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Reducing Educational Barriers in Catholic Schools for Latino Students

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Reducing educational barriers in Catholic schools for Latino students

One of the most significant opportunities for improving sustainable enrollments for Catholic schools is improving the recruitment and retention of Latino students. The population of Latino students is growing more than any other demographic group and now comprises one in five school-age children (Capps, et al., 2005; Dolan, 2009). Yet Catholic schools under-serve these students. While one in three Catholic adults in the United States identifies as Latino, only one in ten students in Catholic schools does (Gray & Gautier, 2006). Catholic schools must learn to respond to this demographic imperative.

Tuition-based Catholic schools are inaccessible to many Latino families, a disproportionately high number of whom live in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). The importance of development and marketing efforts has been increasingly discussed over the past four decades in the field of Catholic education (Hamilton, 2008; Youniss & Convey, 2000). Innovative financing and governance models to meet the U.S. Catholic bishops (2005) call to make Catholic schools affordable, available, and accessible are emerging (e.g., see models from SPICE in 1997, 1998, 2003, 2006, 2008, and 2009).

Just as formidable, are educational barriers to the success of Latino students in schools. Research shows that schools effectively educate culturally and linguistically diverse students by creating teaching and learning environments that are (a) culturally responsive, (b) pedagogically rich, and (c) asset-based. Catholic schools that ameliorate these educational barriers are better positioned to attract financial support because they can make a compelling case for such investment.

Culturally responsive

First, Catholic schools must be culturally responsive. Culturally responsive school communities treat students' identities, life experiences, families, and backgrounds as resources for optimizing learning (Gay, 2000). Culturally responsive teaching is grounded in sociocultural learning theory, which views human development and learning as intrinsically social (Moll & Gonzalez, 2004; Vygotsky, 1978) and occurring in communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Culturally responsive educators teach to the strengths of students by incorporating awareness of their cultural heritages and home lives, emphasizing the value of maintaining cultural identity alongside academic achievement (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). The religious identity, mission, vision and philosophy are central to culturally responsive Catholic school communities (Martin, 1996; Martin & Litton, 2004).

Diverse learning

Second, pedagogically rich Catholic schools accommodate and build on students' diverse learning needs, employing an array of instructional strategies to reach the diversity of learners. Principles of differentiated instruction and universal design ground these strategies (Rose & Meyer, 2002; Tomlinson & Allan, 2000; Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006). Structures that support these strategies include collaborative teaming (Drago-Severson, 2007; Fitzgibbons, Mahon, & Maus, 2008; Thousand, Villa, & Nevin, 2006) and early, targeted interventions for students who are struggling (Perez-Johnson & Maynard, 2007).

Pedagogically rich teaching for Latinos also recognizes that many of these students have limited proficiency in English and/or live in homes

in which Spanish is spoken (Dolan, 2009; Planty, et al., 2009). Specific pedagogical approaches are particularly beneficial strategies to students who are English language learners (ELL), such as teaching word analysis, using cognates to facilitate vocabulary learning, and activating prior knowledge (Carlo, et al., 2004; Ren Dong, 2009). All teachers—not just those with bilingual or English as a second language specialization—are better equipped to effectively structure their classrooms to serve students who are ELL when they have a solid understanding of oral and written language development and academic English (Wong Fillmore & Snow, 2000).

Linguistic diversity

Third, Catholic schools reduce educational barriers to Latinos by recognizing that linguistic diversity is an asset. This orientation rejects a compensatory approach to bilingualism and sees the language and culture of students as vehicles supporting education (Brisk, 2006). Catholic schools demonstrate this orientation by welcoming Spanish in the school community, promoting bilingualism for the educators and students, and cultivating cross-cultural relationships between native English- and native Spanish-speaking families.

Catholic schools position themselves to effectively educate Latino students by cultivating communities that are culturally responsive, pedagogically rich, and take asset-based approaches to linguistic diversity. ✦



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References

Visit the NCEA Web site, at www.ncea.org/news/notes/Sept2009.asp for a list of references.