



Giving Hispanic Students a Chance to Succeed from the Start

How Early Childhood Providers and Policy Makers in the District of Columbia can Support Young Hispanic Children's Access to High-Quality Early Care and Education

This brief is part of the Race for Results¹, a series of publications from DC Action for Children that explore how race and ethnicity intersect with youth and child well-being in the District of Columbia.

Introduction

The release of the most recent DC CAS scores reaffirms a troubling trend: DC's Hispanic² students struggle to keep up in school. These discouraging results should be a wakeup call for District policy makers. For Hispanic children, the challenges of family poverty, cultural differences, and language proficiency are often interrelated and pose significant barriers to academic and personal success. The roots of the academic achievement gap are formed early in life; by age five, Hispanic children are, on average, four to five months behind white children in pre-reading skills,¹ and this gap at kindergarten entry accounts for over 80% of the gap in reading skills between white and Hispanic fourth grade students.² By fourth grade, 81% of Hispanic students are not proficient in reading nationally.³ Yet with additional support, we know that young Hispanic children can succeed; research suggests that Hispanic children who attend an early care and education (ECE) program are up to twice as likely to be proficient in English at kindergarten entry as those who did not.⁴ Since limited English language proficiency

upon kindergarten entry is often a significant contributing factor to depressed math and reading achievement during elementary school,⁵ Hispanic children are especially positioned to benefit from enrollment in high-quality programs designed to engage their needs.

Despite these benefits, Hispanic children are much less likely to be enrolled in an ECE program³ than children of other racial/ethnic groups. A recent report from the Annie E. Casey Foundation found that 63% of Hispanic children do not attend preschool nationally, compared with 51% of black and white children.⁶ Even more troubling, research indicates those who speak Spanish as their primary language are least likely to participate in any kind of ECE program.⁷

Since implementing its universal pre-kindergarten program, enrollment in pre-kindergarten programs in the District of Columbia has risen dramatically. According to the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) report card, the District of Columbia has the highest enrollment rates in the country when compared to states.⁸ However, not all populations have benefitted equally from universal pre-kindergarten. The growth of the city's vibrant Hispanic community has changed the face of the city's classrooms and presented new challenges for city officials as

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¹ In partnership with the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Race for Results: Building a Path to Opportunity for All Children is a series, which explores the intersection of kids, race and opportunity.

² In order to maintain consistency with census categories, this brief uses the term Hispanic, rather than Latino. Furthermore, by referring to the Hispanic community in the singular, we do not mean to minimize the diversity in the economic, political and social histories of the District's Hispanic residents. Rather, we attempt to identify and explore the demographic and cultural attributes that are common in this community in order to advocate for the healthy development of Hispanic children.

³ In this brief, early care and education is used as an umbrella term that encompasses programs providing educational experiences for young children before kindergarten entry.

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Interview Subject Profiles

Anne Zummo Malone is the Chief of Schools for AppleTree Early Learning Public Charter School in the District of Columbia. Prior to her promotion to this position, she was the founding principal at Apple Tree's Columbia Heights campus, which serves a large Hispanic population.

Sylvia Harper is an English Language Inclusion teacher at AppleTree Public Charter School where she works to integrate young ESL learners into the school's curriculum.

Dee Dee Parker Wright is the Executive Director of Jubilee Jumpstart, a community-based child development center in Ward 1 with a large Hispanic enrollment. In addition to managing the daily operations of the school's nonprofit childcare center, Ms. Wright also leads the organization's community outreach efforts.

Loudell Robb serves as the program director of Rosemount Center, a community-based child-development center in Ward 1, which serves a large Hispanic population. It is part of the District's blended service campuses that serve low-income students enrolled in Head Start and non-Head Start students.

Carolina Restrepo is a home visiting coach and family support worker for Mary's Center, a non-profit, community group in the District that provides health care, family literacy, and educational and social services.

Hector Busco⁶ works at the District's Office of Latino Affairs, which seeks to improve the quality of life for the District's Hispanic residents through the management of public and private partnerships and expertise on policy, community relations, and civic engagement.

Hispanic students remain underrepresented in pre-kindergarten classrooms in DC. A preliminary analysis⁴ suggests that 28% of Hispanics between the ages of three and four-years-old are not enrolled in ECE programs, compared to 19% of white children and 9% of black children.⁵ With the District's Hispanic population continuing to grow,⁹ the quality of educational opportunities available to Hispanic children, from birth through graduation, will play a critical role in determining the city's future economic and social development.

