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LATINA EQUITY IN EDUCATION: GAINING ACCESS TO ACADEMIC ENRICHMENT PROGRAMS

by

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Lack of access and equity has long plagued the educational experiences of Latina students. In California, Latinas constitute 43% of all girls in kindergarten through twelfth grade and 50% of the girls in kindergarten. Yet, numerous structural barriers continue to exclude them from advancement. Their dropout rate is three times higher than that of their White peers so that by college Latina students constitute only 9% of female undergraduates in the University of California system. At any given point in the educational pipeline—regardless of how educational outcomes are measured—Latina students do not perform as well as Whites. We argue that the inequities in Latina access to academic enrichment programs and advanced placement courses impair academic performance and graduation rates throughout California's educational landscape.

GATED OUT

California's "Gifted and Talented Education" program (GATE) identifies and labels a select group of students as "exceptional." They enjoy educational opportunities beyond the standard elementary curriculum and participate in a more challenging course of study with a smaller class size. However, there are significant enrollment disparities between Latinas and White females in GATE (see fig. 1).

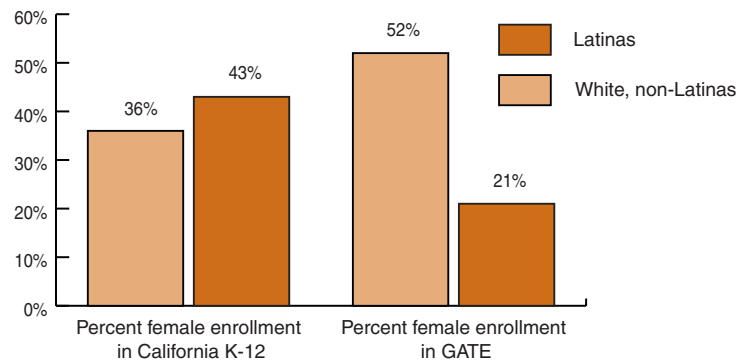


Fig. 1. Latinas make up a high proportion of total enrollment in California public schools, but a small proportion of enriched program enrollment.
(Source: California Department of Education 2000-2001. <http://data1.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/>)

Though Latinas constitute 43 percent of girls enrolled in California public schools, they represent only 21 percent of the females enrolled in GATE programs. Conversely, White females make up only 36 percent of enrolled girls, but account for 52 percent of all girls in GATE.

Important questions arise from these findings. What factors contribute to Latina underrepresentation in GATE? What can we infer from these findings about the educational futures of Latina students in California? Although not much research addresses these questions, we do know that current procedures used to identify "gifted" students are at the discretion of school districts, schools, and teachers, with little-to-no state oversight of

students' eligibility standards or of the re-evaluation of students in the program. Considering enrollment disparities in GATE by gender and race, perhaps it is time to evaluate the program's identification and assessment methods. Without access to such enrichment programs, Latina students are effectively "Gated-Out" from later placement in upper-level math, science, honors, and Advanced Placement courses.

LOCKED OUT

According to the American Association of University Women's report *¡Sí, Se Puede! Yes, We Can: Latinas in School*, "roughly 70 percent of Latina/o high school students are enrolled in classes that will not prepare them for college." Data from the California Department of Education for the 2000–01

school year confirms this report's findings by demonstrating, through "hard numbers," the underrepresentation of Latinas in math and science courses (see fig. 2). The steady pattern of Latina underenrollment in all upper-level math and science courses is dramatic when compared to White female enrollment. Indeed, Latinas are "locked-out" of "gatekeeping" math and science courses that are necessary for college entrance.

PUSHED OUT

The College Board's report of the National Task Force on Minority High Achievement contends that the proportion of Latina/o and African American households in which no parent has a high school diploma is expected to grow from 60 percent in 1990 to 78 percent in 2016. The study concludes

that "the real story here is among Latinos," since the number of Latina/o students whose parents lack a high school diploma will nearly double to 4.7 million.

The California Department of Education's public school dropout data corroborates the College Board's findings of declining educational achievement (see fig. 3). Latina students dropped out of high school at a rate two to three times higher than their White female peers.

