

## Why Hispanic Education Deficits Persist

Economist Richard Fry, senior research associate at the Pew Hispanic Center, a Washington think tank, discusses the challenges of improving educational outcomes for the country's rapidly growing Hispanic population.

**Q: How big is the Hispanic student population in the U.S. and Texas?**

**A:** Expanded immigration from Mexico and other Latin American countries since 1980 has greatly enlarged the number of Hispanic students. The nation's public schools educated 10.2 million Hispanics in 2007–08—about 21 percent of all students. White students were about 56 percent and black students about 17 percent.

Hispanic students are already a plurality in Texas. The public schools educated 2.2 million Hispanics in 2007–08, or 47 percent of the state's students. Whites were at 35 percent and blacks at 14 percent.

Because Hispanic students are younger than non-Hispanic students, they make up even larger shares of elementary school enrollments in Texas and the nation. For example, Hispanics were almost 50 percent of Texas' prekindergarten-to-sixth grade enrollment in 2007–08.

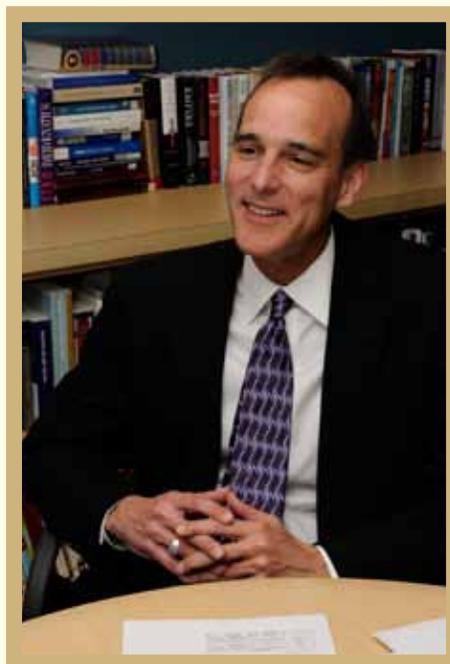
The nation's Hispanic student population will grow rapidly. The Census Bureau projects it will climb 166 percent by 2050, while the number of non-Hispanic students will increase just 4 percent.

**Q: Where are Hispanic students concentrated?**

**A:** California, Texas, Florida, New York, Arizona and Illinois educated seven of 10 Hispanic students in 2007–08—but these six states had an even larger portion in 1990. City school districts educate about 47 percent of Hispanic students, but the Hispanic population is increasingly suburban, dispersing Hispanic enrollments. About 36 percent of Hispanic students are in suburban schools, up from 29 percent in the early 1990s.

**Q: How do Hispanics compare with other demographic groups in educational outcomes?**

**A:** Nationally, Hispanic elementary school



students are already behind academically. According to "The Nation's Report Card," put out by the U.S. Department of Education, about half of white 9-year-olds can perform numerical operations and start solving problems. Only a quarter of black and Hispanic 9-year-olds show this level of mathematics proficiency.

I'm not an expert in early-childhood education, but we know that early academic difficulties strongly predict later difficulties in staying in school. Since 1980, Hispanics have made some progress in graduating from high school, but they still have high dropout rates. Among 16- to 19-year-olds nationally, about 11 percent of Hispanics were high school dropouts in 2008, compared with 5 percent of whites and 8 percent of blacks.

Hispanic college enrollment rates also lag. In 2008, about 43 percent of Hispanic high school graduates 18 to 24 years old were in college. Comparable figures were 54 percent for white graduates and 48 percent for black graduates.

U.S.-educated Hispanic teenagers aren't that far behind their white peers in completing high school. And many of them pursue some form of postsecondary education. The big difference is in completing bachelor's degrees. About 11 percent of Hispanics 25 to 29 years old have finished college, well below the 33 percent for whites and 18 percent for blacks.

**Q: What about Texas?**

**A:** College enrollment is a bit lower. In Texas, 41 percent of Hispanic high school graduates 18 to 24 years old were in college. The state's college enrollments for whites and blacks were also a bit lower—52 percent and 45 percent, respectively. Otherwise, Texas' measures of Hispanic educational attainment closely resemble the nationwide outcomes.

**Q: What are key factors at work?**

**A:** Let's start with the elephant in the room. English proficiency is an important prerequisite to success in American classrooms. Some Hispanic students are English-language learners, and they face the large, sophisticated task of acquiring a second language. The task is difficult, but it should be noted that English acquisition applies to a minority of Hispanic students. Among Hispanic children ages 5 to 9, for example, only a quarter speak English with difficulty. So language is an important factor but far from the only one.

Another factor is disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. I think this is best captured by parental education rather than poverty rates or income. Hispanic students are much less likely than white students to have parents who finished high school—and less likely still to have parents who are college educated.

I'll add one more thing. Hispanic students trail other groups in achievement and high school completion because of where they go to school. In Texas, more than half of Hispanic students attend schools with nonwhite enrollments of 90 percent or more. These schools differ from those educating white students. For example, Hispanic students attend bigger high schools, where stu-

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dents tend to perform less well academically and are more likely to drop out.

