

# MISSING OUT: LATINO STUDENTS IN AMERICA'S SCHOOLS

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## INTRODUCTION

During the past decade, the dramatic growth of the Latino<sup>†</sup> population throughout the United States has had a sizable impact on our country's demographic makeup. In 2007, Latinos composed 15.1% of the population,<sup>1</sup> demonstrating a substantial 28.7% growth rate since 2000.<sup>‡</sup> In particular, increased growth among Latino children has introduced major changes into the nation's composition and continues to have significant bearing upon the country's educational institutions and their future impact.

Hispanic children now constitute one-fifth (20.5%) of all school-age children in the U.S.,<sup>3</sup> and nearly one-third (32.1%) of the Latino population is currently enrolled in the U.S. school system.<sup>4</sup> This dramatic increase is effectively changing the face of the American student body. Nonetheless, like the majority of U.S. school students, most Latino children are neither immigrants nor undocumented. In fact, the vast majority (91%) of Latinos under the age of 18 are U.S. citizens.<sup>5</sup> Notably, these children and their families recognize the critical role of education for future success. An overwhelming number (98%) of Hispanics think education is "important,"

and more than half (51%) report that it is an "extremely important" issue.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the large numbers of Latinos living in the U.S. and the extent to which they value education, Hispanic students continue to confront significant barriers to their academic success and lag behind their peers academically. Obstacles to educational opportunities for Latinos include high Latino enrollment in resource-poor schools and insufficient financial aid for their pursuit of higher education. Evidence of the disparity in educational achievement and attainment between Latinos and their peers includes high dropout rates, low graduation rates, and lower reading and math scores among Latino students. Although the overwhelming majority of Hispanic students are U.S.-born, a large number (40%) are also English language learners (ELLs), many of whom require additional support to succeed at the same level as their non-Hispanic peers.<sup>7</sup>

The rapid growth of the Latino student population has not been reflected in a corresponding improvement in their educational outcomes. The collection of statistics that follows suggests that Latino students are missing out on many

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† The terms "Hispanic" and "Latino" are used interchangeably by the U.S. Census Bureau and throughout this document to refer to persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central and South American, Dominican, Spanish, and other Hispanic descent; they may be of any race.

‡ These data do not include the 3.9 million residents of Puerto Rico, nor do they reflect the 3% undercount for Latinos reported by the U.S. Census Bureau for the last decennial Census (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005).



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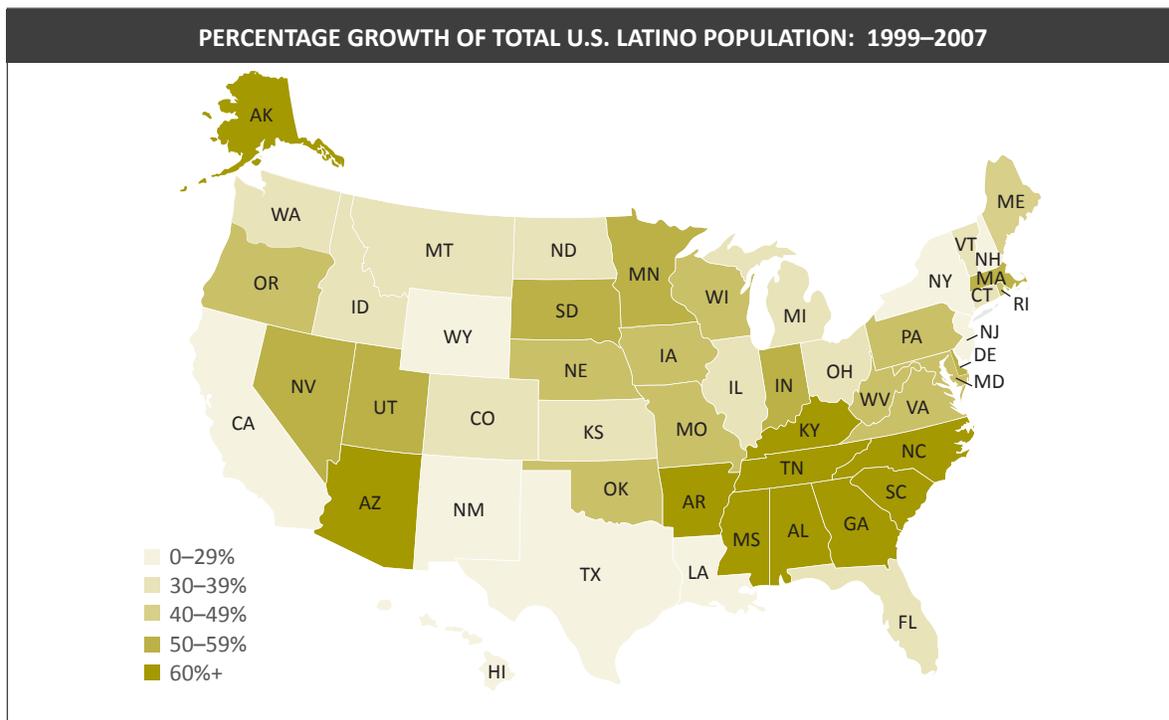
education, representing 16% of total Hispanic student enrollment.<sup>10</sup>

