

Unmanageable and Unsustainable A Review Essay on *The Latino Education Crisis: The Consequences of Failed Social Policies*

By John Wahala

In their book *The Latino Education Crisis: The Consequences of Failed Social Policies* (<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0674047052/centerforimmigra>), Professors of Education Patricia Gandara and Frances Contreras provide a rare and candid look at how Hispanic students — both immigrant and native-born — are faring in the United States. Their assessment is a warning to those concerned with the most vulnerable among us or to those simply concerned about the future prospects of our country.

Among the points made by the authors:

- By every achievement measure, Hispanic students are performing at or near the bottom.
- Some researchers find that around 50 percent of Hispanic students do not receive a diploma four years after entering high school.
- Hispanic students are linguistically and socially isolated, receive less support at home, and have high rates of poverty.
- In 2006, Hispanics constituted approximately 19 percent of the national school-age population. The Census Bureau estimates that one in four students will be Latino by 2025.
- Given current trends, it is projected the United States will experience a significant decline in skills and income.

The central role immigration has played in our current situation is unmistakable. As Professors Gandara and Contreras acknowledge, in 1972, 95 percent of all students were non-Hispanic white or African American. By 2005, Hispanics had grown from roughly 5 percent to 20 percent of the overall student population.¹ The federal immigration program is responsible for virtually all of the national increase in the school-age population over the last two decades.²

Like any transformation, this demographic change has resulted in various dislocations that society has attempted to address. But given the specific circumstances Hispanic students now face, the impact has become unmanageable. The authors explain:

The current data do not give cause for optimism, for they show that the demands of contemporary American society are outpacing the ability of post-immigrant generations of Latinos to overcome the educational and socioeconomic barriers they confront With no evidence of an imminent turnaround in the rate at which Latino students are either graduating from high school or obtaining college degrees, it appears that both a regional and national catastrophe are at hand As a group, Latino students today perform academically at levels that will consign them to live as members of a permanent underclass in American society. Moreover, their situation is projected to worsen over time If their situation is not reversed, the very democracy is at peril.³

John Wahala is the Assistant Director of the Center for Immigration Studies.



Who Is Hispanic?

Before examining Gandara and Contreras' assessment, it is important to clarify who is considered Latino. The term, synonymous with the less fashionable official government designation of Hispanic, is the generic classification for several Latin American nationalities, and can include people of any race.⁴ Of the 45 million Hispanics in the United States, Mexicans and Mexican Americans account for 64 percent. No other nationality represented makes up even 5 percent of the total Hispanic population. Not surprisingly, newcomers from Mexico also dominate our immigration flow, accounting for 31 percent of the foreign-born population, or 11.6 million people.⁵

For this reason, the authors focus their case studies on students of Mexican-origin in California, where they represent 83 percent of Hispanics and 36 percent of the state's total population. In doing so they assert that the Mexican experience in America is similar to that of most Hispanics, an assumption the data tend to support.

A Failing Grade

Examining the available data on student achievement, Gandara and Contreras find that Hispanic students consistently perform at the poorest levels. This begins at the earliest stages of development and persists throughout their educational experience.

A survey of kindergartners, conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics, found that roughly 40 percent of Hispanics scored in the lowest quartile in reading and mathematics.⁶ By fourth grade, less than 20 percent of Hispanics were deemed proficient in these subjects. And by eighth grade those numbers had declined to 15 percent proficient in reading and 13 percent proficient in mathematics.⁷ A similar study, the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills, reported comparable results.

More disheartening than poor early test results is the pattern of increasing disengagement exhibited by Hispanic students as they get older, which results in a high dropout rate.

There is some uncertainty on the high-school dropout rate since estimates have varied. A more optimistic projection comes from the Department of Education (DOE), which finds that in 2005, 70 percent of Hispanics graduated from high school four years after enrolling. Gandara and Contreras point out that this number does not take into account those students who leave school before entering the ninth grade. They refer to a recent study of Boston public schools that

finds as many as 14.4 percent of Hispanic students never enrolled in high school.⁸ Furthermore, the authors question the methods used by the DOE and contrast its findings with a joint analysis by the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University and the Urban Institute that estimates a Hispanic graduation rate around 53 percent.⁹

An examination of the Census Bureau's 2008 American Community Survey conducted by the Center for Immigration Studies shows more encouraging numbers. It finds that 82 percent of 19-year-old, native-born Hispanics have graduated high school, though that number drops to 52 percent for 19-year-old Hispanic immigrants.

Regardless of which estimate is most accurate, all indicate that Hispanic students are significantly behind most of their peers. This is the pattern with other achievement measures: grade point average, scholastic aptitude test scores, and college enrollment and graduation rates. By every reckoning, Gandara and Contreras note, Hispanic students show "a consistent pattern of underachievement."¹⁰ And this disparity in performance has grown over time.