**Q: What’s behind the large college gap?**

**A:** One key is academic preparation. Hispanic undergraduates aren’t as well prepared, and persistence in college partly reflects the skills acquired in high school. But equally well-prepared Hispanic and white youths tend to take different pathways.

White high school graduates tend to enroll at more academically selective colleges and universities, which do a better job of ensuring that their students graduate. Hispanic undergraduates are more heavily concentrated at the lower rungs of American higher education—at less academically selective colleges and universities with lower graduation rates.

Hispanic youths enroll in community colleges to a greater extent than their white and black peers. Part of this is geography. Hispanic youths are concentrated in six states with well-developed community-college systems. After accounting for geography, however, Hispanic youths still disproportionately enroll in two-year colleges. Undergraduates who start at two-year colleges are less likely to get their degrees.

College affordability is an issue with some nuances. The largest cost of college is foregone earnings, which don’t vary whether a student goes to a community college or an elite university. If we factor in publicly provided and institutional aid, the net undergraduate tuition across different kinds of postsecondary education isn’t all that different in the U.S. I suspect that’s also true in Texas.

So I think that, aside from the very difficult task of understanding how to increase Hispanic academic preparation for success in college, we need a better understanding of Hispanics’ choice of postsecondary education in Texas as elsewhere.

**Q: Do we see significant gender differences in educational outcomes?**

**A:** Young Hispanic females have made tremendous strides since 1970 and have eclipsed their male counterparts in educational attainment. Hispanic females are less likely than

males to drop out of high school. Among Hispanic high school graduates, females are more likely to be enrolled in college. These gender differences aren’t distinctly Hispanic. Young women of all racial and ethnic identities have eclipsed males in many educational measures.

I don’t think we have a full explanation for women’s ascendance in U.S. schooling. One factor is motherhood. Young mothers are much less likely to be enrolled in school than women of similar age without parenting responsibilities. Since 1970, young motherhood has declined among Hispanic females, and this is clearly associated with the falling dropout rates. However, most Hispanic female dropouts aren’t mothers, so other factors come into play.

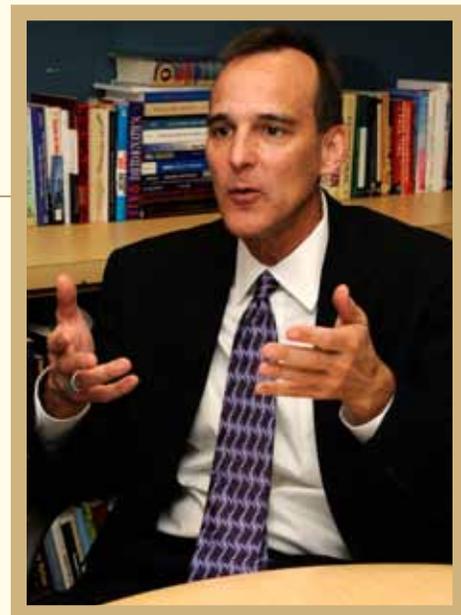
**Q: What role does immigration play in the lower educational outcomes among Hispanics?**

**A:** Most Hispanic immigrants arrive in the U.S. as adults. Their education reflects the schooling they received in their home countries. On average, they’re much less educated than U.S.-born adults.

We really haven’t seen increases in the number of students who are immigrants themselves, so immigration can’t directly explain the educational performance of Hispanic children and youths.

Among Texas Hispanics, 45 percent of the 5.7 million adults are immigrants, while fewer than 8 percent of the 3.1 million children are immigrants. Most Hispanic kids in Texas started school in the U.S. Their performance reflects their education in Texas schools, not schools in Mexico and countries in Central and South America.

Immigrants are often young adults in their family-forming years. In 1980, 30 percent of Hispanic children were the U.S.-born offspring of immigrant parents, or second generation. By 2007, the share had grown to 52 percent. The rise of the second generation implies that more students speak Spanish at home and are exposed to English primarily when they start kindergarten. It also implies that more students have parents who were educated outside the U.S. and who lack familiarity with the practices and pathways of American education.



**Q: What are the consequences of Hispanics’ lower educational levels—for them and society at large?**

**A:** The impact of education on wage rates, unemployment and other aspects of work is well known. The typical 25- to 34-year-old Hispanic male with a high school education earns about \$25,000 per year. His college-educated counterpart makes about \$46,000.

But education is associated with many aspects of life beyond the labor market. More education increases the likelihood of voting and participating in civic activities. Less education is strongly related to the likelihood of engaging in crime and interacting with the justice system.

Finally, education is strongly related to marriage and family life. In 1970, native-born Hispanic high school dropouts were just as likely as native-born Hispanic college graduates to be married. No longer. Among native-born Hispanic women, 46 percent of dropouts are married, compared with 61 percent of college graduates.

As for the economy, Hispanics are a young enough and big enough population to make a big impact on our labor force. The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects labor force growth of 45 million workers by 2050—of which 27 million will be Hispanic. A large share of the additional Hispanic workers will be U.S. educated. Whether we continue to have a more-educated workforce depends in part on increasing the education and skills of Hispanic youths.