- **The vast majority of Latino children are born in the United States.** As of 2007, 90% of Latinos under 18 were U.S.-born citizens, while an additional 1% were naturalized citizens. Fewer than 10% of Latino children under 18 were noncitizens.<sup>11</sup> However, although very few Latino children are immigrants, Hispanic children do represent a large proportion of the school-aged immigrant population. Specifically, Hispanic immigrant children accounted for more than half (52%) of all immigrant youth in the U.S. in 2007.<sup>12</sup>
- **Growth among the Latino student population has significantly surpassed that of other ethnic/racial groups.** Between 1995 and 2005, the proportion

of Hispanic students enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools increased from 13.5% to 19.8%, representing a considerable growth rate of 46%. During the same period, the proportion of White students decreased from 65% to 57%, and the proportion of Black students increased only slightly from 16.8% to 17.2%.<sup>13</sup>

- **Hispanic students are a growing presence in K–12 public schools in every region of the United States.** Between 1972 and 2006, the proportion of Hispanic K–12 students in the West grew from 15% to 37%. For that same period, the Hispanic student population also increased in the South (from 5% to 19%), in the Midwest (from 2% to 8%), and in the Northeast (from 6% to 15%).<sup>14</sup>

Figure 2



Source: NCLR calculation using U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Population Estimates for States by Race and Hispanic Origin: July 1, 1999*. Washington, DC, 2000; and *Estimates of the Population by Race and Hispanic Origin for the United States: July 1, 2007*. Washington, DC, 2008.

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**HISPANICS AND EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION**

