

Creating Opportunities for Latin@ Youth through Evidence-Based Policy

Overview

This policy brief discusses recommendations based on findings from ELAYO* to support youth in reaching their aspirations for higher education and economic security while also ensuring their sexual and reproductive health.

The Issue

Education and civil rights advocates have focused on historically low educational attainment rates among Latin@s**, and simultaneously, reproductive and sexual health, rights and justice advocates have promoted actions to reduce rates of sexually transmitted infections and unplanned pregnancies. The two fields are rarely perceived as interdependent, and thus policymakers often enact on siloed policies in both the education and health arenas. Integrative policies are needed.

Current Promising Trends

- Nationally, a record seven-in-ten (69%) Latin@ high school graduates in the class of 2012 enrolled in college, two percentage points higher than the rate (67%) among their white counterparts¹.
- California's teen birth rate has seen a 59% decrease since 1991. Latin@ youth are driving the teen birth rate reduction even though they are still experiencing a higher rate than any other racial/ethnic group².

There are multiple factors contributing to these trends that require sustained investment:

- Number of Latin@s graduating from high school is at an all-time high (76%)¹, but still low.
- The majority of sexually experienced teens (78% of females and 85% of males) used contraceptives the first time they had sex³, but many Latin@ youth do not have access to them or know what their options are.

It is imperative to address the academic, economic, and sexual health challenges many Latin@ youth face through a multi-faceted justice framework, in order to ensure strong, healthy, productive and economically secure families and communities.

Recommendations and Related Evidence

- 1. Improve Latin@ educational outcomes by addressing socio-economic inequities and providing an array of academic and social support services. These can include increased job training opportunities, increased exposure to college and career pathways, early education programs, expanding mentoring and college access programs that provide role models to all students, and guaranteeing comprehensive sexuality education in classrooms.**

ELAYO youth voiced strong belief in the utility of school and the value of education. Some had plans to go to college, but many were still unclear on how to get there. This knowledge gap is consistent with previous research, suggesting that Latin@ students and their families continue to be less familiar with how to prepare for and apply to college as compared to others^{4,5}. Most of the youth also pointed to financial barriers to higher education, whether or not they had a clear path to college.

Youth see educational inequities contributing to disparities in accessing higher education. Low-income and students of color are less likely to gain access to college preparatory, honors and AP classes than other students, and they are more likely than nonminority students to be placed in the low, non-college-bound tracks, independent of their actual academic achievement⁶.

Most youth, particularly the young parents, showed remarkable resiliency and a strong desire to achieve their dreams - the vast majority was on track to graduate from high school and some had concrete plans to go to college - debunking the dominant narrative. While Latin@ teen parents face enormous challenges to staying in school and graduating; pursuing post-secondary options are attainable if provided with the necessary social support - including affordable, quality child care and safe transportation to go to school⁷.

2. Promote policies and invest in community-based programs that support family engagement by informing students' parents and/or caregivers regarding educational resources, requirements and the educational system itself.

Youth once again confirmed previous research regarding the absolutely vital role that parents and caregivers play in a youth's educational outcomes. Parental involvement has been correlated with better engagement in school and can increase the chances to graduate⁸. Although most youth had parents that were very supportive and encouraging of them to graduate from high school and go to college, fewer parents were involved in their children's educational process. This lack of involvement could be a result of Latin@ parents' own level of formal education, lack of familiarity with the U.S. school system or feeling unwelcome or uncomfortable at their children's schools.

3. Promote policies that better equip teachers, counselors and administrators to deal with their increasingly diverse student body and ensure compliance with non-discrimination laws, particularly directed against pregnant and parenting students.

Many youth shared that teachers and counselors often discouraged them from considering higher education, and therefore they never received the information or counseling they needed. For those who had applied to college or had been admitted to college already, they shared having connection to resources including a family member, a teacher/mentor and/or friend who believed in them and helped them with the college and financial aid application process. There are great inequities in schooling resources for Latin@ students, including over-crowded schools, less skilled or experienced teachers and in many cases teachers who held lower expectations for students of color, which can result in diminished achievement⁹.

While the societal disparaging of young parents is a much larger issue, school-based attitudes and treatment must adhere to non-discrimination laws to create a supportive learning environment for all youth. However, the young parents interviewed pointed to discrimination and stigmatization in both regular schools and continuation schools. They universally expressed the need for role models and support groups lead by current and/or former teen parents who had "made it."

4. Restore adequate funding to youth reproductive health and sexuality programs and services eliminated through successive budget cycles since 2008 and promote policies to spur innovation of programs to address youth sexuality from a non-judgmental and right to know position that combats ineffective messages of stigma and shame, and equips all youth to feel empowered to make the best decisions for themselves.

Youth indicated that sexual activity was mostly framed by parents and teachers as risky, with an emphasis on the consequences of pregnancy or getting a sexually transmitted infection. Important skills such as how to refuse sexual advances or negotiate contraceptive use, is not discussed in many sex education curricula. Punitive messages about sexuality and incomplete information and skill-building, really do impact many different aspects of youth's lives including their agency, autonomy and confidence.

Conclusion

Latin@ youth are becoming California's majority population and will become our future workforce and leaders. For California's health and prosperity, there is much that policymakers and other key stakeholders can do to help Latin@ youth overcome the barriers they face.

Let's connect the dots between sexual health decision-making, educational attainment, and economic security. Better access to contraception, sexual decision-making skills, and teen parent support can ensure retention in high school. Increased funding for college access programs will increase entry to higher education. Youth who go on to achieve higher education will also have access to higher paying jobs resulting in fewer families living in poverty.

*The study was conducted in California with 345 Latin@ youth, including in-depth interviews with Latin@ youth, ages 16-18, in Fresno, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Watsonville to represent youth experiences in both urban and agricultural areas of the state.

**Latin@ is used to reflect the full spectrum of identities in our communities.

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Says Who

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