As a result, it will be very difficult for these students to succeed. Academics concur there is no better indicator of how one will fare in our increasingly post-industrial economy than educational attainment.¹¹ Obtaining a formal education is far more profitable today than it was decades ago. "In 1972, a male with a bachelor's degree could expect to earn 22 percent more than a male high school graduate. The difference for females was greater, over 40 percent. In 2003, however, the typical male college graduate earned 60 percent more than the typical male high school graduate, and for females the difference had risen to 69 percent."¹² Around 11 percent of Hispanics have completed a bachelor's degree by age 29, which is "less than a third the rate of [non-Hispanic] white students."¹³

Being undereducated leaves millions of Hispanics without the means to adequately provide for themselves and their families. And because Hispanics will soon be a majority in many parts of the country, how they fare will have a large impact on entire regions and even the country as a whole.

A study by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education warns "if California does not immediately begin preparing more underrepresented students for higher education, by 2020 the state will experience an 11 percent drop in per capita income, resulting in serious economic hardship for the state's population."¹⁴ The study explains that the demographic groups that are growing the fastest are also the least educated and as a consequence — without dramatic

educational improvement — the skills and incomes of the U.S. workforce will decline over the next two decades.¹⁵

A Cultural Shift

One need not pin all the blame on society for these failings, as Gandara and Contreras do, to recognize the daunting circumstances Hispanic students must overcome.

Experience suggests, and research confirms, that educational success begins at home. Studies have shown that early academic performance is related to the educational attainment of a child's mother. And since Hispanic mothers have far less education than their counterparts in all other ethnic groups, it is believed this creates an initial disadvantage for their children.¹⁶ This disadvantage is reinforced by cultural norms. Formal education is simply not as much a priority in Latin American countries as it has become here. Failing to complete high school in Mexico, the authors write, "does not carry the same social stigma as in the United States."¹⁷ On average, a Mexican adult has 8.8 years of education and more than 50 percent of the population drops out before finishing the state-mandated period of schooling.¹⁸ Mexican immigrants, and many Mexican Americans, have a decidedly different perspective that shapes their approach to education.¹⁹

But the role parents play in their child's performance is much larger than just their own educational attainment. In fact, parental involvement in a child's life is perhaps the greatest outside factor in determining a child's success. Researchers from many perspectives have acknowledged this. Gandara and Contreras assert "it is the parents' involvement in their children's education — wherever that occurs — that is the more critical factor in achievement."²⁰

The ability for Hispanics to be involved parents is severely restricted by the reality of their circumstances. Ill-equipped for the demands of a post-industrial economy, they labor in agricultural, construction, or service sectors. Such work is defined by modest pay and long hours that leave less time for nurturing children. Unavailable parents are often forced to use things such as television or video games as a babysitter, leaving their children without sufficient guidance for development.²¹

Worsening the situation is the prevalence of single-parent homes, in which the parent trying to raise her child faces an even greater burden. The overall illegitimacy rate has risen dramatically in the last few decades. Among native-born Hispanics it is now 50

percent and for Hispanic immigrants it stands at 42 percent.²²

The consequences of these factors have been severe. A *Washington Post* feature touched on the growing phenomenon of children who are not bilingual but *alingual*. Young students described in the article — who were not mentally disabled — could not communicate in either Spanish or English but were only able to grunt and use body language. The mother of one of the silent children, when asked if the girl talks at home, responded that she is never home when the child is awake.²³ Deprived of the most basic developmental stimulation, the odds these children will become good students or just healthy and contented young adults are steep.

Linguistic and Social Segregation

Approximately two-thirds of Hispanics come from homes where another language (almost always Spanish) is spoken.²⁴ Most of these students must learn English while simultaneously trying to master a school curriculum, an endeavor so arduous and frustrating it causes some to quit trying.

Researchers claim it takes the average person five to seven years to gain fluency.²⁵ A study found that "the typical English learner in California schools had only a 40 percent chance of reclassifying to a fluent English speaker by high school graduation."²⁶ And there is no guarantee that the students who do learn to converse in English have developed a deeper understanding of the language. As Gandara and Contreras explain, speaking a language is much easier than using it in an academic context, which requires skills such as comprehending a text and writing analysis. Given these obstacles, it should not be shocking to discover that the "educational attainment of English learners is lowest of all groups of students in the public schools except for special education pupils."²⁷

While English learners require special attention, the size of the population is outpacing the ability to provide it. Gandara and Contreras acknowledge, "Latino immigration since 1980 has increased dramatically, exacerbating a situation in which school systems have proven to be ill-equipped to address the needs of this population."²⁸

One does not have to take a side on bilingual education to acknowledge that having fluency in Spanish is an asset when instructing Hispanic students. But most teachers understandably lack such fluency. A survey found that "more than 40 percent of teachers nationwide had English learners in their classrooms, yet only about 10 percent reported that they were proficient

in reading and writing the language of their students.”²⁹ If English learners wish to succeed, most must do so with little assistance.

