



# Helping Latinas Succeed in School: How Schools Can Address Barriers to High School Graduation

Latinas overall have very high aspirations for academic and career success, yet **41% of Latinas do not graduate from high school on time with a standard diploma.** In their joint report, *Listening to Latinas: Barriers to High School Graduation*, the National Women's Law Center and the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund highlight the many challenges that help to explain this disconnect. These challenges include obstacles that affect both Latinos and Latinas, such as poverty, immigration, and limited English proficiency, as well as obstacles that particularly impact the educational experiences of Latinas, such as teen pregnancy, other family caretaking obligations, and the combined effects of gender and ethnicity discrimination. As a result, despite their high aspirations, many Latinas doubt their ability to reach their goals and face significant limitations on their choices and chances for educational success. And Latinas who drop out of high school encounter particularly severe economic consequences—they are more likely than their male counterparts to be unemployed, to earn low wages, and to have to depend on public support programs.

It is critical that schools devote serious resources to improving Latinas' graduation rates. There is a lot schools can do to ensure that each Latina student has the resources, guidance, and support she needs to be able to achieve her academic and career goals.

## **Schools should:**


### **Provide support to Latina students to ensure they graduate on time and ready for post-secondary educational and employment opportunities.**

- ▶ Talk to students early and often about their short- and long-term aspirations educationally, professionally, and personally.
- ▶ Provide students with an adequate number of counselors and monitor students' course selections to ensure that post-secondary educational prerequisites are met.
- ▶ Expose students to opportunities by, for example, bringing in outside speakers; taking students on field trips and site visits to expose them to post-secondary educational options and possible careers; inviting college representatives to speak with students and parents; and arranging mentoring partnerships and student support groups.

### **Ensure that school environments are culturally inclusive.**

- ▶ Rigorously enforce anti-discrimination policies and refuse to tolerate discriminatory or offensive conduct by teachers or students.
- ▶ Create inclusive, multicultural environments where programming, activities and curricula incorporate and value Latino history, culture, and identities, as well as other cultures.

August 2009

- 
- ~ Support dual language education for Latino students, for English Language Learners (ELLs) in particular, to build on the existing linguistic strengths of students and allow them to continue to expand their content knowledge rather than fall behind due to time spent exclusively on English acquisition in ESL programs.
  - ▶ Offer quality after-school programs and summer enrichment programs. The extra learning time can offer the support that ELLs need to catch up to their peers both academically and linguistically.

### **Help Latino parents get more involved in the education of their children.**


- ▶ Develop and implement parent involvement initiatives to ensure that Latino parents are encouraged to attend meetings and participate in the school community and are generally made to feel welcome.
  - ~ Have an individual who can translate English to Spanish and Spanish to English attend every school meeting.
- ▶ Conduct outreach to Latino parents, who may not be aware of meetings or the significance of being in contact with their child's school, or who may be unable to attend.
  - ~ Send out flyers in Spanish and English on a regular basis, updating parents about school activities.
  - ~ For students most at risk of dropping out, phone calls and home visits may be necessary.
- ▶ Arrange for guidance counselors or college representatives to meet with Latino parents to give them information regarding graduation requirements, post-secondary education requirements, financial aid eligibility and scholarship opportunities.
- ▶ Schedule meetings with guidance counselors and college representatives at times when working Latino parents can attend.

### **Take steps to help prevent teen pregnancy, as 53% of Latinas become pregnant before age 20. For more information on the connection between teen pregnancy prevention and dropout prevention, go to [www.nwlc.org/dropout](http://www.nwlc.org/dropout).**

- ▶ Provide students with comprehensive, medically accurate, and age-appropriate sex education that includes information about contraception, abstinence, and how to avoid sexually transmitted diseases, in a culturally appropriate manner.

### **If students do become pregnant, offer them the supports they need to stay in school.**

- ▶ Comply with Title IX by eliminating discriminatory barriers against pregnant and parenting students, such as prohibitions against continued participation in extracurricular activities and receipt of academic or social honors, policies that do not excuse absences related to pregnancy or childbirth, and rules that treat pregnancy as an ineligible condition for homebound instruction services.

- 
- ▶ Do more to keep pregnant and parenting students in school. For example:
    - ~ Provide access to quality, affordable child care, preferably on-site.
    - ~ Provide free transportation for the student and her child to and from school/day care.
    - ~ Ensure that pregnant and parenting students have a strong support system, including regular guidance from school counselors or advisors, interaction with successful role models, and even a peer support group.
    - ~ Provide referrals or regular access to health care providers, social workers, and other service providers who girls can trust.
    - ~ Excuse absences following the delivery of a child for at least six weeks and for as long thereafter as the student's doctor recommends.
    - ~ Provide homebound instruction services to help the student keep up with her schoolwork while she is out on leave.
    - ~ To the extent possible, be flexible in scheduling a pregnant and parenting student's classes and assignments, and excuse absences of the custodial parent when their child is sick or has a doctor's appointment.
    - ~ Offer a class for pregnant and parenting students (including teen fathers) covering parenting skills, healthy relationships, time management, budgeting, and other life skills and resources.
    - ~ Give pregnant and parenting students consistent encouragement, so they believe they can succeed.

### **Enhance data collection and monitor student progress.**

- ▶ Develop longitudinal tracking systems to effectively compile data on the performance of individual students so that teachers, schools, and communities can easily monitor the performance of all students, including those who are otherwise likely to fall through the cracks. Perform regular evaluations of this data to identify problems.
- ▶ Report graduation rate data disaggregated by—in addition to other categories—gender and status as a pregnant or parenting student, to provide a more accurate picture of girls' educational status and to ensure that resources are effectively targeted to improve graduation rates. Such data should be maintained in a format that can be cross-tabulated for further analysis.

**To download *Listening to Latinas: Barriers to High School Graduation*, or for more information about the dropout crisis for girls, please visit the National Women's Law Center's website at [www.nwlc.org/listening](http://www.nwlc.org/listening).**