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to Promote Achievement Among
Mexican-Origin Youth**

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How Schools Can Shape Peer Relations to Promote Achievement Among Mexican-Origin Youth

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Synopsis

Research shows that in the aggregate U.S. Mexican youth are completing high school and college in significantly lower numbers than young people from other major ethnic groups in this country. Something happens, or doesn't happen, with Mexican-origin youth that precludes the vast majority from gaining access to college degrees. One important factor in shaping school participation and achievement is the nature of students' peer affiliations and peer relationships. Peers can either be a supportive or undermining force in school achievement. Much depends on the context of the school and community. This brief examines the contexts in which peers are either resources or liabilities, and considers the ways in which schools can shape peer relations to promote greater academic achievement among Mexican-origin youth. Findings and recommendations are drawn from a newly released nine-chapter edited volume entitled *School Connections: U.S. Mexican Youth, Peers, and School Achievement.*

Background

Mexican-origin youth make up the largest percentage of the rapidly growing Latino population in the United States and in California. Because of their numbers, these youth are of enormous public policy interest, and their educational achievement is a matter of growing concern at both the state and national levels. Research shows that in the aggregate U.S. Mexican youth are completing high school and college in significantly lower numbers than young people from other major ethnic groups in this country. Something happens, or doesn't happen, that precludes the vast majority of Mexican-origin young people from gaining access to college degrees.

One factor contributing to this situation is a lack of *peer support*, including the type of *peer relationships* that help to promote academic achievement. Many Mexican-origin students fail to develop close connections in high school with other young people who can serve as academic resources. Too often, instead, peers serve as a distracting influence undermining school achievement. This occurs in part because Mexican-origin youth in many instances feel disconnected from the schooling process. As a consequence, they have little opportunity to internalize the norms and values that can aid their success in school or to make connections with those who can guide their academic progress (see Stanton-Salazar chapter).

This policy brief addresses two key questions overlooked in the literature on U.S. Mexican youth:

In what ways do peers and peer relationships influence the school performance of Mexican-origin high school youth?

In what ways can schools participate in structuring peer relationships to enhance school achievement?

Why Focus on Peers?

We have long understood the critical importance of peers in the personal and social development of adolescents. As Raley (see chapter) asserts, "the ubiquity and force of adolescent social categories and cliques is a common-sense matter taken largely for granted" but often misunderstood and too little investigated in terms of *how these peer groups are shaped by schools themselves*.

Although supportive and trusting relationships with teachers and other adults in school settings are essential, we have found that students' overall sense of fitting in at high school and the manner in which they apply themselves to their studies are also strongly influenced by their peer relationships. Students who experience a sense of belonging and peer acceptance in school are more prone to like school, to be engaged academically, to participate in school activities, and to persist toward graduation. Students who feel excluded or estranged from others in school are far more likely to disengage academically, to act out in class, and ultimately to drop out of high school (Osterman, 2000).

What Have We Learned?

The nature of peer relations: Peer relations come in many types — from comfortable and rewarding interactions with friends ("kids like me") to more difficult, sometimes alienating or hurtful interactions with schoolmates who may belong to different groups ("those other kids"). Peer relationships at school are indisputably important. Moreover, they are shaped to a large degree by the school context itself. Families continue to play a central socializing role in the lives of adolescents; however, for students who need additional help in school, peer support and peer relationships can play a pivotal role, and they are factors over which schools have far more influence than is generally recognized.

Peers as potential resources: Too often, peer relationships are portrayed as one-dimensional, focused on undermining adult authority, and peers are portrayed as "bad" influences. Certainly, there is evidence to support this perception, and Hurd's research (see chapter) on English Language Development classrooms, demonstrates in painful detail how students sometimes perform for their peers, using the classroom as a stage

and disrupting learning. Vigil's chapter also shows how gang members — in the absence of strong relationships with caring adults in the schools — lead each other away from schooling. But the simplistic view of peer culture as solely oppositional to schooling can result in a failure to tap an enormous resource. Gándara, O'Hara, and Gutiérrez (see chapter) demonstrate that *peer pressure* to engage in "risky behaviors" (drugs, alcohol, gangs, sex) is strongest in the ninth grade, when students are just beginning high school, and declines thereafter. But *peer influence* in a more general behavioral sense remains strong throughout high school and can be tapped to support engagement and achievement.

Students care what their peers think and shape their behavior accordingly. If their close peers value school, they are more likely to behave in ways that suggest they, too, value school. If they are uncomfortable with not-so-close peers ("those other kids"), they may adopt behaviors that do not support success in school. For example, they may refrain from taking college prep classes where they will be in the minority and without the support of friends.

At the same time, our research indicates that peers can be a critical emotional and academic resource. Several chapters demonstrate the ways in which peers provide such support. The Migrant Education Program and Migrant Student Association (see chapter by Gibson, Bejínez, Hidalgo, & Rolón) offer examples of how supportive peer networks help some Mexican-origin youth stay on track in high school and point them in the direction of college.

Schools as sites of peer support: As Raley (see chapter) points out, peer relations "are always… implicated in the process of learning." Both Raley and Lewis-Charp, Yu, and Friedlaender (see chapter) demonstrate the power of the school environment or "ethos" on the behavior and aspirations of some Mexican-origin youth. Raley describes a small school "oasis" in the midst of a high-risk urban community where it is more common to go to jail than to college. But this school, organized around a belief that all of its students will be academically successful, provides the context for close and supportive relationships to form. Lewis-Charp and colleagues paint a portrait of two very different schools — one that acknowledges the roles that race and ethnicity can play in social relations and social divisions, and one that does not. The former organizes itself to promote cross-ethnic relationships that provide the opportunity for students to become "border crossers" — individuals who can move comfortably from one social/ethnic group to another, thus accessing the resources available to a wider range of peers. The other school groups students for instruction and for other activities in ways that perpetuate social divisions, competition, and the common belief that only certain groups can succeed.