CONCLUSIONS

At every point in the educational pipeline, torrential leakages harm educational outcomes for Latina students. We must dismiss the assumption that educational opportunities and facilities are the same for all students from the elementary through the postsecondary levels. Some of the educational inequalities that Latina students face in kindergarten through twelfth grade include the lack of an enriched curricula and qualified teachers, their tracking into remedial instruction, school segregation, and lower financed schools. All of these factors lead to fewer positive educational outcomes. According to Patricia Gándara, "a review of the research on school failure points to a far more intentional system of obstacles placed in the path of students who enter the race full of optimism, but more often than not fail to navigate the hurdles and thus fall by the wayside."

To address these educational inequalities, Jeannie Oakes and her colleagues argue that California schools must implement new and more equitable education policies and practices. Although Latinas/os will become the majority of the California kindergarten through twelfth grade population by 2008, how many will be prepared to go on to college? As David Hayes-Bautista and his colleagues noted fifteen years ago, the future of the state depends on addressing the inequalities facing the emerging Latina/o majority as they enter the California educational system. That future is fast upon us.

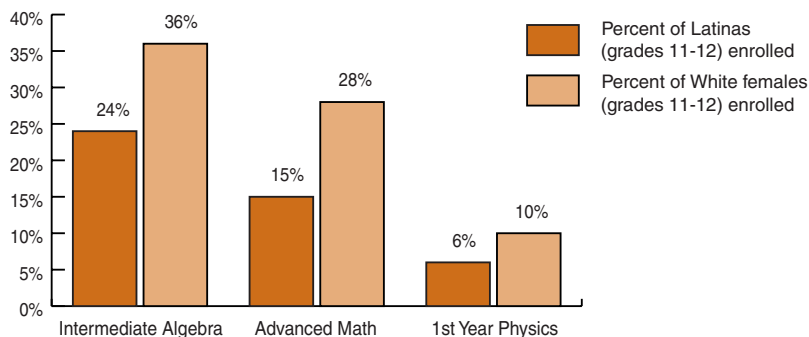


Fig. 2. Less than a quarter of Latinas in California public schools are enrolled in upper-level math and science courses.
 (Source: California Department of Education 2000-2001. <http://data1.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/>)

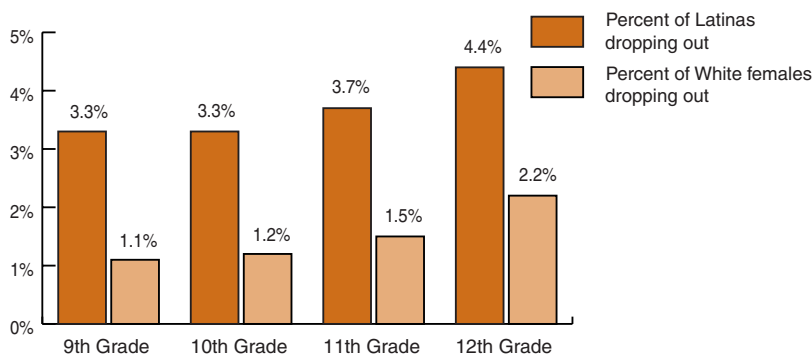


Fig. 3. Latinas are two to three times as likely as white females to drop out of California public schools in grade 9 through 12.
 (Source: California Department of Education 1999-2000. <http://data1.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/>)

RECOMMENDATIONS

To address the connections between the structures of school inequality and disparate educational outcomes in California, a comprehensive study of Latina educational access and equity must seek answers to the following questions:

- What kinds of academic enrichment programs are available at the schools Latina students attend? (e.g. GATE, advanced mathematics, Advanced Placement courses)
- What are the processes that grant or deny Latina students access to these programs? (e.g. identification and selection processes)
- How do these enrichment programs and processes impact college admissions by race, ethnicity, and gender?
- What policies can be implemented to ensure increased Latina enrollment in academic enrichment programs?
- How can schools develop a culture that encourages and supports Latina college-going, rather than remedial tracking and low academic expectations?
- What policies can be implemented to ensure increased access to qualified teachers and technology, intensive academic support, and rigorous academic courses for all students?

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SOURCE

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While Latinas account for nearly half of kindergarten through twelfth grade female students, they remain excluded from academic enrichment programs that affect graduation rates and college admissions.

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