High-Quality ECE Is Especially Beneficial for Hispanic Students

For Hispanic students, ECE programs offer an important introduction to the institution of formal schooling, an opportunity to socialize with peers, and for those living in linguistically isolated households, may provide the first opportunity to learn English.¹⁰ Participation in center-based care, in general, has been associated with improved cognitive, language, and social skills for Hispanic students.¹¹ One evaluation of Oklahoma's high-quality, universal pre-kindergarten program found that participating Hispanic students demonstrated substantial gains in pre-writing, pre-reading and pre-math scores compared to Hispanic students who did not attend the program. Significantly, these students outpaced the gains of their non-Hispanic peers, and

children whose parents spoke Spanish at home or who were foreign-born benefitted even more.¹² Early and sustained attendance in ECE programs appears to close about half of the Latino and white achievement gap at kindergarten entry.¹³

Explaining the Hispanic ECE Enrollment Gap

Existing research on Hispanic access to ECE suggests that a number of different factors interact to limit both the supply and demand of ECE programs for Hispanics. Researchers, however, are divided over which factors are more important in explaining low Hispanic enrollment rates: some argue certain demographic characteristics and familistic cultural beliefs (the emphasis of familial obligation over individual interests) lead Hispanic parents to prefer caring for their child at home,¹⁴ while others argue that a lack of access to information about ECE programs, an insufficient supply of quality programs in Hispanic neighborhoods and high program costs are the true underlying factors behind low Hispanic participation. Since understanding the relative impact of these different factors is essential to developing sound policy, the primary barriers that limit Hispanic enrollment in the District are explored below. This brief is based on the data collected from a pilot study on Hispanic children and their access to ECE in Washington, DC, that was

⁴ At the time of publication, OSSE was unable to provide system-wide enrollment data by race/ethnicity because it had only recently begun requiring community-based organizations to report this information.

⁵ Projections use data from the *American Community Survey* 2012, 1-year Estimates. Preschool enrollment, broken up by race/ethnicity, was compared with the estimated population of three and four-year-olds, by race/ethnicity.

⁶ Name changed using an online, randomized name generator, at interview subjects request for anonymity

completed in concert with DC Action for Children in the spring of 2014. It draws on existing research, census and school data, reports from the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) and interviews with early childhood practitioners, administrators, and government officials with experience serving the Hispanic community. These interviews allowed for an exploration of the barriers to Hispanic access that are harder to quantify, or analyze through data alone, like cultural values.

Exploring Hispanic Access to ECE in the District

Demographic Barriers

Certain demographic characteristics common in Hispanic families tell one part of the story of low Hispanic enrollment. Maternal education has been shown to be a significant predictor of the type of ECE program a parent selects for their child.¹⁵ In the District, 44% of Hispanic children have a parent with less than a High School degree, more than four times greater than the share of black children,¹⁶ which may contribute to lower Hispanic enrollment rates. Maternal employment, which logically increases the need for child care, has been shown to be a strong predictor of ECE participation for children of all racial/ethnic groups. Nationally, only 46% of Hispanic mothers worked outside of the house, compared with 58% and 75% of white and black mothers, respectively. Similarly, single parent households are also more likely to use center-based care.¹⁷ In the District, 62% of Hispanic children live in a two parent household, compared to 26% of black children.¹⁸ Hispanics also tend to have more extended family members and other adults living in the same household, further limiting the need for center-based care.¹⁹ In the District, 32% of Hispanic children live in a household with three or more related adults compared to just 19% of black children and 5% of white children²⁰. Furthermore, despite low incomes and high poverty rates, Hispanics in the District are less likely to use social

safety net programs like *Temporary Aid for Needy Families* (TANF) and food stamps at much lower rates than other racial groups, with Hispanics accounting for only 3% of TANF use and 4% of food stamp use in 2008.²¹ Furthermore, despite low incomes and high poverty rates, Hispanics in the District are less likely to use social safety net programs like Temporary Aid for Needy Families (TANF) and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) at much lower rates than other racial groups, with Hispanics accounting for only 3% of TANF use and 4% of SNAP in 2008. This suggests an overall reluctance to use government services, which may extend to ECE programs.

Structural Barriers

The 2008 Pre-K Enhancement and Expansion Act, the highly touted cornerstone of the District's ECE policy, has significantly improved access to ECE for children of different socioeconomic and racial/ethnic groups. The national Hispanic prekindergarten enrollment rate hovers around 40%, but is almost 30% higher in the District. However, while enrollment rose substantially for Hispanics in the District, it has also increased by at least the same margin for black and white children. Even with universal prekindergarten, other structural barriers may remain.