If schools create niches for students by segregating them according to their perceived abilities and interests, then most students have fewer opportunities to "border cross." Because students tend to choose their friends from among like-ethnicity peers (see

Gándara et al. chapter), their information networks and worldviews are constrained by their own peer group perspectives. This is especially problematic for Mexican-origin students, who for the most part, have less information about how the schools and the broader society apportion opportunity.

Policies and Practices that Make Sense in High Schools

Emphasize community building. All students need to feel a sense of membership in the school community and to belong to some school-organized peer group where they feel safe, respected, accepted, and supported by their peers. Such institutionally organized peer groups need to occur in classroom settings, as well as in extracurricular activities (clubs and sports), and in the broader social life of the high school (e.g., community service activities, mural painting, school improvement projects), and they need to be structured to support high academic achievement. All students, and those who may feel marginalized from the mainstream life of the school in particular, need to be involved. The relationships that students form through these activities, both with their peers and with the adults who guide them, often prove pivotal to their success in school.

Develop measures for school climate. Just as California has instituted a strong academic accountability system, so too it should establish a system for measuring school climate. There is a need to create a strong sense of community in schools, in the way that some sports teams do, where students strive to do well not just for themselves but also for each other, and to help each other succeed. This extended group ethos exists in families and also in gangs. We have seen that it exists in small schools, and in some pockets within larger schools, but too few students participate in these pockets. Indicators, such as opportunities to interact across social and ethnic groupings, integration of *all* students into "extracurricular" activities, school-wide activities that incorporate a representative cross-section of students, and evidence of real academic and socially diverse peer contact in the classroom, should be part of the school's accountability system. And, this should be a system of rewards not just of sanctions.

Focus on 9th graders. Because it is in the 9th grade that high school students feel most vulnerable to pressures to engage in risky and academically undermining behavior, it is critical that schools create mechanisms for students to become connected to academically supportive peers in the first few months of high school. This would mean, for example, organizing classes so that lower achieving students are in real academic and social contact with higher achieving peers—not just sitting in the same classrooms, but participating in well structured, collaborative learning activities. We recommend that all 9th graders have at least some classes that are small (no more than 20 students); this is especially important for students who are English language learners, as well as those who need extra academic support. We also recommend cross-age mentoring, with

consciously structured opportunities for older and younger students to engage in school activities together and for the older students to become role models.

Prioritize social relationships. Provide students with both the opportunities *and the skills* to move in and out of different racial, ethnic, socio-economic, and skill groups as a regular feature of their daily school routine. Schools need to make social relationships among students and between students and teachers a priority. They need to address directly the divisions that exist between individuals from different socio-economic and racial/ethnic groups. Too often schools "turn the other way" in the face of such divisions, denying the ongoing tensions and sense of alienation and marginalization they produce. Through structured group activities within classroom settings and other school activities, students need to learn how to respectfully acknowledge and celebrate cultural differences, how to work collaboratively on school tasks, and how to feel comfortable accessing a wide variety of student networks on campus. Students also need to be helped to recognize how their own actions can contribute to such marginalization.

Structure opportunities for interaction with college-bound peers.   Academic achievement among working-class Latino youth improves when these youth are encouraged through school contexts to interact with college-bound peers, including those from different ethnic and social class backgrounds. Beyond just creating a sense of belonging, increasing contact among diverse students with different aspirational levels increases the likelihood that Latino youth will internalize a college going ethos and develop supportive peer relationships that can promote academic achievement.

Organize small learning communities. In order to foster a sense of belonging, high schools need to organize themselves into smaller communities. Schools within schools, academies within schools, "houses" where students and teachers work together for longer periods of time and get to know one another provide opportunity for greater intimacy and trust among students and teachers.

Identify adult mentors and role models for each student. Mexican-origin students need regular contact with adults in school who understand their lives outside of school, who value their home language and culture, who hold high expectations for their success in school, and who serve as their mentors, role models, and advocates.

Provide institutional support and assistance. Community building needs to be combined with other forms of institutional support such as tutoring, mentoring, advocacy, skill building, and information about post-high school opportunities.

Build clear pathways to college. Many Mexican-origin youth and their families lack basic information about post-high school opportunities because they are not part of the social networks that have access to this information. Such information needs to be embedded in classroom instruction and in extracurricular activities, and it needs to be taught as part of the routine of schooling. Schools also need to help build networks of

Mexican-origin parents who can share information with each other and who can connect comfortably with counselors, teachers, and administrators. This requires cultural and linguistic competence on the part of school staff.

Create "safe spaces." Students who feel a lack of membership within the larger school community may need to spend part of the school day with other students who share a similar culture and background. Creating such institutionally organized and supervised peer groups may be a necessary step on the path to a truly integrated campus.

Increase resources. Implementation of these recommendations will not be cost free. Most cannot be implemented without increased resources to schools—in the form of time for planning and coordination, time for thoughtful interaction with students, increased training of school personnel, and quite possibly compensation that reflects the increased demands placed on those who are responsible for our students' education. They certainly require more staff training, and more informal mentoring time with students. Some of these recommendations can be implemented by reorganizing existing resources, but schools should not be expected to make these changes without increased support from the state. We acknowledge that at this time California faces a budget crisis of unprecedented proportions. However, we need to make a start. The ability of our schools to successfully educate all of our students depends on it.

Acknowledgments

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