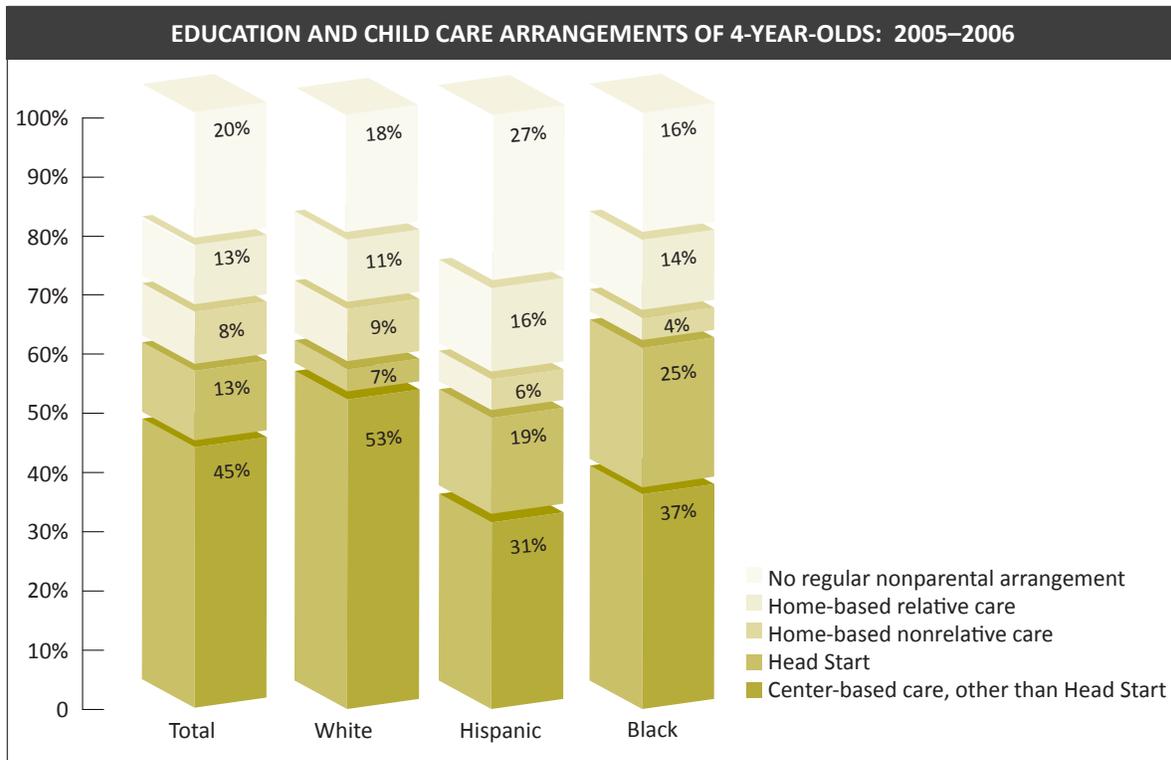
Early childhood education programs have been shown to have a positive impact on the school careers and future success of all children. However, while Latino children account for nearly one-quarter (24%) of all children under the age of five, they are underrepresented in early childhood education programs.<sup>15</sup>

- **There is a greater likelihood that White and Black three- to five-year-olds will be enrolled in center-based preschool education than their Hispanic counterparts, especially those living in poverty.** During the 2005–2006 school

year, 60% of White children and 62% of Black children participated in such programs, while only 50% of Hispanic children participated (see Figure 3).<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, among Hispanic children ages three to five living in poverty, fewer than 36% were enrolled in early childhood care and education programs. In contrast, 45% of White and 65% of Black children of the same age group living below the federal poverty threshold\* were enrolled in these programs.<sup>17</sup>

- **There has been significant growth in the number of Head Start participants who are Latino, but they and other children**

Figure 3



Source: *The Condition of Education 2008* (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

\* For a family of four, the U.S. Census Bureau defines the federal poverty threshold as a total family income of less than \$22,207.

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**continue to be underserved by Early Head Start.** In 2000, 29% of Head Start children were Latino, and by 2007, the proportion had grown to almost 35%.<sup>18</sup> In contrast, accessing the Early Head Start (EHS) program, which provides important learning opportunities for infants and toddlers in the U.S., is a challenge for Latino families. While nearly one-third (31%) of EHS participants are Latino, the program reaches only 3% of all eligible families, leaving many Hispanic families without services.<sup>19</sup>

### HISPANICS AND HIGH SCHOOL EDUCATION

To understand the situation of Latino students in secondary education, it is critical to analyze indicators such as overall academic achievement and access to rigorous coursework. As of 2007, although 3.2 million Hispanics were enrolled in U.S. high schools, representing almost one-fifth (18.1%) of total secondary school enrollment,<sup>20</sup> they were much less likely than their non-Hispanic White peers to actually complete high school. They were also substantially underrepresented in advanced science and mathematics courses.

- **Hispanics and Blacks are significantly less likely to complete high school than their White peers.** Although the 2005 high school graduation rate for White students was 78%, only 58% of Hispanic students and 55% of Black students who entered ninth grade completed the twelfth grade and graduated with a regular high school diploma.<sup>21</sup>
- **Hispanic and Black high school students are less likely than Whites to be enrolled in advanced mathematics and science classes.** In 2007, Calculus was the highest math class completed in high school for

16% of White high school students. In contrast, only 6% of their Black and 7% of their Hispanic peers completed this course. Also, while 20% of White high school students completed advanced science courses, only 12% of Blacks and 13% of Hispanics completed these courses.<sup>22</sup>

### HISPANIC ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Given the predominance of Latinos among the English language learner (ELL) student population, it is not surprising that the ELL student population reflects the patterns of rapid growth and geographic distribution among the Latino student population. Similarly, educational outcomes for ELLs are intrinsically tied to Latino student achievement.

