Overview

In this second policy brief, ELAYO continues the discussion regarding recommendations that support Latin@* youth in reaching their aspirations for higher education, economic security and a healthy sexuality. These recommendations are based on a mixed-method study, where a total of 372 Latin@-identified youth from across California participated in focus groups, in-depth interviews and a statewide online survey to explore how they perceive and handle competing messages about the importance of sexual health, family, and higher education.

Education and civil rights advocates have focused on historically low educational attainment rates among Latin@s, while simultaneously; reproductive and sexual health advocates have promoted actions to reduce rates of unplanned pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections. The two fields are rarely perceived as interdependent, and thus policymakers often enact policies in siloes within each of the education and health arenas. Although there is much to celebrate in current Latin@ educational and sexual health trends – including a drop in unplanned pregnancies, an increase in high school graduation and an increase in college enrollment - it is essential that we address the academic, socioeconomic, and sexual health challenges many Latin@ youth continue to face by enacting integrative policies that address these issues holistically.

Recommendations

In order to ensure Latin@ youth have equitable access to higher education, access to real economic opportunities and the tools needed to realize their full potential, it is critical to recognize the integral role that health, particularly reproductive and sexual health, plays in Latin@s’ educational and economic outcomes. To this end, it is imperative to support policies and community-based programs that provide an array of academic and social support services at all educational levels and to preserve, expand and reinstate funding for youth sexuality programs and services.

Our research outcomes highlight the critical need to promote policies that better equip school personnel – especially teachers - to deal with an increasingly diverse student body and to hold high expectations, respect and support for the future goals of all students, particularly students who may feel discouraged from seeking higher education.

Making a choice between entering the workforce, starting a family or going to college is a consideration among many youth today. It is vital to continue to invest in programs that increase Latin@ students’ college-readiness, enrollment and completion rates while also providing access to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services that can address youth sexuality from a non-judgmental perspective that equips youth with the tools they need to make the best decisions for themselves.
Findings

Educational Aspirations

1. The vast majority of the ELAYO youth research participants voice a strong belief in the value of education, challenging the notion of low educational aspirations often attributed to Latin@ youth.

9 out of 10 youth say they plan to go to college after high school.

2. Latin@ youth report that their parents are very encouraging and supportive of their educational aspirations, including going on to college. Despite these goals and a national record high in college enrollment, where seven-in-ten (69%) Latin@ high school graduates in the class of 2012 enrolled in college,\(^1\) Latin@s continue to have the lowest degree attainment (16%) as compared to other ethnic groups (26-59%).\(^2\)

3. This low number of college completion rates can be attributed to structural barriers, many of which surfaced in the ELAYO research. The top four reasons participants report they may not attend college are:

- Families are not able to afford college
- Want to avoid getting into debt to pay for college
- Not feeling they are “college material”
- Lack of information about how to go to college

Supported by previous research, we believe these reasons are due to Latin@ students and their families having less knowledge of financial aid options as compared to others; having unequal access to college preparatory, honors and AP classes; being placed in the low, non-college-bound tracks, independent of their actual academic achievement and being less familiar on how to prepare for and apply to college.\(^3\)^\(^4\)^\(^5\)

4. ELAYO participants who indicate perceived discrimination from teachers also indicate a lower likelihood of attending college. This important finding supports previous research regarding student–teacher relationships, where negative attitudes or teacher stereotypes of students may weaken bonds necessary for learning, which in turn can result in diminished achievement.\(^6\)^\(^7\)

Healthy Sexual Responsibility

1. Healthy youth sexuality - in which youth have agency and control over their sexual and reproductive choices - is an integral component of Latin@’s future opportunities. The majority of the participants report intentional sexual decision-making linked to future aspirations, which include:

- Purposefully use contraceptives to avoid unintended pregnancies
- Delay sex in order to complete high school and attend college

2. There are indications that some adolescent Latin@s may be more likely to start their families early because they do not have the resources and knowledge on how to enter and finish college. Furthermore, under current systems and punitive societal attitudes, going to or graduating from college and becoming a parent is implied to be mutually exclusive.
The ramifications of these punitive messages are further exemplified in ELAYO findings around adolescent childbearing. Despite having high college aspirations, 60% of youth believe that they might have to quit school if they were to become a parent, suggesting they see little support for young parents.

