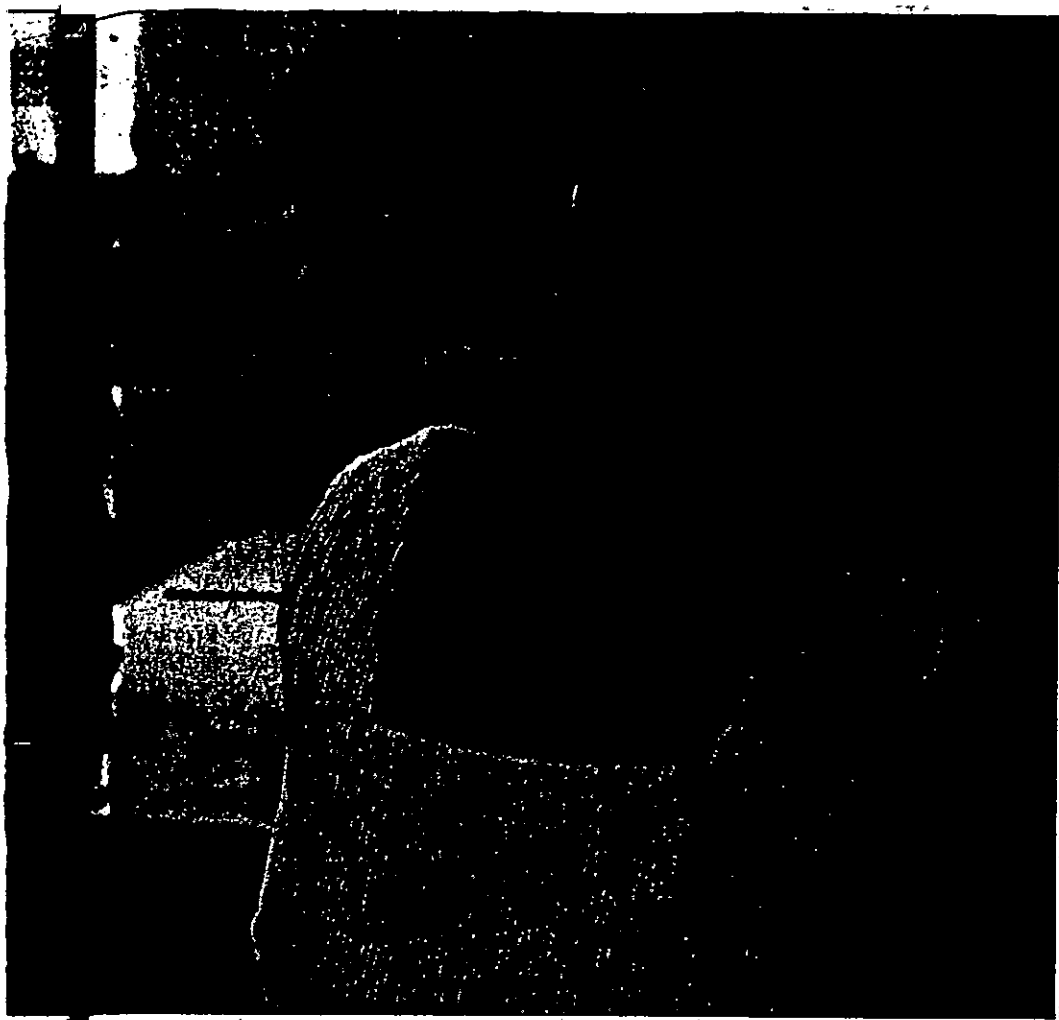
Divergent opinions. Hispanic teens say they leave school for reasons common to troubled students from all ethnic groups: They're failing, they're bored, they're working to support a family. But beyond these factors, opinions diverge about why Latino dropout rates have been persistently high for the past 25 years. Hispanics say that the public schools marginalize them, disrespecting their culture, neglecting their language problems, and setting standards so low that kids can't help but reduce expectations. Others insist it is Hispanics themselves who are giving up on education.

Language is one obvious barrier to Hispanic academic success. Forty-three percent of Hispanic dropouts are foreign born, and many of them don't get special language help. Bilingual-education advocates cite the dropout rate when arguing that more courses should be taught in Spanish; opponents hold it up as proof of the failure of bilingualism to make students learn English.

DeAnza Montoya, 16, says that "In school they make you feel like a dumb Mexican."

But language difficulty is not the only reason Hispanics leave school. Contrary to popular perception, most Hispanic dropouts were born here and speak English fluently. The greater problem—particularly among poor Hispanics, where the dropout rate is close to 41 percent—may be handicaps to learning in *any* language. One third of Hispanic children live in poverty, and like many inner-city children, they start school at a substantial disadvantage: They rarely attend preschool, and their parents, often ill-educated or illiterate, don't read to them.

Poverty also goes a long way toward explaining why Mexican-Americans, Central Americans, and Puerto Ricans drop out of school at rates far higher than, say, Cuban-Americans, who tend to be wealthier and immigrate for political reasons. Schools in rural Mexico are apt to be remote, overcrowded, and limited to the primary grades. Partly because of this weak academic tradition, many Hispanic parents don't demand as much of American schools as whites and blacks do.



Peer pressure to drop out can be nearly overwhelming in the Hispanic community, as DeAnza Montoya, a pretty Santa Fe teen, can attest. In her neighborhood, it was considered "Anglo" and "nerdy" to do well in school. So DeAnza cruised in wildly painted cars with her "low rider" friends and didn't worry about the future. She claims she was simply doing what was expected of her. "In school they make you feel like a dumb Mexican," she says, adding that the slights only bring Hispanics closer together. That fierce Latino loyalty, particularly when applied to family, is an ethic that teachers find hard to challenge. A sound instinct in most circumstances, it can nevertheless prompt a student to leave school for reasons as seemingly flimsy as the one offered by the North High dropout who insisted on working full time to pay for wrecking his brother-in-law's car.

Addressing the problem. Even if blame for the dropout crisis lies with the students, a solution is likely to come from the schools. The black dropout rate plummeted once schools focused on it; to have a similar impact on Hispanics, reformers say, teachers must go beyond the classroom to counsel at-risk students and their families. Teachers may have to speak Spanish and schedule conferences around parents' jobs. Most important, reformers call for more Hispanic role models. The U.S. public-school population is 13.5 percent Hispanic, yet Latinos account for only 3 percent of the teachers.

Programs that target the Hispanic dropout rate are showing promise around the country. Former dropout Shileene Martinez, 14, is thriving at Colorado High School in Denver, which schedules small classes to accommodate students' work hours. In Santa Fe, a mentoring program matches members of the Hispanic business community with at-risk youth. And a nationwide effort sponsored by Coca-Cola enlists would-be dropouts as tutors for younger children.

Should the alternatives fail, administrators might take a cue from Joe Sandoval at North High School. Here, students intent on quitting school must sign a waiver reading: "By signing this, I realize I will not have the skills to survive in the 21st century." They are then presented with a "Certificate of Dropping Out." Occasionally, it achieves the intended effect. One teen, Sandoval recalls, threw the document back in Sandoval's face, shouting "I don't want this piece of s—!" Far from being insulted, the principal welcomed the wayward student back to school. ■