

BEST PRACTICES SERIES

Postsecondary Access for Latino Middle-Grades Students

REACHING THE PARENTS OF LATINO MIDDLE- GRADES STUDENTS

Lessons from College Access
Programs



A publication of the PALMS Project

The PALMS Project seeks to improve the life chances of Latino youth by opening doors to postsecondary education. We communicate information about how to equip and support students and their families in the pursuit of education beyond high school. We work alongside secondary schools, college access programs, and community-based organizations that are committed to providing Latinos with an education of the highest quality.

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Introduction

In a recent survey by the Pew Hispanic Center (2004), 95 percent of Latino parents indicated that it was “very important” to them that their children go to college. A study conducted by the Tomas Rivera Policy Institute (TRPI) reveals a similar finding: Of 1,054 Latino parents in Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles, 96 percent said they expected their children to attend college (Tornatzky, Cutler, and Lee, 2002) .

While these numbers support the view that Latino parents have high aspirations for their children, the TRPI study also presented a less encouraging statistic. Sixty-six percent of those parents surveyed failed a “mini-test of college knowledge,” incorrectly answering at least half of the questions about prerequisites and milestones needed to prepare their children for postsecondary education. This gap between aspirations and practical know-how was most frequently observed among parents of low socioeconomic status (SES). Furthermore, researchers correlated lower SES with parents’ increased difficulty in “engaging” their children’s teachers and counselors in the search for information.

The goal of the PALMS Parent Outreach Study, conducted in 2004 and 2005, was to examine how college access programs across the country were working to address this gap in aspirations and attainment. We conducted in-depth interviews with staff from university- and community-based programs to learn about their work with the parents of Latino middle-grades students. We learned that the first step programs took was often to educate parents about the U.S. school system and the importance of serving as an advocate for their children. Subsequently, programs worked to engage parents in the life of their children’s school and empower them to be full participants in the postsecondary planning process.

The programs we studied seek to help parents translate their aspirations into high-impact, empowering supports for their children. In this report, we describe the strategies that postsecondary access programs employ to address the lack of college knowledge and connections to school-based resources among Latino parents. We also provide a summary of the research that informs and complements the findings of our study.

Strategies that Work

Daunted by institutions they don't understand and grappling with the constraints of limited incomes, thousands of Latino parents feel a nagging, daily helplessness to make a significant difference in the life chances of their children. The programs selected for the PALMS Parent Outreach Study sought to address what we might call a "resigned desperation" by making a path for parents to act on behalf of their sons and daughters.

Program personnel often found that at first many parents did not believe that they indeed could play an important role in the process of furthering their children's education. "Parents want to see their kids do well, but they aren't sure how to help. They are intimidated by the school system," said one program director. This uncertainty and intimidation often results in a wider gulf between parents and institutions. In contrast, parents who have an understanding of how to access school- and university-based services, become indispensable allies to their children and to program staff. As another program leader put it, "Involved parents feel more connected [and more able] to get the kind of help that they need for their kids."

During our interviews, we set out to discover how programs foster this kind of involvement and connectedness among parents. We asked questions such as, "What do you do to draw parents in? How do you keep them engaged and active?" We documented several strategies that both address parents' need for information about the educational system and facilitate parents' relationships with school personnel. We saw, in fact, that these two areas are consistently at play with one another, reinforcing the other for better or worse. That is, when parents have information about the school system, they are more likely to seek out the help of school personnel as problems arise. The converse is also true.

When describing how knowledge about the school system impacts parent behavior, the director of a GEAR UP program gave the following example: "We offered a workshop on how to read report cards. When report cards came out, the parents that [attended] called us to say, 'My child got two D's. What can I do now?' They might not know exactly where to go, but they know that they can come to us. Whereas the parents that we never got [to attend the workshop], don't make those calls, or they don't come in."

While the strategies presented here were designed to give parents a greater role in preparing their children for college, it could be argued that, on a deeper level, the strategies actually aim to transform parents' perceptions of their ability to make a difference. One program leader remarked that before becoming involved in her city's program, parents "didn't know they had a voice, and that they can go to a counselor" and request more opportunities for their child. Another leader spoke of journeying with parents "to places where they normally would not go" and seeing them become comfortable in approaching community leaders — even state legislators. We hope the material offered in the following pages will promote a continuing transformation of Latino families across the country.