According to OSSE's Eligibility Determination Policies for Subsidized Child Care²², the parent (or both parents, if it is a two-parent household) must be gainfully employed or engaged in a valid qualifying activity to qualify for subsidies. However, since Hispanic mothers are significantly less likely than black or white mothers to be employed outside of the home,²³ the subsidy program's current structure discourages Hispanic parents from using child care. In her interview, Dee Dee Parker Wright argued that "the child care subsidy... is just not consistent with new immigrant families, and in particular Latino families, where... the value system is that mom stays home. A family with a parent at home and a parent

at work —which seems right out of the fifties and great— doesn't qualify for child care subsidies." So while low-income families are eligible to receive child care subsidies, the requirements are structured in such a way that many Hispanic families may be disproportionately excluded from participation.

In their interviews, Loudell Robb and Carolina Restrepo also cited insufficient slots in geographically convenient preschools as a structural factor that limits Hispanic access to ECE. Indeed, since the District does not provide transportation to bring young children to their ECE program, conflicting work schedules and the cost of transportation can represent a significant barrier for working and low-income parents. Furthermore, while OSSE's 2013 annual PreK report indicated that there were open ECE program slots in each of the city's wards, half of the wards were at over 99% of their total capacity.²⁴ As a result, even small enrollment increases would force parents to either travel farther to find program openings, utilize lower quality programs, or delay enrolling their child in a center-based care.

The funding mechanisms that the city uses, especially OSSE's *Risk and Reach* report, may not accurately identify many risk factors that affect Hispanic children. The yearly report⁷ presents data on select indicators that are meant to identify at-risk populations of young children, which allows the city to maximize its finite resources by allocating them to communities that stand to benefit the most from the additional investments in ECE programs and infrastructure. The majority of the indicators reflect common proxies for poverty, like the percentage of the community unemployed, or the percentage of SNAP or TANF recipients. However, since Hispanic families in the District use public safety net programs at a lower rate than other racial ethnic groups relative to their socioeconomic status, and have higher employment rates,²⁵ these indicators may not accurately identify Hispanic children who are in

⁷ Last released in 2012

most need of quality ECE programs. Furthermore, other indicators that would reflect areas of risk for Hispanic children — like the percentage of households lacking English proficiency or the percentage of foreign births²⁶— are not included in the assessment, limiting the District’s ability to respond to the factors that may lead to lower Hispanic enrollment and academic achievement. This is indicative of much of the District’s social history, which has traditionally been framed as ‘a tale of two cities’ — a juxtaposition between the affluent, professional class and the largely economically disadvantaged black majority — ignoring its growing Hispanic community.

Informational Barriers

Informational barriers —an insufficient understanding of the benefits of ECE, program eligibility requirements, or enrollment procedures— also limit Hispanic access to ECE. Indeed, a national survey investigating Hispanic perceptions of pre-kindergarten programs found that a lack of information was the primary reason Hispanic parents did not enroll their child.²⁷ In the District, less than 12% of Hispanic children have a native born parent.²⁸ Carolina Restrepo explained how for many Hispanic parents, especially recent immigrants, the very concept of ECE can be a foreign one: “If you come from a country where it [ECE] isn’t the norm or it isn’t accessible to everyone, it’s less likely that you will be informed... I would say the more years a parent has spent here, the more common [their use of] early childhood education would be.”

Unfamiliarity with the registration process could further suppress Hispanic enrollment. Drawing on her experience working as a principal, Anne Malone described how “sometimes the biggest barrier is helping [Hispanic parents] understand that [pre-kindergarten] really is free and they really are eligible for it.” Furthermore, Carolina Restrepo, Dee Dee Parker Wright, and Sylvia Harper all discussed how many Hispanic parents, especially immigrants who were not accustomed to educational choice,

were often challenged in navigating the District’s ECE program marketplace.

Fear of legal ramifications may make some undocumented parents hesitant to enroll their children in an ECE program. While these fears are unfounded⁸, one survey that asked Hispanic parents what they thought accounted for low-Hispanic enrollment rates found that one-eighth of participants identified the lack of required immigration documentation as a significant barrier to access.²⁹ Sylvia Harper echoed this view, explaining that undocumented parents are often reluctant to approach school officials because “they wouldn’t want to ask too many questions or reveal too much [about themselves], because they were afraid that someone would find out and their child would be removed from the school.”