### Ethnicity and Nativity of the Population

- **ELL students represent a significant portion of the Latino student population, and a large majority of ELLs are Hispanic.** Nearly two-fifths (39%) of all Latino children were ELL students in our nation's public schools in 2005.<sup>23</sup> Also, nearly four-fifths (79.6%) of ELL students were native Spanish speakers.<sup>24</sup>
- **Most ELL students are native-born and many have native-born parents.** As of 2007, nearly two-thirds (65.1%) of ELLs were native-born citizens. Specifically, 17% of ELLs are born in the U.S. to U.S.-born parents, and 48% are born in the U.S. to immigrant parents.<sup>25</sup>

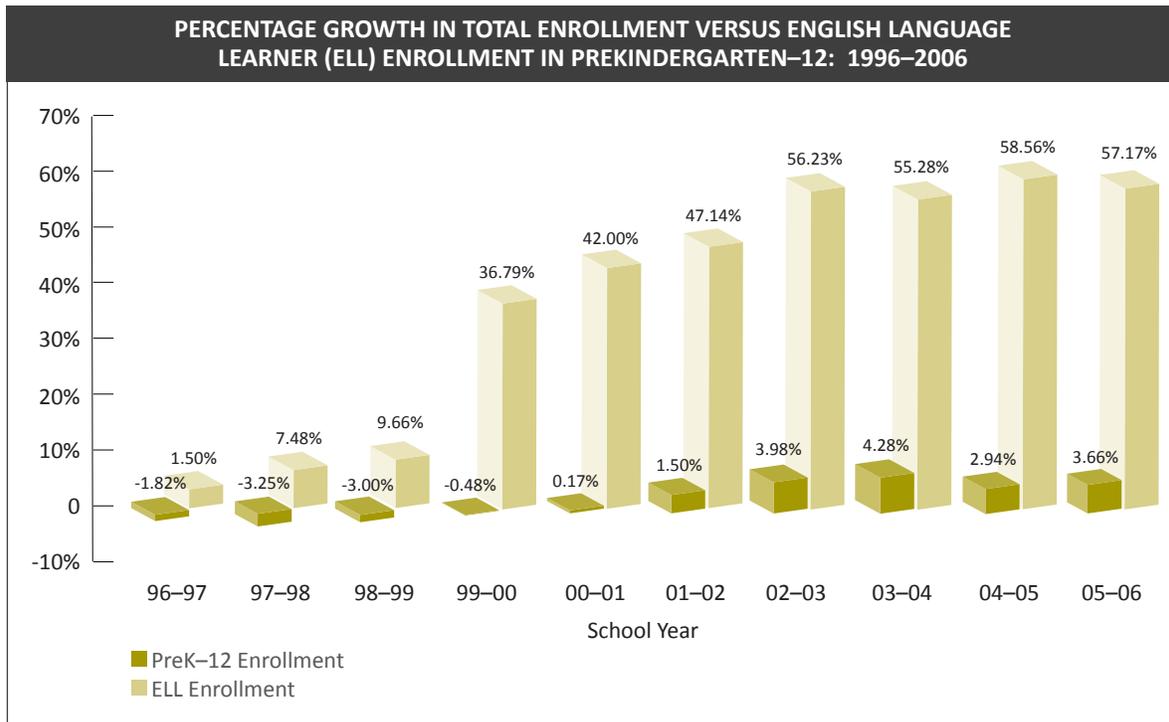
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**Growth, Size, and Geographic Distribution of the Population**

Like Latinos in general, ELLs are a fast-growing population. Although they remain concentrated in urban areas and traditionally Latino states, their presence is increasing in nontraditional states in the Midwest and Southeast.