Strategy 1: Home Visits

The home is a logical place to conduct parent outreach, particularly when working with parents that, for a variety of reasons, don't feel comfortable approaching the schools that serve their children. The home environment can provide a non-threatening space for parents to ask questions and share their concerns about their children's postsecondary education options. Many of the programs we studied used home visits as a means to convey important information about how the family could work together to prepare the children for college. They also used visits as opportunities to build or strengthen connections between the parent and the child's school.

"We'll stick this out"

Home visits play a central role in the Padres Promotores de la Educación program in Santa Ana, California. Through the program, a cadre of Latino parents is trained annually to go out into their community and deliver information about the K-12 educational system and the steps required to pursue postsecondary education. This peer-to-peer approach was adapted from an internationally-recognized health promotion model. Promotores conduct a specified number of initial and follow-up home visits a month, and receive a stipend for their efforts. They also receive ongoing training to sharpen their communication skills and deepen their knowledge about California's postsecondary education requirements.

Promotores often find that, though the parents whose homes they visit sorely need information about the U.S. school system, what they truly crave is the personal connection that the program provides. Since many of Santa Ana's residents live in fear that their undocumented status will be discovered, they limit their interactions with the outside world. As a result, they are alone in facing the challenges of raising an adolescent, and they don't see a way to stay involved in their children's lives. "We tell them, 'I've been there and I know it's hard, but we are going to stick this out because our kids need us now more than ever,'" explains Rosa Harrizon, a leader in the program. Establishing this shared experience paves the way for the messages that follow concerning increased involvement in the children's schools.

"Knocks and Talks"

In Albuquerque, New Mexico, another group of parents can be found knocking on their neighbors' doors. These parents volunteer at Family Centers established at a number of middle and high schools through the ENLACE Albuquerque program. Family Center volunteers serve as resources to students, families, and school personnel. "A lot of times, a school principal will give the Family Center a list of the kids who haven't been coming to school and ask them to make a home visit," says Karen Sanchez-Griego, director of the program. "Then the parents go out and say, 'I'm your neighbor from 8th Street. I'm not a school employee, but I'm here because I'm concerned that your child hasn't been going to school.'" The volunteers then provide the families with the resources needed to integrate the child back into the school.

In all their work with parents, the Family Center volunteers communicate the idea that the school is a place that welcomes parent involvement. "We want parents to know that the educational institution is open to them. They can walk through the school doors, they can ask questions, and they can participate," notes Sanchez-Griego. At a time when federal mandates call for increased parent involvement in schools, this type of message is being touted across thousands of schools in the U.S. The Albuquerque parent volunteers can deliver it with uncommon effectiveness and credibility because of their unique position at the school.

Part of the Family

Through its mentorship program, the ENLACE y Avance program regularly sends undergraduate students from the University of California in Santa Barbara (UCSB) to the homes of the 35 families that make up the program cohort. In their junior or senior year, the UCSB undergraduates commit to working with a particular school-age student and that student's family during the course of an academic year. They receive training prior to starting their mentoring relationship, and they enroll in a sociology course designed to inform and document their experience as mentors. The program also supplies a stipend, provided the students keep up with their mentoring responsibilities.

"Undergraduates spend at least ten hours a week in the mentorship program," says Claudia Martinez, director of ENLACE y Avance. "That could mean making one or two home visits, going to after school tutoring class with your student, or taking your student to visit a college campus." During the home visits, mentors might help parents interpret their child's report card, or emphasize the importance of taking college preparatory courses in high school. The program's parent outreach coordinator, who is also an adjunct member of the counseling staff at the students' school, stays in close contact with all mentors. This link to the coordinator helps the mentors understand their students' academic needs and communicate these to the families.