Finally, several interview subjects claimed the city still has a long way to go before important information about ECE is sufficiently accessible for Hispanic families. Carolina Restrepo noted the prevalence of government documents or informational materials that are either poorly translated, or not translated at all, as examples of how the District must improve its communication and outreach to Hispanics. A 2012 report on outreach strategies used to target Hispanics found that barriers of language and literacy can exacerbate feelings of distrust felt by Hispanics towards government institutions.³⁰ Hector Busco, Carolina Restrepo, and Loudell Robb also cited insufficient bilingual personnel in ECE programs and city government offices as factors that further limit the accessibility of information.

Cultural Barriers

While Hispanic families value education, viewing it as a pathway to upward mobility and personal development, researchers have also suggested that traditional Hispanic values and cultural approaches to childrearing may affect their early care preferences. Familism may represent an important contributing factor to lower Hispanic enrollment rates.³¹ Research

indicates that Hispanic mothers are more likely to prefer to leave their children in the care of friends or relatives, and less likely to prefer center-based care, than mothers of other racial/ethnic groups.³² Carolina Restrepo described how the families she works with as a home visitation specialist place an enormous amount of importance of familial bonds: “There is a distinction between the individual and the family among Latinos. Even if education is really important, the family’s needs come first.”

The emphasis on familial obligation is interconnected with the Hispanic value of *marianismo*— the belief that mothers should sacrifice for their children.³³ Carolina Restrepo explained how she regularly encounters Hispanic mothers who see themselves as the only capable teacher and protector of their children before they enter kindergarten. She recalled one mother who she met with regularly as a home visitation specialist. When the Hispanic mother enrolled her three-year-olds in preschool she was so emotional that she broke down and pulled her kids out after the first two weeks. Carolina explained that to the mother, “sending them somewhere they didn’t want to go and didn’t have to go by law yet... was a reflection of who she [the mother] was as a person.”

Hispanic mothers’ use of family or friends as a source of child care may also reflect a cultural disconnect between Hispanic families and formal ECE programs. For non-English speaking Hispanic parents, the inability to communicate with center staff can lead to misunderstandings and a sense of disengagement from their child’s education,³⁴ especially if they perceive the values being taught in ECE programs to be incompatible with their understanding of proper education and socialization.³⁵ Sylvia Harper explained how some Hispanic “parents feared that [their] child will go to school and just be speaking in English all day... That [schools] are just trying to take away their culture and language.”

Carolina Restrepo described how Hispanic parents view a child’s early years as an

⁸ In *Plyer v. Doe* (1982), the US Supreme Court ruled that immigration status could not be used to deny enrollment in public education.

especially important time to establish familial bonds and impart the family's belief system: "The home is a place of learning for many families, where you learn your family's values... The early years are the formative years of the family's culture." This emphasis on ensuring that a family's belief system is instilled in young children extends to shielding children from the values and behaviors of American culture that Hispanic parents find threatening.

In Hispanic culture, *buen educación* involves more than basic literacy and mathematics; it emphasizes respect for adult authorities, rules and consideration for others.³⁶ Many American ECE programs' curricula are based on middle-class, Anglo values of individualism and may strike Hispanic parents as in direct challenge to the values they hope to instill in their children. Carolina Restrepo described how "it is quite common to hear that a school, although it is a learning center, is a place where children learn habits and customs that don't belong to the family, things they might consider to be rude, bad behaviors. Talking back is one that kind of appalls parents... talking to their parents as they would to a friend, not as an elder, being an individual more than being a member of your family."

What is the city doing to improve access for Hispanic children?

Beyond the District's Pre-K Enhancement and Expansion Act 2008, the city has already taken several steps to address some of the barriers to Hispanic participation in ECE programs. Dee Dee Parker Wright, Loudell Robb, and Carolina Restrepo endorsed the Office of Latino Affairs (OLA) as an important institution that leads the city's outreach to the Hispanic community and efforts to improve language access in public services. Carolina Restrepo explained how the OLA works as an intermediary in communicating with agencies and Hispanic families to help mitigate cultural barriers, and all interview participants cited the District's increased efforts to ensure that enrollment, special education, and residency documentation are available in Spanish as well as English as important

improvements that ease the enrollment process for Hispanic parents. Hector Busco described how Ingrid Gutierrez, the OLA's outreach coordinator, plays a critical role in orchestrating community outreach, including forming reading groups for immigrant parents of young children and leading conferences to develop Hispanic parent leadership.

