

## Communities of Color and Public School Reform

### I. Introduction

In today's knowledge-based economy, education—especially education beyond high school—is central to achieving the American Dream. Yet, recent research points to devastating statistics related to educational outcomes in the nation's communities of color.

For example, only 54 percent of Native American students will graduate high school on-time. Half of today's African American and Latino eighth-graders will drop out of high school before graduation. And, only 10 percent of African-American and Latino eighth grade students will complete any sort of college degree. While Asian American student outcomes are seemingly high compared to other students of color, this is not true for all Asian groups. Within the Southeast Asian community, 34 percent of Laotian, 39 percent of Cambodian, and 40 percent of Hmong adults do not have a high school diploma or equivalent.<sup>1</sup>

To better address the implications of these trends, a deeper and more nuanced understanding is needed of the views held—and the realities faced—by parents and caregivers of color from low and moderate income communities whose children attend public schools.

To that end, a broad array of education and civil rights groups (principally within the Campaign for High School Equity) challenged the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to fund this research and similar studies in order for parents and families to better inform and shape educational reform, outreach and engagement efforts. The groups specifically asked that this research provide insights and understanding on the realities, expectations, and priorities of parents and caregivers of color who deal with underperforming schools every day.

Brossard Research, Insights Marketing Group, and Hart Research Associates conducted the research, focusing on:

- Identifying perceptions of low- to moderate-income African-American and Latino parents and caregivers concerning the schools in their communities;
- Understanding the importance of a college education and the college attendance expectations that parents in communities of color have for their children;
- Assessing the attitudes of parents/caregivers toward key aspects of public school reform; and
- Identifying effective means of connecting with parents/caregivers of color to enlist their support for school reform and improvement efforts.

Limited research was also conducted with community leaders from Southeast Asian and Native American communities to identify perceptions that low-income parents from their communities hold about education reform.

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<sup>1</sup> National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education (CARE). "The Relevance of Asian Americans & Pacific Islanders in the College Completion Agenda", Washington, DC 2011: 8.

The research found that African American and Latino parents and caregivers are concerned about the state of public education. Most perceive high dropout rates and low college attendance as problems. The research also shows that when these parents think about schools that need to be reformed, they are thinking primarily about those in their own communities. The “general public”, in contrast, is much less likely to see the schools in their own communities as needing reform. In 2008, a Hart Research survey found that only 37% of all Americans (and just 35% of those with children in public school) said they were thinking about the schools in their own communities—rather than schools in other places—as the ones in need of reform and improvement. Furthermore, among more affluent Americans—those with a household income of more than \$100,000—fully 68% said they were thinking about schools in other places and communities as the ones really in need of reform and improvement. By contrast, Americans as a whole are much less likely to identify schools in their own communities as being the ones needing reform.

Overall, findings from this research present both opportunities and challenges to civil rights and education reform proponents. For instance, parents in communities of color have a tremendously high level of individual commitment to ensuring the educational success of their children. But, they are unaware of the larger public school reform movement and face a reality that is in stark contrast to what they want for their children. However, because these parents and caregivers overwhelmingly already share aspirational goals of a strong education and college degree for their children, there is a marked opening to engage parents in a collective, coordinated education reform effort that would empower them to hold the educational system accountable as more effective and inclusive reforms and innovations are developed and implemented.

## **II. Methodology**

This research is not meant to be comparative between African-American and Latino parents.

### Latino Parent and Caregiver Research

From June 21 to July 1, the Insights Marketing Group surveyed a representative national cross section of 601 Latino parents and caregivers from low- and moderate-income households whose children currently attend public schools. The sampling was conducted to focus on places with relatively high concentrations of Latino households:

- Fifty-five percent (55 percent) of respondents say their children attend schools at which most of the students are Latino.
- Another 25 percent report that many, though not most, of the students in their children’s schools are Latino.
- Nearly three-quarters of respondents have no formal education beyond high school, including 37 percent who are not high school graduates, and only 9 percent have a four-year college degree.
- Fifty-four percent (54 percent) of parents and caregivers were born outside the United States.
- Two-thirds of the interviews were administered in Spanish.

These findings were informed by six focus groups that were conducted among low- and moderate-income Latino parents and caregivers of children enrolled in public schools including two sessions in Los Angeles, CA, two sessions in Chicago, IL, and two sessions in Raleigh, NC.

Where the implications are significant, Latino responses have been distinguished between U.S. and foreign-born Latinos.

#### African-American Parent and Caregiver Research

From June 21 to June 30, Hart Research Associates, in conjunction with Brossard Research, interviewed a representative national cross-section of 603 African American parents and caregivers from low- and moderate-income households whose children currently attend public schools. The sampling was conducted to focus on areas with relatively high concentrations of African-American households.