The home visit often serves as a first bridging activity, breaking down the initial barriers between home and school. The programs in our study often used home visits with the understanding that parents' involvement would grow from that point forward. In addition to using the visit to provide parents with information about the school or about their child's progress, programs also used home visits as opportunities to invite parents to attend school- or university-based events. Receiving a personal invitation made it much more likely that parents would actually show up at an event, thus opening the doors for the next level of involvement.

Strategy 2: Parent-Child Activities

Many parents in the programs we studied felt that their children's growing sense of independence limited the amount of support and supervision that they as parents could provide. As the children made the transition to the middle grades, parents also began to feel less qualified to help with school work that required specialized knowledge. Programs responded to these particular concerns by giving parents and children opportunities to become partners in a variety of learning experiences. These experiences placed children and parents outside of their established, home-based patterns of interaction. As parents and children learned together, they developed new ways of relating to one another and began to see themselves as co-laborers in an educational pursuit. Parents gained the confidence they needed to help with their children's school work, and children began to see their parents as learners and participants in the life of their school- or university-based programs.

A Love for Science

In the Bronx, sixth-grade students and their families get together on a weekly basis to work on hands-on science projects at a reconstituted neighborhood school. After dining together, the families disperse to different classrooms and spend the evening working on science activities that build upon what the students are studying in science class. The curriculum, designed by Columbia University faculty, offers a number of options for extending the learning experiences beyond the school and into cultural institutions around the New York metropolitan area. As a result, many families have taken trips to places such as the New York Botanical Garden and the Liberty Science Center in New Jersey.

The semester-long experience culminates with a special evening that gives families a chance to reflect on their experience in the program and to exhibit their finished projects. "It was unbelievable to see family after family stand up and say how much they love science after being part of this. One father was sobbing," recalls Naomi Barber, director of Bronx ENLACE, the organization that partnered with a local middle school to offer the science program. Barber also noted that the families' positive experience created a "buzz" around the neighborhood and resulted in the school having a large waiting list for next year's class of incoming sixth graders.

Computing Together

Parents at Cesar Chavez Middle School in Waco, Texas also have opportunities to learn with their children in a school setting. Through the GEAR UP Waco program, parents can enroll in ESL, GED, or computer classes that meet in the evening once a week. Child care is provided, but children are also welcome to join their parents as they learn. Working together in a relaxed atmosphere gives parents and children an opportunity to gain valuable skills, and encourages them to seek venues where they can continue to build on those skills.

Matt Williams, director of GEAR UP Waco, tells of a mother and daughter who went through a computer class together. They worked together on the computer to figure things out – whether it be using a word processor, surfing the Internet, or doing email, Williams says. As the mother’s language and technology skills grew, so did her comfort level in interacting with school personnel. This resulted in her becoming familiar with school-based resources, and eventually having her daughter identified as gifted and talented. Her daughter also began participating in additional enrichment activities offered by GEAR UP Waco.

Mother-Daughter Bonding

Several mother-daughter teams can also be found learning together through the Junior League of Austin’s Hispanic Mother-Daughter Program. In addition to other services, the program offers four day-long events throughout the academic year for mother-daughter teams in the program. The kick-off event of the year is a ropes course that allows girls and their mothers work on team building and develop leadership skills. Other events include a community service day, a College & Career Fair, and a day based on the ‘Soy Unica! Soy Latina!’ education initiative. This latter offering covers topics related to peer pressure, self-esteem, and substance abuse prevention.

Each event consists of presentations conducted in English and Spanish, followed by a time for the mothers and daughters to raise questions or voice opinions on the topic of the day. The events “give the moms and daughters an opportunity to talk about some of the tougher issues – like sex education and birth control – that they normally wouldn’t talk about,” explains Rose Escalona, director of the program. “That subject is pretty much taboo in the Hispanic family, so the parents welcome the information that the program provides,” Escalona says. Other discussion topics have included the desirability of attending colleges close to home versus those in other cities or states.

The vignettes above illustrate the impact that shared learning experiences can have on parents and children’s perceptions of one another and of the people that can help them in their pursuit of postsecondary education. “For example,” says Escalona, “if we send home a note indicating that the child’s grades are falling, the mother will meet with us. When the daughter sees [that], she’s assured that her mom is interested in how well she’s doing.” Furthermore, parents make valuable connections to people in the institutions that can eventually help put their child on the path to college.