The District's government has also expanded access to ECE by supporting Hispanic operated, community-based ECE programs, and relying on those organizations for service delivery to the Hispanic community. By employing bilingual and bicultural staff, often members of the communities they serve, these programs are able to authentically engage Hispanic parents. Hector Busco explained that the popularity of these programs is proof of their success: "all the parents signing up for these programs, recommending these programs, and parents wanting to get on these programs shows something is working."

Recommendations

In order to expand access to quality ECE for Hispanic children, it is important that District officials to craft policy that comprehensively addresses the primary factors that lead to Hispanic under-enrollment. Beyond removing many of the structural barriers to access through universal Pre-K, it is also important that ECE programs are welcoming places for Hispanic families and their children. Too often, cultural differences are discussed as deficiencies and policy makers must ensure that the District's early childhood system supports the development of young Hispanic children without undermining the cultural values that shape the very identities of Hispanic families and communities. With this in mind, here are several recommendations for supporting Hispanic children's access to ECE:

- 1) Create a media outreach campaign, targeting the city's Hispanic community, which underlines the benefits of ECE and explains the District's eligibility requirements and enrollment procedures.**

A culturally competent, bilingual

media outreach campaign would build the capacity of Hispanic parents to make informed decisions about their children's early education by explaining the benefits of ECE and how to choose and enroll their child in a quality program that meets their needs. The media campaign should be aimed at both informing the parents of young, Hispanic children as well as encouraging members of the Hispanic community to talk with their family and extended social networks about the benefits of center-based ECE programs. Research indicates that media outreach campaigns are an effective strategy to engage and mobilize the Hispanic community,³⁷ and Carolina Restrepo explained that public places, like bus stops or community events, as well as Hispanic television and radio stations are the most effective channels for disseminating information to the city's Hispanic community.

- 2) Increase Hispanic representation in ECE by providing grant funding to expand existing Hispanic operated programs, and for other programs to hire more bicultural and bilingual staff.**

OSSE should increase grant funding for high-quality, Hispanic operated early childhood programs to expand their capacity, and for other centers that enroll Hispanic children to hire qualified bilingual Hispanic educators and administrators. Sufficient bilingual and bicultural staff in ECE programs would address informational and cultural barriers by facilitating communication between Hispanic parents and program staff, and by ensuring that instruction was framed in a way that is compatible Hispanic values. Carolina Restrepo explained that hiring Hispanic staff members creates an environment that encourages participation by Hispanic parents: "A member of the community is more trusted. They are going to be heard and will be understood, not just because of the language, but how they approach the community." Beyond influencing the early care preferences of Hispanic

parents, hiring more bilingual staff may also help improve student outcomes. Emerging research suggests early childhood programs can most effectively engage Hispanic children by scaffolding the academic curriculum on their culturally situated strengths and social assets.³⁸ This would encourage the integration, rather than assimilation, of Hispanic families and their values into the city's ECE system.

3) Increase funding for Hispanic community organizations and Office of Latino Affairs' (OLA) to expand their community outreach programs and other services they provide.

Increased funding for Hispanic community organizations would allow them to expand the important services they provide for the Hispanic community, including home visiting, family support, and family literacy programs that refer parents to social services and ECE programs in the community. Evidenced-based home visiting programs aim to prevent child neglect and support child development by educating parents about beneficial childrearing strategies and the importance to developmentally stimulating interactions like reading regularly to their child. Since infants and toddlers, even those enrolled in child care programs, spend the majority of their time at home, teaching parents how to provide a cognitively enriching home environment has enormous potential to help young children build the skills they need to succeed in school and beyond. While providing critical early learning opportunities, they also meet the needs and values of the Hispanic community; since Hispanic mothers are less likely to work, and infants and toddlers are more likely to remain at home with their mother, evidenced-based home visiting programs may offer a better alternative for Hispanic families than center-based child care, which is not always of high quality.

Expanding OLA funding would allow for further outreach and support for the Hispanic community as well as improve language access for Hispanic parents. Rather than addressing inadequate or non-existent document translations piecemeal, the District should commission the OLA to review all relevant ECE documentation and information used by the city and draft new enrollment documents for Hispanic families to ensure they are easy to follow and correctly translated.

4) Revise OSSE's Risk and Reach indicators.

The city should also revise OSSE's Risk and Reach assessment to better respond to the needs of the Hispanic community. Additional indicators, like the percentage of ELL students, the percentage of families where English is not spoken at home, and the percentage of foreign births are more representative of the factors that lead to depressed academic and social outcomes for Hispanic students. As property values in historically Hispanic neighborhoods continue to rise, it will be especially important for the city to track the Hispanic community's intra-city migration to ensure that targeted services are available in the new communities that are being formed.

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