



Latin Roots is a nonprofit organization created to serve the Latino communities.

Editorial

Dear friends:

In 2004 Latin Roots has transitioned from start-up mode to direct involvement with the problems of Hispanic students in Massachusetts. We began a hectic year by conducting our survey of over 700 8th Grade students in four Lowell Middle Schools in order to help us identify the issues they face both in 8th Grade and in their transition to High School. The survey was made possible thanks to contributions from the Stevens Foundation and Citizens Bank. In addition we appreciate greatly the support of our board member, Dr. Robert Mendoza, who also incorporated the invaluable technical expertise of Dr. David Pittenger, former head of the Psychology Department and currently Vice-Provost of the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. Contributions by Eileen Ceballos, Maria Eugenia Revilla, and Emmy Ceballos were also crucial. With all their help we identified a series of statistically significant results (See "The Lowell Study" later in the Newsletter), which have been put at the disposal of the School District for its planning process, and which we will use to help us design a novel program, called "En Camino", tailored to the needs of Latino students in Lowell.

After discussions with local organizations and with the School District, we then decided to create an independent after-school program that will tackle the problem of low student

performance through a combination of academic work, performing arts, and cultural themes. This decision was motivated by the survey results showing first that students of every background do not feel the current approaches supporting academic performance actually help them improve in school, and second that Latino students value highly their cultural background. With these factors in mind we have been putting together the pieces of a program that will help the students deal with their current problems through established performing arts techniques. We have drawn inspiration from programs like 2050 in Amherst, run by the New World Theater (see later), Urban Improv in Boston (www.urbanimprov.org/improv/urban_improv.html), the Community Arts Center programs in Cambridge (<http://www.communityartcenter.org/sacc.html>), similar programs run by the Cambridge Ringe and Latin High School, and others. We believe the use of performing arts and cultural themes will allow us to capture the interest and confidence of the students, motivating them to improve their academic performance.

In early 2005 we will begin a pilot of "En Camino" in collaboration with the Casey Family Services in Lowell (<http://www.caseyfamilyservices.org/>). We hope to draw from other local resources like the Merrimack Repertory Theater (<http://www.merrimackrep.org/>), and the Mercier Center. To set the ground-work for the program we have counted on the generous help of many individuals, but I would like to especially mention Betty Athanasoulas, Coordinator of our Program Design Committee, for her expertise in blending together so many good ideas. For this and other endeavors we have been supported by an ever growing network of

friends and contributors who also believe that addressing the issues of Latino education is a worthwhile enterprise.

We also held a well attended and very successful 'Tarde de Tapas' Fundraiser in September, and we have just set up our initial website, so for more information about us and our programs, you can now visit us at www.latinroots.us

Leonardo Vivas. Executive Director

More about...

...Casey Family Services

For over 25 years, Casey Family Services has assisted vulnerable children and families. Today, programs operate throughout New England and in Baltimore, Maryland.

Casey Family Services is a fully licensed and accredited non-profit child welfare agency providing a broad range of programs to meet the changing needs of vulnerable children and families. Founded in 1976 solely as a source for long-term foster care, Casey Family Services today offers foster care for children, as well as post-adoption, preservation and reunification services

for families. In addition, Casey has established a number of specialized and innovative community-based programs to help strengthen families and enable parents to provide the healthy, nurturing environments their children need to grow and thrive.

...2050: Assisted Creation for Expression and Performance

Eight years ago the New World Theatre in Amherst, MA, created a unit of performing arts for youth. 2050 is the date when current demographics predict that the U.S. will become a race-blended country. Why not open the minds and hearts of minority youth to this new coming reality? Drawing from several experiences in the Pioneer Valley the NWT convened a retreat of some 50 high school youngsters to think about and then act out what it meant for them to be in a world like that anticipated by the U.S. Census.

Not surprisingly, it has taken on a life of its own. Not only has it gained a place in the performing arts in Western Massachusetts, but more importantly (at least from Latin Roots' perspective) it has also provided a window of expression for troubled mi-

nority youngsters in troubled times.

Every year a group of approximately 50 youngsters from about 7 high schools is selected to participate in a wide range of artistic activities, from dancing to singing and acting. They devote the first semester of the year to exercises in the different performing arts under the guidance either of trained professionals, or of peers who have already undergone the 2050 experience. They also participate in special workshop sessions with professional actors coming to perform at NWT during the year.

In the second semester the main activity is the retreat, modeled on that of eight years earlier. Every year the NWT organizers select a different theme, and all the work revolves around that theme, both from a societal and a personal perspective. At the retreat special speakers set the table for discussing the issues, while participants provide their interpretations through performance, either in writing, dancing, singing or acting. Later, mentors help the participants to improve the quality of their different means of expression. By the end of the week a final performance results from putting together different acts prepared by the youth over the year and at the retreat.

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To send a Gift please complete this form and include with your contribution

Yes, I want to support Latin Roots in it is mission to address the high dropout rates of Latino students in the commonwealth by developing creative educational and cultural heritage programs.

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The Lowell Study

Immigrant Students, Transplanted or Integrated ?

Background

In February 2004 Latin Roots conducted a survey in four Lowell public Middle Schools in order to assess 8th grade students' perceptions of their scholastic performance. The study explored issues identified from programs that have successfully countered high Latino "dropout" rates. It inquired about language, family of origin, school (perception of teachers, difficulty of subjects, post-middle school path, reasons for low performance), perception of culture and ethnicity, career paths, and about special programs to improve performance.