Strategy 3: Skill development

The programs we studied realize that in order to increase their children's chances of continuing their studies beyond high school, parents need to know more than just the steps needed to prepare for college. To be sure, parents who have information about required high school classes, standardized tests, and financial aid can serve as better guides. Yet, parents also need to be able to build relationships with resource brokers in their communities — people in a position to provide help along the way. These might include school personnel, college admissions staff, or even elected officials. More often than not, however, parents lack the confidence and skills to approach these individuals. In response to this need, a number of programs help parents build communication and leadership skills through structured approaches.

Knocking on Doors

California's Parent Institute for Quality Education offers a nine-week program that equips low-income Latino and other ethnically-diverse parents to take a leadership role in their children's education. Topics covered during the program include the ins and outs of the U.S. school system, and the basics of preparing for college. Paty Mayer, a member of PIQE's executive team, believes the program's focus on action planning is critical to its success. After each session, parents are required to apply the new information in a concrete way. For example, after learning about report cards, parents are asked to calculate their child's GPA based on the grades in their last report card.

Mayer explains that though many of the participants have only a grade-school education, they persevere through the program once they grasp the fact that their children's chances of graduating from high school are bleak. "We raise the level of concern," she says, because parents will act once they know what's at stake. On a testimonial available on the program's website, a former participant recalls that PIQE taught her "to always keep knocking on doors [and that] when one door closes another will open." Her persistence and willingness to continually approach people who control key resources served her well beyond the nine weeks she spent with PIQE. She credits her experience there to helping her obtain legal documentation for her family — and to being able to send her four children to college.

A Forward Thinking Approach

In California's Isla Vista community, a number of Latino parents receive leadership training through the Padres Adelante (Parents Moving Forward) program, a key component of the ENLACE y Avance initiative run by the University of California, Santa Barbara. The program uses a curriculum developed by the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, which covers topics such as parent's rights and responsibilities, the structure of the school system, how to conduct a meeting, and how to make an effective presentation. The program, first run at Isla Vista Elementary School, has now expanded to include a middle school and a high school. Initially conducted by an ENLACE staff member, the training is now run by parents who graduate from the program.

Padres Adelante graduates have found a number of ways to make their voices heard in the community. Several participants formed a task force and met regularly with the principal at Isla Vista Elementary to discuss the need for more nutritious food for their children. The task force successfully advocated to the district for the addition of a salad bar to the school's cafeteria. Parents also met with representatives from a local foundation to express their support for a proposed new neighborhood playground. The grant was approved, due in large part to the parents' role in the process.

Learning a New Language

In addition to its intensive work with students, the North Carolina Math and Science Education Network (NC-MSEN) regularly provides parents with workshops that cover educational issues such as the No Child Left Behind legislation, the North Carolina standard course of study, and changes in state testing policies. These workshops are provided through local parent clubs called Parents Involved in Excellence (PIE), to which all parents with children in the program belong. Associate program director Rita Fuller says that having access to current education language and concepts helps parents feel empowered when approaching school personnel. Having equipped parents to interact with these individuals, the program also provides regular access to their children's teachers and counselors.

A math and a science teacher (and occasionally a guidance counselor) from the local school are assigned to work closely with each PIE club. Because parents have many opportunities to interact with these teachers, they often serve as the parents' first point of contact when their child is having a problem at school. The PIE-affiliated teachers then become a bridge to other staff, guiding parents to the places where they can get the help they need. As a result, PIE parents become willing and able to approach the school, as was the case with the parent who successfully advocated for her child to be placed in an AP course even after the student's teacher had not recommended her. Many PIE clubs have also established a strong presence at their local school, and PIE parents have assumed leadership responsibilities in their PTOs.