- **The number of ELLs enrolled in U.S. schools has increased substantially in the past decade.** During the 2005–2006 academic year, there were an estimated 5.1 million ELL students enrolled in PreK–12 public schools, representing 10.3% of the total public school student enrollment and demonstrating a more than 55% increase between the 1996–1997 and 2005–2006 school years (see Figure 4).<sup>26</sup>
- **The ELL student population is mainly concentrated in metropolitan areas.** An estimated 17% of central-city public school students are ELLs. In contrast, ELLs composed about 8% of the suburban public school population and less than 6% of rural and small-town public school students during the 2003–2004 school year.<sup>27</sup>
- **ELL student enrollment is concentrated in states with traditionally large Hispanic populations.** During the 2005–2006 school year, the states with the highest percentages of ELL students in their public school classrooms were California (25.1%), New Mexico (20.0%), Nevada (18.0%), Alaska (15.4%), and Texas (14.2%).<sup>28</sup>

Figure 4



Source: *The Growing Numbers of Limited English-Proficient Students 1995/96–2005/06* (Washington, DC: Office of English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement and Academic Achievement for Limited English Proficient Students, U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

- **Reflecting broader trends in Latino geographic patterns, ELL student enrollment has increased dramatically in nontraditional Latino and immigrant states.** Between 1995 and 2005, the following states experienced more than 200% growth in their ELL student population: AL, AR, CO, DE, GA, IN, KY, NE, NH, NC, SC, TN, VA.<sup>29</sup>

### ELL Instruction and Achievement

Almost every state in the nation has at least one program that addresses the specific needs of ELL students. Despite such programs, there exist significant differences in reading and math scores between ELLs and non-ELLs.

- **States use a variety of education programs to instruct ELL students in public schools.** Since 2006, forty-nine states, including the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico, have focused on developing ELL literacy in English, and 41 states have programs that help foster the development of bilingual literacy. Only seven states have programs that develop literacy exclusively in English.<sup>30</sup>
- **There are differences in the achievement scores in reading and mathematics between ELL students and non-ELLs.** According to the 2007 National Assessment for Educational Progress, only 30% of ELL eighth-grade public school students scored at or above the basic achievement level for mathematics, compared to 73% of non-ELL eighth graders.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, only 29% of ELL eighth graders scored at or above the basic achievement level for reading, compared to 75% of non-ELL eighth-grade students.<sup>32</sup>
- **Although ELL achievement has increased, it continues to lag far behind that of non-ELLs.** In 1998, over three-quarters (76%) of eighth-grade ELLs scored below the basic achievement level in reading, with just over one-quarter (26%) of their non-ELL peers scoring at the same level. Since then, ELL achievement has increased, but in 2007, 70% of ELLs still scored below the basic reading achievement level. Clearly, the achievement gap persists, as only 24% of non-ELLs scored below the basic level that same year.<sup>33</sup>
- **Educational achievement among Latino ELL students is linked to high school dropout rates.** Specifically, Latino ELLs drop out of high school at a higher rate than non-ELL Latino students, according to 2000 Census data. In that same year, while 15% of Latinos ages 16–19 who are fluent in English did not graduate from high school, four times that many (60%) Latino ELLs of the same age did not graduate.<sup>34</sup>

### HISPANICS AND SCHOOL RESOURCES

Latino children are more likely to attend schools that serve primarily low-income students and have fewer resources available for students. In many cases, these schools also tend to have a high concentration of minority students.

- **Latino and Black students are more likely to attend schools that serve a large concentration of low-income students.** Among elementary and secondary school students during the 2005–2006 school year, 34% of Hispanic and 32% of Black students were enrolled in schools with the