Youth need to have access to information and resources that address their questions, issues, and concerns about sex, sexuality, and family planning that do not shame them for their considerations or choices, but instead further reinforce and support their future aspirations and goals regardless of their immediate choices or circumstances.

3. California has created broad policies and made great strides in increasing young people’s access to reproductive and sexual health services and support. However, access to comprehensive, confidential, culturally and linguistically appropriate information and services continues to be lacking for many Latin@ youth.

Only 60% of surveyed sexually-active youth had received family planning or sexual health services in the last year.

Despite limited access to these services, 79% of sexually active youth report using some form of contraception the last time they had sex, and among those, 28% report using dual-method protection. This challenges the notion of sexual irresponsibility often attributed to Latin@ youth.

4. Participants report obtaining information on sexual health education from school and parents/guardians.

- Some ELAYO youth indicate school is a primary source for obtaining information about an array of topics. However, the low percentages reported (less than 50% for all topics shown in Figure 1) reflect that the California statute on sexual health education is not being properly implemented and is failing to provide very important and critical information to all California youth. This data also indicates that narrowly focusing on birth control and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) excludes other concerns of Latin@ youth sexual and reproductive lives that are equally as important to them, including having healthy relationships, exploring their sexuality, and pleasure.

- Youth report that parents/guardians engage in important discussions around sexuality topics - dismantling the commonly held perception that Latin@ parents do not consider engaging in conversations regarding sexuality with their children important. To further expand these conversations, it is important to provide parents with tools that build their knowledge about how to initiate these discussions and the technical characteristics of contraceptives and the transmission routes of STIs.

![Figure 1: Where ELAYO youth get their sexual health information](image-url)
Although providers were not a primary source of information for many of our youth, they can potentially play a transformative role in delivering non-judgmental services and information to youth – especially when young people are not receiving this instruction at their schools or from their parents/guardians.

Conclusion

The data from this research reinforces that Latin@ families’ values around education are the same as other groups – they want their children to pursue higher education and Latin@ youth have aspirations to continue their education. The data from this research also shows that many youth lack access to accurate or adequate information about sexuality, sexual health and sexual decision-making, which may affect their decisions or planning for continuing their education. We must ensure that programs aiming to increase Latin@ educational attainment are not reinforcing punitive messaging around sexual-decision making. All Latin@ youth – whether sexually active, pregnant, parenting, or not – deserve respect and have a right to a quality education and well-paid career, to quality health care services, to parent with dignity if and when they decide to have children, and to be able to reach their goals, dreams, and aspirations. Information on and access to all contraceptive methods, comprehensive sexuality education, support from teachers and other important adults in their lives and providing clear pathways to college and/or other career opportunities, are issues to be thought of as part of healthy youth development. California policies must turn attention to addressing the multiple realities that surround Latin@ youth's lives and ensure they have equitable access to opportunities, resources and information in order to continue to improve the health, educational and economic outcomes of our future leaders.

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

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2) Degree attainment rates among California adults (25-64) U.S. Census Bureau 2008-2010, American Community Survey PUMS File
4) University of California (2004). UC Eligibility and Admissions Study Group Final Report
5) Geiser and Santelices (2006). The Role of Advanced Placement and Honors Courses in College Admissions
8) California State Education Code 51930-39 (California Sexual Health and HIV/AIDS Prevention Education Act) and Health and Safety Code 151000-03(Sexual Health Accountability Act) established curriculum guidelines for school-based and other state-funded sexuality education programs to be comprehensive, age-appropriate, medically accurate, objective, equally available to English learners and appropriate to students of all races, genders, sexual orientations, ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and students with disabilities.