An intentional focus on the development of parents' communication and leadership skills is central to the success of the programs discussed above. In particular, these programs see the value of familiarizing parents with the specialized language of U.S. schools and teaching them how to present their concerns to school staff. Other programs saw that offering ESL and computer classes could also help parents to advocate for their children. However, the delivery of workshops and classes was not an end in itself. Programs also provided opportunities for parents to practice their new skills and offered support along the way. Once parents had purposeful and effective interactions with practitioners, they began to see schools as places where they could access valuable resources and take an active role.

Strategy 4: A Liaisons between home and school

For the Latino parents served by the programs in our study, not having a reliable conduit into their children's schools poses a significant barrier to meaningful involvement. Embarrassed or uncertain about how to approach school personnel, parents often rely on their children to keep them abreast of their academic progress. This strategy for staying connected to the school has clear limitations, as it puts the child in the untenable position of having to decide what the parent should or should not know. Programs did a number of things to open communication channels between homes and schools, including assigning a staff member the specific responsibility of providing this connection. These individuals provided a critical link between school and family life.

A Team Approach

The University of North Texas' GEAR UP program employs two full-time staff to serve as community liaisons at the participating middle and high schools. According to program director Aurelio Hurtado de Mendoza, the one-on-one attention that the liaisons provide parents "makes all the difference in the world." Also key to the programs' efforts is the liaisons' ability to speak both Spanish and English and to understand the world in which parents live. Liaisons work especially hard, Hurtado de Mendoza says, to overcome parents' distrust of the school, which they initially see as an arm of the federal government. The fruits of the liaison's labors are evident as parents often call or drop by the liaison's school-based office to discuss concerns pertaining to their children.

When it becomes clear to the liaison that, despite the program's efforts, parents and children are not communicating openly about school-related issues, she has the discretion to call a meeting between a parent and a student. During one of these meetings, a mother was shocked to learn that her daughter had been cutting class to spend time with friends. After the truth came out, the liaison helped develop a plan to get the student back on track academically. It's not uncommon for liaisons to conduct up to five of these meetings per day. Though time consuming, the meetings reinforce the connections between home and school in important ways. "The kids know that the parents and the liaison are a team, so they stop messing up," explains Hurtado de Mendoza. "And the parents can see that the liaisons are there for the well-being of the child."

A Personal Touch

The parent outreach coordinator employed by the ENLACE y Avance program of Santa Barbara, California boasts a unique – and desirable – set of qualifications. In addition to being bilingual, she is a credentialed guidance counselor who has also served as a middle school registrar. According to program director Claudia Martinez, the coordinator's deep knowledge of the school system has endeared her to both the families and the personnel at the school that serves a cohort of 35 ENLACE students. As an adjunct member of the counseling staff, the coordinator is on site once a week, offering individual advising as well as facilitating group counseling sessions for students who are struggling. During her days off site, her

When the 35 ENLACE students entered ninth grade, the program focused on helping them select rigorous courses that would provide the widest array of postsecondary education options upon graduation. The coordinator worked closely with the other counselors to oversee this process. In one instance, her knowledge of a student's history alerted her to a problem that was about to be caused by a clerical error: the young woman was scheduled to repeat a course that she had already passed with an A in middle school. This individual attention to each student has fostered a trust among ENLACE families that results in greater school involvement. Remarketing on the coordinator's influence, Martinez notes "If she calls them to say there's an important meeting at the school, they believe her, and they participate."

Coordinating Connections

Similar to the ENLACE y Avance program, the I Have a Dream Foundation (IHAD) of Boulder County, Colorado works with cohorts of approximately 50 students, or Dreamers, beginning in elementary school and continuing through high school graduation. Each cohort is assigned a full-time project coordinator, whose job is to establish long-term, personalized relationships with the Dreamers and their families. The coordinators also build a strong relationship with the personnel at the Dreamers' schools, and serve as a resource for both students and teachers. Knowing that many Latino families feel reluctant to approach teachers by themselves, coordinators try to scaffold the contact between parents and schools. For example, to encourage attendance at parent-teacher conferences, the coordinators accompany parents during the meeting and provide translation assistance for both parents and teachers.