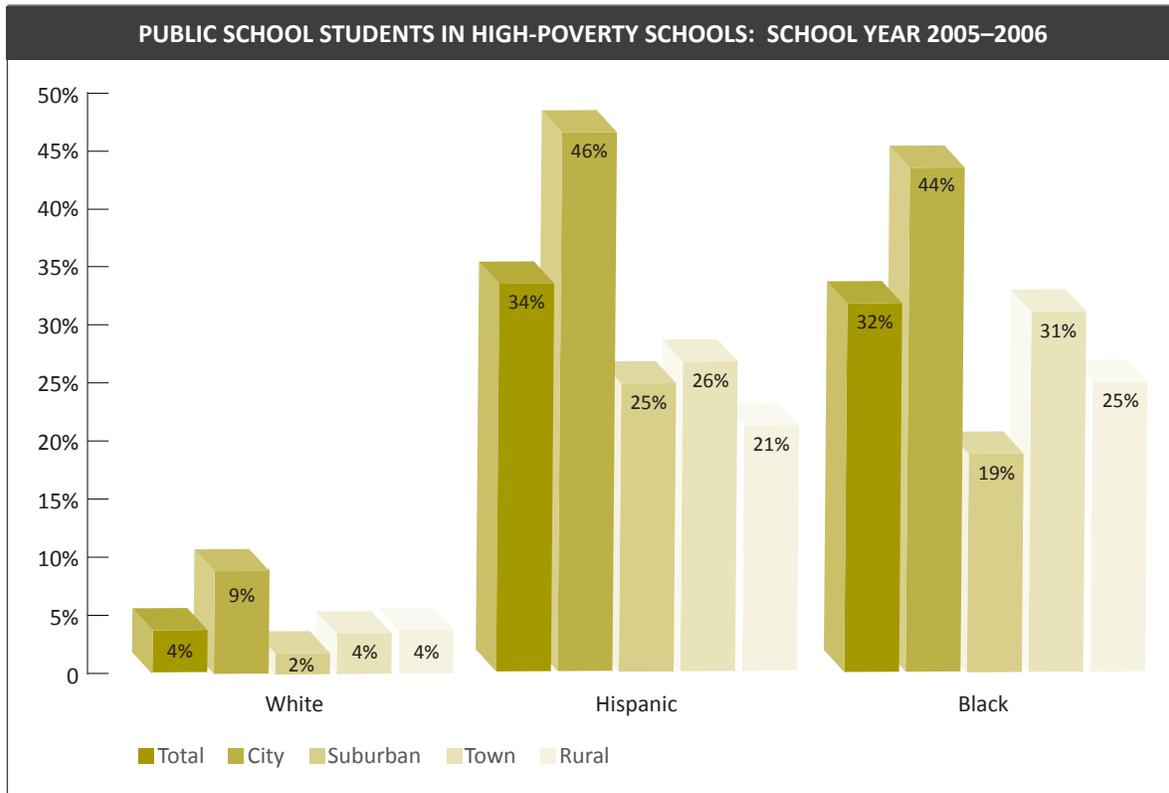
highest measure of poverty, compared to 4% of White and 10% of Asian/Pacific Islander students. Moreover, there is a strong relationship between poor and minority student populations. Hispanic (46%) and Black (44%) students composed the vast majority of students attending school in high-poverty urban areas, while fewer than 10% of their White peers attended such schools (see Figure 5\*<sup>35</sup>).

- **Some states with large Latino populations spend significantly less on students in high-poverty school districts than those in low-poverty districts.** Students in

high-poverty districts may receive up to \$3,000 less than their peers in low-poverty districts. New York, for example, has a \$3,269 per-student funding gap, while Illinois has a per-student gap of \$2,286. The highest-poverty districts receive fewer cost-adjusted dollars than the lowest-poverty districts in 28 states.<sup>36</sup>

- **States that have considerable funding gaps between low- and high-minority districts include states with large Hispanic communities.** Many school districts with the highest percentages of minority children receive significantly

Figure 5



Source: *The Condition of Education 2008* (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, 2008).