- Forty-nine percent (49 percent) of respondents say their children attend schools where most of the students are African American.
- Another 31 percent report that many, though not most, of the students in their children's schools are African American.
- The median reported household income of respondents in the sample is \$33,214.

These findings were informed by six focus groups that were conducted among low- and moderate-income African-American parents and caregivers of children enrolled in public schools including two sessions in Los Angeles, CA, two sessions in Columbia, SC and two sessions in Pittsburgh, PA.

#### Native American and Southeast Asian Community Leader Research

Two additional telephone focus groups were conducted with community-based leaders from Native American and Southeast Asian communities to identify the top-line views about parent expectations for their children, and parent engagement in education reform within these communities.

For the Native American community in particular, this conversation was used to gain an understanding of how Native American adults have interacted with the public education system and how these interactions may have instilled a negative perception of the schools and education overall.

### **III. Findings and Implications**

#### Parents hold high aspirations for their children.

Parents of color have high aspirations for their children's educational achievements.

- When parents were asked if it is important to them that their child attends and graduates from college, 91 percent of Latino and 86 percent of African-American parents said it is quite or extremely important to them.
  - Among Latinos, there is a significant difference in the importance of college dependent on the parent's educational attainment. Eighty-three (83 percent) of Latino parents with more than a high school education believe that attending and graduating from college is extremely important, while only 56 percent of Latino non-high school graduate parents believe that it is extremely important.
  - Parents strongly believe that when their children graduate from high school, they will be prepared to attend college.

- Parents believe that the biggest obstacle to their children attending and graduating from college is being unable to afford the cost of a college education (36 percent of African Americans and 64 percent of Latinos).
- When these parents use the term college, they are overwhelmingly talking about four-year institutions.
- Parents of color want their children to take rigorous college prep courses, even if they will struggle. When asked what kind of math course parents would prefer their child to take, the majority (85 percent of Latinos and 77 percent of African Americans) selected the “more challenging college-prep math course, even if it is far more difficult to pass” compared with the “less challenging math course that teaches basic skills, but does not prepare them for college math.”
- Southeast Asian community leaders indicate that parents in their communities already have a strong orientation to educational success, but are not empowered to navigate the education system to help their children achieve their goals.
- Native American community leaders indicate that parents in their communities want their children to be involved in a stronger college-going culture. They also have high hopes for their children, but are not informed and are overwhelmed by the system.

#### Schools are in need of reform and improvement

- While African-American and Latino parents have high hopes for their children, they also recognize the problems of high dropout rates and low college completion in their communities, and say that the schools in their communities are in need of reform and improvement.
- When African-American and Latino parents think about the kinds of public schools that are in need of reform and improvement, seven out of 10 African-American and Latino parents are thinking about schools in their own communities.
- When this question was posed to the general public, only 37 percent of Americans were thinking about schools in their own communities when thinking about the ones really in need of reform and improvement. Among the most affluent Americans, with an income of more than \$100,000 per household, 68 percent were thinking about schools in other places as the ones needing reform and improvement the most.
- Fifty-seven percent (57 percent) of African-American parents and 60 percent of Latino parents believe that high school dropout, low college attendance and graduation rates are pretty big or very big problems in their communities.
- Compared to Latino parents without children in high school, Latinos with children in high school are significantly less satisfied with their local public schools and express less confidence that the public schools in their community will provide their children with the education they want for them.
  - Fifty-six percent (56 percent) of parents with no children in high school think public schools in their community are excellent/very good, compared to 39 percent of parents with a child in high school who say the same.
- The idea of closing poorly performing schools is controversial among low- and moderate-income parents from communities of color. When their local schools are performing poorly, option number one is to try to fix them rather than close them. Parents want districts to redouble their efforts to improve the quality of teaching in these schools as well as provide more learning resources.

- Native American community leaders indicate that parents in their communities are distrustful of the education system because of their past experiences with it.
- Native American leaders also underscore the need for schools to be consistently respectful of the sovereignty, traditions, and culture of this community.

There is a focus on parenting and external factors, and a desire for better teaching.

- When considering what would help a lot in improving the quality of public education children receive in their community, parents emphasize more parent involvement in schools (95 percent of African Americans and 88 percent of Latinos).
- Nine out of 10 parents believe that more support to help teachers become better teachers would help a lot in improving the quality of education children receive in their community.
- When asked why they feel their children are being shortchanged, one of the top reasons volunteered by parents was that whites receive a better education and have better teachers.
- As a priority, parents put a greater emphasis on helping teachers improve than on weeding out bad teachers.
- Parents' view of good teaching is measured more by the amount of caring and attention teachers devote to children than by student performance on standardized tests, but parents are unclear on what an effective teacher really is.
- When parents were asked what they would spend additional resources on, parents place priority on individual tutoring and learning time (33 percent of African American parents and 30 percent of Latino parents).
- Native American community leaders indicate that parents in their communities believe good teaching is about caring and attention, as much—if not more so—than it is about standardized tests.