To encourage greater parent involvement at a particular school site, a coordinator scheduled one of the monthly IHAD parent meetings to take place on the same night that the school was holding a "Family Literacy Night." A typical parent meeting consists of a meal and a presentation on a topic of interest, and childcare is also provided. Once the meeting adjourned that evening, the coordinator invited parents to stay and participate in the school's literacy event. Many parents chose to stay for the meeting and received valuable information about things they could do to support their children's literacy development. "The principal was thrilled to see so many of our parents in attendance," recalls Lori Canova, the program's executive director, "because many of them had never attended a school-wide function before."

The program staff mentioned above serve as important bridges across homes and schools. Critical to their success is an ability to establish a strong presence at the schools the students attend. These individuals almost always have offices on site, allowing them opportunities to interact with teachers and counselors on a regular basis. They also make extraordinary efforts to build rapport with families, often serving as the first school-affiliated employee that families contact for help. Because the parent-home liaisons are well integrated into the life of the school, they can provide parents with information and services that would otherwise be inaccessible. For parents who feel like outsiders when approaching their children's school building, these individuals provide a compelling reason to walk through the front doors.

Strategy 5: Encouraging parent ownership

Many of the programs in our study sought to create an environment in which parents' contributions to program initiatives were as critical as the contributions of program personnel. Trying to stave off passivity and isolation, these programs gave parents important roles to play in planning, managing, and implementing institutional efforts. While certainly not all parents were ready to take on a leadership role, program staff recognized that some parents were eager to extend their influence beyond the sphere of their homes. The parents who stepped up to the challenge often received valuable "on-the-job" leadership training, which served to reinforce their commitment to staying involved in their children's education and in their community.

Exercising "Choosing Muscles"

In 2003, as New York City began an intensive restructuring of its high schools, a group of parents in the Bronx realized they and their neighbors lacked clear and up-to-date information about how to take advantage of the new educational options that were suddenly available to their middle-school children. In response to this need, staff from the Bronx Institute convened a group of parents who had successfully navigated their children's transition from middle to high school, and began developing what would come to be known as Family-to-Family: The Guide to the Schools of Hope. The guide, aimed at families whose children are eligible to attend the 85 new small high schools in the Bronx, is the result of an action research project conducted by staff from the Bronx Institute in collaboration with a steering committee made up of ten parents with children in the Bronx GEAR UP and ENLACE programs.

Parents worked with program staff on researching the content of the guide and making decisions about its organization and design. The guide features an overview of the city's high school admissions process, the research team's findings about what Bronx families want in a high school, and information about the new high schools—all presented in a family-friendly and engaging format. Once the guide is published, the parents will facilitate meetings to introduce the guide to other Bronx families. Meetings will be held in middle schools, community centers, and in the parents' own living rooms. "Our goal is to introduce the concept of choice to our Bronx families, many of whom have no idea what that's all about," explains Naomi Barber, a leader at the Bronx Institute. "We want them to exercise their choosing muscles now," so they'll be ready to use them again when the kids get to college, says Barber.

Reaching the Summit

Parents in Costa Mesa, California, also came together to respond to their community's need for more information about their children's educational options. To complement an existing college awareness conference aimed at Costa Mesa's Latino youth, a consortium of community organizations launched an annual Parent Education Summit in 2002. According to Victor Becerra, director of the ALMA Program at the University of California, Irvine, the impetus for the summit came directly from the parents. "They said, 'these issues that you're talking about in the youth conference are great, but if you want parents to invest in what you're do-

Coordinated by the ALMA Program, the conference involves parents in all facets of planning how to the best provide information about college preparation. Parents participate in a planning committee that makes decisions regarding the summit's content and structure. During the weeks leading up to the summit, parents also help to distribute information about the event in their neighborhoods. On the day itself, a crew of parents greets, registers, and provides childcare for close to 70 participants. When his program took over the coordination of the summit, Becerra says, they sought to provide expertise about higher education, "but we wanted the community to retain a sense of ownership of this activity."