\* The definitions used here are from the U.S. Office of Management and Budget. "Rural" is a Census-defined rural territory located a certain distance from an urbanized area and/or an urban cluster. "Town" is defined as a territory inside an urban cluster located a certain distance from an urbanized area. A "suburban" area is one outside a principal city, but inside an urbanized area. "Cities" are territories inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city.

less funding than districts with the fewest minority children. This occurs in states such as California, with a gap of \$432 per student, Arizona (\$591), Texas (\$1,337), Illinois (\$1,595), and New York (\$3,137). Although race and poverty are often highly correlated, certain states have a larger funding gap for minority students than for low-income students, including Montana, Nebraska, Kansas, South Dakota, and Wyoming.<sup>37</sup>

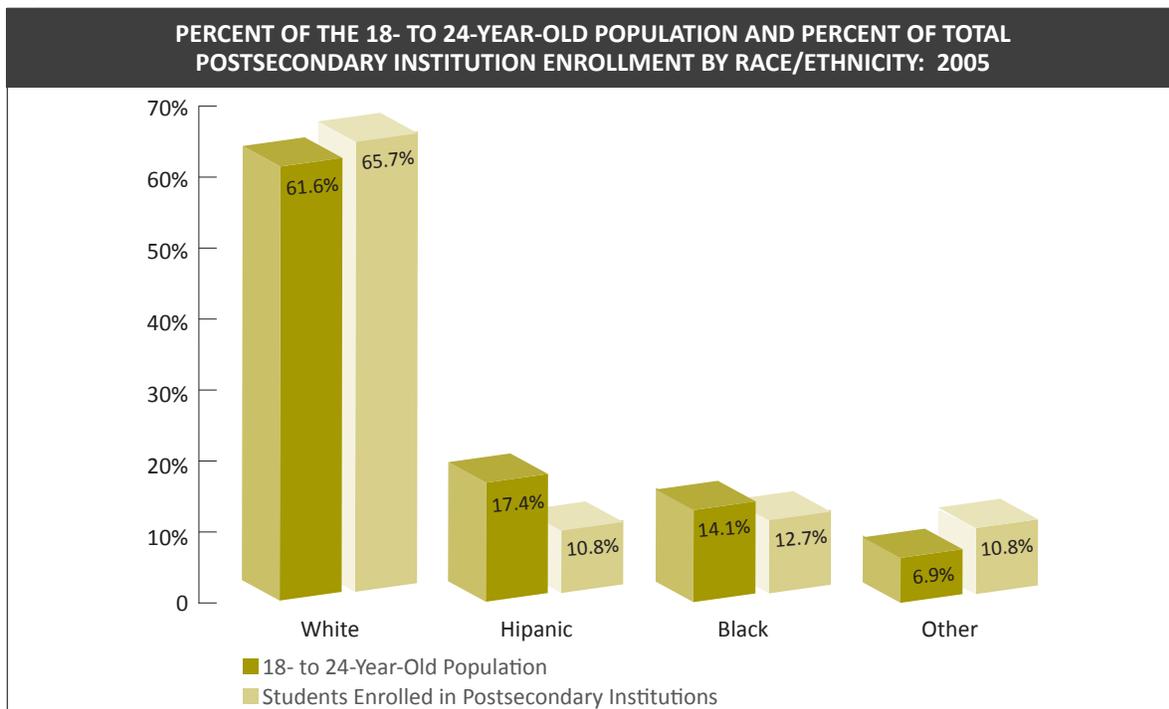
### HISPANICS AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Although Latino enrollment in institutions of higher education has increased, Latinos still lag behind their White peers in postsecondary enrollment. They are also less likely than non-Latinos to graduate from college, and they often receive less financial aid.

### Hispanic Enrollment in Higher Education

- **Hispanics and Blacks constitute only a small proportion of undergraduate students in the U.S.** Latinos and Blacks compose a large percentage of the college-age population, at 17.4% and 14.1%, respectively. However, only 10.8% of all 2005 undergraduate students were Hispanic and only 12.7% were Black, while 65.7% of undergraduates were White (see Figure 6).<sup>38</sup>
- **Latino and Black students are less likely than their White peers to be enrolled in institutions of higher education.** In 1976, 27.6% of young Whites participated in postsecondary education, including graduate, vocational, and technical schools, versus 23% of Blacks and 20% of Hispanics. While participation rates

Figure 6



Source: *Digest of Education Statistics* (Washington, DC: Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2007).

for all three groups increased between 1976 and 2006, Whites continued to have higher participation rates than both Blacks and Hispanics. In fact, while 41.0% of Whites and 32.6% of Blacks ages 18 through 24 were enrolled in higher education institutions in 2006, only 23.6% of Hispanics of the same age group were enrolled in higher education institutions that year.<sup>39</sup>

