

## Economics and Education Hold Key to Progress for Hispanics and Connecticut

You can't separate economic opportunity from educational opportunity in any true assessment of the prospects for progress among Connecticut's Latino citizenry.

More than other young people, young Latinos have high aspirations for career success. Pew Research Center's Hispanic Trends Project found that 89 percent say career success is very important in their lives, compared with 80 percent of the full population of 18- to 25-year-olds. More than eight-in-ten—including 80 percent of Latino youth and 86 percent of Latinos ages 26 and older—say that most people can get ahead in life if they work hard.

Unfortunately, those strong numbers may surprise people. Too often, misperceptions are allowed to shape our opinions and even our policies. There are serious implications, even real dangers, when that happens.

The reality is that economic opportunity – or the lack thereof – undermines the ability to follow through on those core beliefs. The need to care for family too often leaves pursuit of education behind. Even though 89 percent of Latino youth say that a college degree is important for getting ahead in life, the study found that the high school dropout rate among Latino youths is nearly three times as high as it is among white youths and nearly double the rate among blacks. And just under half of Latinos ages 18 to 25 say they plan to get a college degree. The reason most often given is financial pressure to support a family.

Connecticut's demographics are changing, as are the nation's. Minorities are becoming majorities, majorities are becoming minorities – to the point where those terms will cease to have any meaning at all.

Today, Hispanics are 14.7 percent of the state's population, and the percentage among those under age 18 is even higher, 22 percent. The Latino population in our state grew by 50 percent in a decade, according to the 2010 census.

No challenge is more critical than having access to quality education. The education opportunity gap, as I call it, must be closed and our policymakers must stay ever vigilant in ensuring that English Language Learners (ELL) are adequately served. Education has a strong presence the Latino community – but when the choice must be made whether to pursue education or provide for one's family, the preeminence of family in Hispanic heritage makes the decision predictable. Economic necessity prevails. Educational opportunity evaporates.

A survey commissioned last year by the state's Latino and Puerto Rican Affairs Commission found that nearly two-thirds of Latinos said there was a time during the previous year when they wanted to pursue additional education but could not because of the cost. This as Connecticut's Hispanic unemployment rate is the 6<sup>th</sup> highest in the country<sup>1</sup> and the state ranks

---

<sup>1</sup> ACS 2013 1-yr table S2301.

among the top 5 states in housing segregation for Hispanics<sup>2</sup>. In fact, the Bridgeport metropolitan area is the 6<sup>th</sup> most segregated in the country for Hispanics and the Hartford metropolitan area ranks 7<sup>th</sup>.<sup>3</sup>

This is a dilemma that must be resolved, if our community, and our state and nation, is to fully benefit from the talent and tenacity that the Latino community has to offer. It is not the only challenge.

One cannot help but be concerned about the children behind the numbers at the Department of Children and Families, despite their determined efforts. The percentage of Connecticut's children of Latino heritage in Connecticut is 22 percent, yet the percentage of children in DCF care of Latino heritage is 33 percent. And last year, 35 percent of children entering DCF were of Hispanic heritage.

More than 25 percent of Hispanic children in foster care are between the ages of 1 and 5, and another 25 percent are between 15 and 17 years old – the challenge is not dissipating. The percentage that are reunified within 12 months of entering foster care is less than 25 percent – and after two years, the percentage of children who are adopted is only 14 percent.

If we are to solve those statistics, we need touchstones to guide our way. Families are pivotal. Failure to recognize the pre-eminence of family can lead to unnecessary conflicts, delayed decisions, and poor outcomes, ultimately not in the best interest of the child.

The challenges are complex and intertwined, buffeted by the experiences of daily life. Nearly four-in-ten young Latinos – 38 percent – say that they, a relative or close friend has been the target of ethnic or racial discrimination. This is higher than the share of older Latinos who say the same, 31 percent. That would suggest that the problem is getting worse, not better.

Increasingly, researchers are coming to the conclusion that a strong emphasis on family is a net plus not only for the Latino community, but for all of us. In the years ahead, the values, beliefs, behaviors and worldview of Hispanics will increasingly influence the fabric of American life. So it is in all of our interests to figure this out, and get it right.

As we celebrate Hispanic Heritage Month, it is good to look at how far we've come, and how much of the road still lies ahead. In doing so, we recall it was once observed that nothing worth doing ever comes easily. There is no question but that this effort is indispensable and eminently worth doing.

**Note:** Excerpt from speech provided by Werner Oyanadel, Executive Director of LPRAC at the DCF 2014 Hispanic Heritage Month Celebration on Friday, October 10, 2014

---

<sup>2</sup> Downloaded 09oct2014 from <http://censusscope.org/2010Census/>

<sup>3</sup> Downloaded 09oct2014 from <http://www.psc.isr.umich.edu/dis/census/segregation2010.html>