A Network of Help

Fostering parent ownership is also a key strategy of Chicago's Hispanic Math and Science Education Initiative (HMSEI), a program run out of the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) that seeks to increase the number of Latino students entering health professions. Parents with children in HMSEI automatically become part of the program's Parent Network, which meets monthly during the school year and is entirely run by parent volunteers. As an incorporated non-profit organization, the group has an executive board that includes parents and program staff. It also has a number of committees that implement key functions of the program, such as scholarship drives, parent hospitality, and choosing speakers who can address parents' pressing concerns.

Another committee is responsible for organizing parents to assist during the academic enrichment activities offered for students every Saturday. Parent volunteers serve as classroom aides or hall supervisors. Staff members realize that this type of involvement lends an important type of accountability to the program. Deborah Um'rani, director of the office that oversees HMSEI at UIC, recalls a time when it became clear that a teacher hired by the program "really didn't care about the kids." Parents saw what was happening, and the program quickly let the teacher go, Um'rani says.

Working under the auspices of universities or community-based organizations, parents can make unique and valuable contributions to the goals of college access programs. As the examples above illustrate, parents have the motivation, talent, and energy to work to improve the life chances of their own children, their neighbors' children, and their communities at large. Perhaps the greatest benefit that parents experience through these opportunities is the sense of being able to act in the face of overwhelming odds – to be part of the solution. Whatever the nature of their contribution, parents are reminded that they are neither alone nor helpless.

What Research Says

The activities of the PALMS Parent Outreach Study were guided by a large body of literature concerning the role that Latino parents can play in their children's education. We focused, whenever possible, specifically on the actions that Latino parents can take to increase their children's chances of continuing their education beyond high school. The research cited in this section informed our work during key phases, and it bears important implications for the practice of secondary school leaders and college access professionals.

Latino Parents' Aspirations for Their Children's Education

Recent surveys of the Latino community point to deeply-held beliefs about the value of higher education. A study by the Pew Hispanic Center (2004) revealed that the majority of Latino respondents associated a college degree with success in life. Not surprisingly, 95% of the respondents also said that it was "very important" to them that their children attend college. In interviews with primarily working-class Mexican immigrants, Stanton-Salazar (2001) found that parents held great hopes for their children, and that these aspirations were communicated to the children in the form of exhortations to work hard in school. However, these messages did not actually increase the likelihood that the children would succeed academically. As Stanton-Salazar writes, "such a value-centered strategy of supporting their adolescents...did not directly translate into a support system that could yield needed institutional resources and support" (p. 105).

Similarly, in a study of parents' influences on their children's postsecondary planning, Wimberly and Noeth (2004) found that parents' primary contributions came in the form of motivation, good intentions, and encouragement. However, parents were not always able to provide useful information and direction to their children. Tornatzky, Cutler, and Lee (2002) observe that lower educational attainment among Latinos, compared to that of Whites and African-Americans, may signify a lack of knowledge about how the U.S. educational system works. Chrispeels and Rivero (2001) found that, in fact, after receiving classes about the educational system, Latino parents became more active in helping their children realize dreams of higher education. Specifically, parents reported increased levels of engagement with their children and with their children's schools.

What Latino Parents Need to Help Their Children with Postsecondary Planning

In practical terms, Latino parents need to be well-informed about the process by which a young person becomes qualified to go to college. Furthermore, they need to understand that this process should begin in middle school (Wimberly and Noeth, 2005). In a study of first-generation college students, Horn and Nuñez (2000) found that when parents lacked the information and knowledge about what their children need to prepare for college, they were less likely to help them select high school courses or discuss college options. Torrez (2004) found that the parents

of Latino high school students often did not understand the importance of advocating for their children to take a college preparatory curriculum, and their lack of understanding of the school system resulted in their children being placed in basic or remedial tracks.

In a study of how Latino parents acquired information about the steps required to go to college, Tornatzky, Cutler, and Lee (2002) found that parents with greater knowledge about the college-going process were more adept at interpersonal networking. That is, they used effective strategies for engaging teachers, counselors, and college representatives in their search for information. A person's ability to use their relationships, or personal networks, in order to secure valued resources has been described as social capital (Coleman, 1988; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Scholars have also documented the uneven distribution of social capital across society, with people of lower socioeconomic standing often having less social resources and smaller networks to tap into for help (Lin, 2000; McNamara Horvat, Weininger, and Lareau, 2003). Putnam (2002) has distinguished between "bonding" and "bridging" social capital, with the former fostering ties to people similar to oneself, and the latter fostering relations across social divisions. Latino families whose children would be the first to attend college would especially benefit from opportunities to increase their share of bridging social capital.