Parents believe in higher expectations, but believe that more resources and help for struggling students are needed to achieve them.

Parents believe that higher expectations for all, tied to higher standards, with greater supports in place, would improve the quality of education that their children receive.

- Eight out of 10 parents of color responded that higher expectations for all students, tied with higher standards would help a lot to improve the quality of education that children receive in communities.
- The challenge lies in the broad concern that many parents believe that higher standards without greater resources for their children would be setting up students in low- and moderate-income communities of color for failure.
  - African American parents are most likely (61 percent) to expect negative consequences if standards are raised without the provision of more supports.
  - Latino parents are evenly split and half would expect that raising standards would result in more students of color rising to the challenge and preparing themselves for college and careers.
  - Among Latino parents, 87 percent believe that more help for students learning English would do a lot to help improve the quality of the public education children receive in their communities.

- Native American parents agree that greater (or more equal) resources must accompany higher expectations.
- African American college graduates, native-born Latinos and parents in both groups who believe their children are not given the same opportunities to learn and succeed as white students in their communities are more likely to believe that raising expectations and academic standards for public school students will simply set more students of color up for failure unless schools are given the resources to ensure that the students can meet those standards.

### Engaging Parents in Reform

The goal of education reform is to ensure that the student masters the skills and knowledge they will be required to know in order to succeed in college and career without the need for remediation.

In working to engage and empower parents and caregivers in moderate to low income communities of color, it is crucial that education reform organizations and education leaders work with parents on the parents' terms. With that in mind, these organizations can play a large role in developing reforms that better reflect parent and community priorities while also helping parents understand the relevance of any reform that is being trumpeted as increasing their child's chances to be ready for college and complete a degree.

- The vast majority of parents and caregivers are not aware that there is an education reform movement for them to support or that is seeking their support.
- More than two-thirds of respondents primarily blame parents and home life rather than the school system, teachers and the government for the alarmingly high rate of high school dropouts and of the low rate of college degree attainment.
- Despite the fact that many see important problems in their communities, half of African Americans and Latinos rate the performance of their local schools as excellent or pretty good and are very or pretty confident that their kids will get the kind of education they want for them. However, when this dynamic is probed in focus groups, parents' confidence is based on expectations of themselves rather than on the quality of the school.
- When considering who needs to bear the responsibility for making sure schools improve, Latinos see school reform as an undertaking of the entire community and African Americans point to individuals such as parents (31 percent) and school officials (24 percent).
- Latino parents (44 percent) also believe that poverty is a key factor in poor educational outcomes.
- Parents see themselves as the ones responsible for making sure their children succeed in schools, but also recognize that there is a need for improved performance inside the classroom.
- In order to reach out to parents, parent organizations like the PTO are the most trusted source for advice about public schools and reforms (35 percent of African Americans and 40 percent of Latinos).
- Community leaders in Native American and Southeast Asian communities also emphasized the importance of parental engagement and involvement in addressing the primary educational challenges in their communities. Among Native American parents it is important to engage parents to emphasize building a stronger college-going culture.
- In contrast, Southeast Asian communities emphasize the importance of reaching out to parents through local community organizations, rather than PTO's. This is because cultural and linguistic barriers persist, and parents do not currently feel empowered to navigate the education system.

For example, while the majority of these parents are monolingual, PTO forums are rarely conducted in Southeast Asian languages (Khmer, Vietnamese, and Hmong.)

- Native American leaders note that, in their communities, parental involvement is the missing link in the dialogue surrounding school improvement and student achievement. They add that while parents have high aspirations, those aspirations are often hindered by a system that is cold and challenging to navigate.

#### **IV. Moving Forward**

Current statistics and research around educational outcomes in communities of color underscore the need for immediate and substantive action. The new research summarized here shows that parents and caregivers in these communities are committed to doing their part—and then some—to help prepare their children for post-secondary education. That, in turn, offers a great point of intersection for the individual efforts of these parents and the larger school reform movement, but only if the latter engages these parents with a full understanding of their lives, experience, energy and ideas about how best to improve educational outcomes.

The underlying premise of all these notions is that educational outcomes in moderate to low income communities of color not only should, but can be greatly improved. Working with parents and caregivers in a thoughtful and comprehensive engagement process will greatly improve their ability to participate in the success of their children. It will also improve their ability to participate more meaningfully in education reform and innovation efforts while holding education leaders and reformers accountable for producing better results.