Lowell is a community with a long history of immigration. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, 22 percent of the Lowell population is foreign-born, twice the national average (11%) and also higher than the Massachusetts average (12%). More than 50 languages are spoken in Lowell, including Spanish, Khmer, Portuguese, Laotian, French, a variety of Asian, Pacific Islander, and Indo-European languages, as well as some Indic languages.

Lowell School trends

Like many communities in Massachusetts, Lowell reflects many of the critical aspects of Latino education nationwide. Achievement levels of Lowell students in Grades 4, 8, and 10 are significantly below the State average, and the schools have very high rates of absenteeism, retention, and suspensions. However widespread the problems, Latinos are the most worrisome of all ethnic groups. While

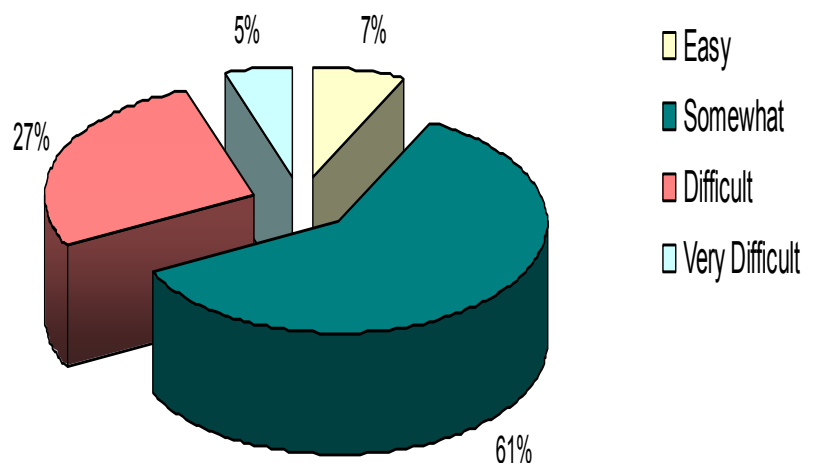
Latinos comprise 17% of the Lowell school district they are over-represented in the negative academic categories. Latinos account for over 29% of dropouts, and about 30% of suspensions, at the high school level. Suspension rates of Latino students in Middle School are substantially higher than all other groups. Attendance rates and academic achievement rates of Latino students in 8th grade are lower than those of all other ethnic groups.

Latino students in Lowell showed the poorest performance of any racial/ethnic category on the MCAS tests. Recent MCAS scores indicate that 73.4% of Lowell students "need improvement" or received "warning/failure" in Lowell as compared to 52.1 % statewide, with 88.1% of Latinos falling into the two lowest categories. Only 53 Latino middle school students of the 296 tested in 2001 achieved the level of Proficient, and only 4 Latino females in grade 8 achieved a level of Advanced in ELA or math on the MCAS.

Results of the Survey

Critical Finding 1 -Why do I fail if school is easy? -The Lowell study reports a gap between students' perceptions about academic achievement and their actual results. No matter their family origin, gender, or school attended, students generally believe the academic disciplines in their schools, including English, to be relatively easy. This perception is, of course, inconsistent with data related to student performance on the MCAS tests as well as other data suggesting that these students express deficiencies in English. In general, trust in their teachers was high, and they tend to perceive them as intelligent, friendly, and accessible, although sometimes rude (to a lesser extent), which overall reflects a positive perception of schools.

CHART 3: Perceptions about school difficulties



Critical Finding 2 - Lowered Expectations for Children of Immigration - The cultural background of immigrant students and their families is perceived both as an advantage and as a difficulty. Aspects like language, family, friends, dance and music are seen as advantages by immigrant students but they also report having experienced difficulties because of their ethnic background. Regarding perception of the future, both immigrants and non-immigrants see college as a likely component of their future, but immigrants show greater likelihood that they will work after middle school, or will enroll in clerical work in contrast to mainstream U.S. students.

Critical Finding 3 - Latinos: An Extreme Case - Latinos group into the extreme set of the data for a number of issues. They do not appear to trust their teachers as much, and are less interested in subjects affecting their academic work. Latinos also demonstrated significant differences from the

rest of the students when asked about their future academic work. Latinos are more prone to go to vocational school, see school as less likely, and have a typically lower rating regarding likelihood of attending college. They also show differences in how they anticipate their life in the future. Latino students tend to see themselves more a part of the family business, working in clerical work, or not going to college than non-Latinos.

Critical Finding 4 -How do you Spell "Support"? -The Lowell study results clearly indicate that Latino students and students in general do not have great confidence in any specified remediation program currently offered to them. This list of offerings includes tutoring, after-school programs, counseling and the "Gear-Up" program.

Although the various programs are rated slightly differently by students at different schools or by the children of immigration, they are all given a low evaluation.

Critical Finding 5 -Parents Make a Difference - The characteristics of the student's family (presence of both parents in

Conclusions for Latin Roots "En Camino" program

1. Given the gap between how easy students find school and their predecessors' actual performance, any intervention should be highly connected to the School curriculum.
 2. As other studies indicate, there are merits for programs specifically targeting Latino students.

3. Given the lack of confidence in special programs, any new programs should tap into the specific interests of students, and should be culture-centered.