- **Hispanic undergraduate students are more likely than their peers to attend a two-year college.** Of the 1.79 million Hispanics pursuing undergraduate study in 2006, 17.8% attended two-year institutions. In contrast, 15.8% of White, 15.7% of Black, and 14.1% of Asian undergraduates were enrolled in two-year colleges.<sup>40</sup>
- **Hispanics age 25 and older are less likely than Blacks and Whites to hold a bachelor's degree.** In 2007, 12.7% of Hispanics age 25 years and older had received a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 18.7% of Blacks and 31.8% of Whites of the same age group.<sup>42</sup>
- **Hispanics are less likely than Blacks to receive financial aid to pay for an undergraduate education, and they receive less financial aid than both Blacks and Whites.** During the 2003–2004 academic year, 63% of Hispanic undergraduates received some form of financial aid, compared to 76% of Black undergraduate students. During the 2003–2004 academic year, while the average amount of financial aid received by an Hispanic full-time undergraduate was \$4,622, White students received an average of \$4,837, and Black students received \$4,908 in financial aid.<sup>43</sup>

### Latinos and Higher Education Attainment

- **Hispanics are less likely to have expectations of completing a bachelor's degree or higher.** In 2004, 28.2% of Hispanic twelfth graders had expectations of attaining a bachelor's degree, compared to 35.5% of White and 32.1% of Black twelfth graders.<sup>41</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Today's Latino student population represents tomorrow's workforce and the backbone of the U.S. economy. Currently, these students are missing out on important educational opportunities, from participation in early childhood education programs to enrollment in four-year postsecondary institutions, leaving them less prepared to enter the labor force than they should be. By creating policies and programs that will help Hispanics and ELLs achieve academically, the U.S. education system can prepare all U.S. students to become productive citizens and to be competitive in the global economy. The statistics presented here provide a comprehensive overview of the Hispanic student population and can serve to better inform the design and implementation of such policies.

Currently, a range of opportunities are in place to increase Hispanic students' chance for academic success. Effective implementation of and full funding for programs such as the Head Start Act of 2007, Early Head Start, Migrant and Seasonal Head Start, and the William F. Goodling Even Start Family Literacy Program would go far in ensuring that young Latino children start their educational

careers on equal footing with their peers. Policies and increased funding for programs that improve academic achievement and graduation rates for Latinos and ELLs, such as parental involvement and language assistance programs, as well as improved accountability and assessment systems and rigorous academic standards, would also do much to ensure Latino students' success. Additionally, the recent economic downturn has put Latino children at risk of falling behind on all of these indicators. However, it also presents an opportunity to make investments in Latino children so their academic performance finally matches their potential.

Finally, while Latinos have historically been concentrated in a small number of states, they are increasingly dispersing to nontraditional locations reaching from New Hampshire to Alabama. Latino students now have an important and growing presence in classrooms throughout the nation, and their successes or failures are a clear testament to the effectiveness of America's schools. If the U.S. education system can succeed for its Latino students, it will succeed for *all* of America's students.

## ENDNOTES

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- 17 *The Condition of Education 2006* (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, 2006), 29.
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- 23 NCLR calculation using 2005–2006 data regarding the number of limited-English-proficient students enrolled in PreK–12 schools from the National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition and Language Instruction Educational Programs; data regarding the percentage of ELL students who speak Spanish from the U.S. Department of Education, *Biennial Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Title III State Formula Grant Program: School Years 2004–06* (2008); and U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, October 2006, "School Enrollment—Social and Economic Characteristics of Students," Table 1.
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- 26 *The Growing Numbers of Limited English Proficient Students: 1995/96–2005/06* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of English Language Enhancement and Academic Achievement for Limited English Proficient Students, 2007), [http://www.ncele.gwu.edu/policy/states/reports/statedata/2005LEP/GrowingLEP\\_0506.pdf](http://www.ncele.gwu.edu/policy/states/reports/statedata/2005LEP/GrowingLEP_0506.pdf) (accessed March 2009).
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