The Role Parents Can Play in Postsecondary Planning

Parents' roles in their children's schooling begin to change as students enter middle school. Activities such as helping with homework, attending school meetings, and volunteering at schools decline as students leave the elementary grades (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). This change has been attributed partly to parents' belief that they can no longer assist their children with more challenging subject matter and with adolescents seeking greater independence from the home (Eccles and Harold, 1993). However, the fact that parents' involvement is less visible at school does not necessarily imply that they have stopped caring about their children's academic progress. Instead, once children reach middle and high school, parent involvement takes on different forms. It often includes activities such as discussions between parents and school personnel and parents and adolescents about school and plans for the future (Hill and Taylor, 2004). Epstein and Sanders (2002) found that strong academic outcomes among middle and high school students were associated with parents and school personnel discussing the child's schooling and future plans.

Since postsecondary planning often involves discussions about future plans and options, it provides a natural mechanism for parents to be involved in their children's education in middle and high school. Tornatzky et al. (2002) point to four ways in which Latino parents and students can take an active role in preparing for college, long before the final year of high school. These include choosing to stay in school, taking a demanding curriculum, learning about colleges and college life, and finding a way to pay for college. Wimberly and Noeth (2004) specifically recommend that parents should be involved in course selection, interpretation of test information, college admissions discussion, college visits, and financial aid planning. Additionally, Plank and

Jordan (1996) showed that such measures as parent-school communication, parent communication with other parents, and parental encouragement to take the SAT or ACT have strong positive effects on students' postsecondary enrollment.

Encouraging Latino Parents to Become Involved in Postsecondary Planning

According to Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997), one reason parents become involved in their children's education is because they see school involvement as an important part of their parenting role. Because the activities associated with parent involvement change once students enter the middle grades, some parents may not be aware that there are still important ways in which they should be involved. Chrispeels and Gonzalez (2004) have observed that increased knowledge about how to help their children and how the school system works was the strongest predictor of Latino parent involvement with secondary-aged children. Yet, many Latino parents, particularly those who have not attended college themselves, do not understand that their involvement—in the forms described in the previous section—is critical to their child's academic progress. These findings imply that strategies for engaging Latino parents should include education about the need for parents to take an active role in postsecondary planning and about the specific activities entailed by this role.

Parents also decide to become involved if they believe that they have the competence to help their children succeed in school (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1995, 1997; Deslandes and Bertrand, 2005). Many Latino parents are reluctant to engage school personnel, because they do not feel qualified to question those who are in the position of teaching their children (Carrasquillo and London, 1993) and they lack the sociocultural knowledge that precludes participation in formal school activities (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991). Helping these parents gain a greater sense of confidence in approaching the school is critical. This can be done by providing opportunities for Latino parents to develop knowledge and skills—particularly those related to communication, leadership, technology, and English-language literacy. A body of research has linked parents' increased participation in their children's education with the development of these important competencies (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Hyslop, 2000; Quezada, 2003; Scribner, Young, and Pedroza, 1999; Vandegrift and Greene, 1992).

Finally, parents often decide to become involved in their children's school as a result of their interaction with other parents. In a study of parent networks, Sheldon (2002) found that the more connections a mother had with other parents at her child's school, the more likely she was to be involved in her child's education. Likewise, Useem's (1992) study of mothers of middle school children indicated that mothers who were more integrated into informal parent networks, compared to mothers who were isolated, knew more about school policies regarding math tracks and could influence their children's placement. Furthermore, McNamara Horvat, Weininger, and Lareau (2003) have shown that parent networks can serve as valuable sources of social capital, particularly when parents need to confront problematic school situations. This body of research suggests that outreach strategies need to include activities that help Latino parents, particularly those who have been isolated, to connect socially with one another.

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