Making their task more difficult is their seclusion from English-speaking students. Research finds “70 percent of English learners attend 10 percent of all schools in the country.”³⁰ The peer interactions of these students are very limited. “Latino students are more segregated than other students, and therefore more likely than students in any other group to go to school with others like themselves. In such settings, Latinos are isolated and do not interact with mainstream students, nor are they exposed to the differences between groups in expectations and aspirations”³¹ Approximately 39 percent of Hispanic students attend schools that are 90 to 100 percent minority. This percentage is 50 percent for Hispanics in Texas and California.³²

Segregation typically accompanies newcomers, who arrive as part of social networks and settle in immigrant enclaves. But what distinguishes the current influx is that it is much larger in scope and much less diverse. “Immigrants from Spanish-speaking Latin America accounted for more than 60 percent of the growth in the foreign-born population nationally in the 1990s.”³³ Spanish speakers comprise around 55 percent of all immigrants — more than 20 million people.³⁴ It is much easier for such a large population to resist assimilation.

The natural impulse toward solidarity is also strengthened by various political undercurrents. Gandara and Contreras claim there has been recent “political assault” on Hispanics in response to the dramatic increases in immigration, especially in the Southwest, resulting in state and local enforcement measures and anti-bilingual education initiatives.³⁵ In response, they have “sought to reinforce their common identity by asserting their language within an American culture that often has rejected them.”³⁶ While the authors acknowledge this tension, which is a response to the size of the immigration influx, they ignore the role of multiculturalism, which encourages a perspective dominated by one’s own racial or ethnic identity. This fashionable dogma stokes the antagonisms liberal democratic societies have sought to suppress, encouraging Hispanics to spurn integration into the larger American community.

Since Hispanics tend to have low levels of education and thus limited opportunity, their enclaves tend to be impoverished. Around 49 percent of Hispanic students are enrolled in schools with the highest measure of poverty³⁷ and around 73 percent of Latino fourth-graders are eligible for subsidized lunch.³⁸ Although

money does not guarantee educational success, affluent school districts have more resources for struggling students. Hispanic students do not have access to such resources.

Gandara and Contreras believe these inequities are more to blame for the large disparities in achievement than even the burden of learning English. They explain that “millions of Latino students speak only English but perform at exceptionally low levels academically. Acquisition of English may be a challenge for some Latinos, but it is by no means the core educational problem for the majority of Latino students, or even, we would argue, for most English learners.”³⁹ They argue that when assimilation does occur, Hispanics adopt the norms of their peers, who survive on the margins of society with little exposure to the hopes and aspirations of mainstream students. This perpetuating phenomenon is making life worse for successive generations of Hispanics.

Breaking the Pattern

To avert this “looming social and economic disaster,”⁴⁰ Gandara and Contreras insist on an extensive expansion of state programs: “A consistent finding of the intervention research is that students need sustained support across the critical transitions of schooling and development, and that the longer students are in supportive programs, the greater their positive effects.”⁴¹ They identify seven broad policy areas: “early and continuing cognitive enrichment, housing policies that promote integration and stability, integrated social services, recruiting and preparing extraordinary teachers, exploiting the Latino advantage, college preparation and support programs, and college financial aid.”⁴² The details of these recommendations are discussed in the final chapter of their book.

Legitimate concerns can be raised over whether such intervention is appropriate for the state, or if it can even be effective. But these concerns aside, some of the recommendations make intuitive sense. Providing support to those facing unique and significant obstacles not only benefits the recipients but the country at large.

A major problem, however, with the Gandara and Contreras approach is it repeats the tired refrain that places all the blame on the failure of educational and social policies. This absolves parents and children from their responsibility, which is central to student success. Their advice is to invest in more programs even though such programs to date have failed to reverse the increasingly dim prospects of Hispanics. And they do not provide an estimate for what a profusion of “well-

trained and experienced teachers, counselors, librarians, nurses, psychologists, and other medical personnel” will cost.⁴³ They gloss over this very critical point by assuming “in a wealthy nation such as ours, these investments are not too much to sustain.”⁴⁴ But at a time when federal spending has grown exponentially, this argument fails to persuade. The national debt is now more than \$12.6 trillion and is projected to grow significantly over the next several years.

This fiscal drain is exacerbated by immigration, a fact that is completely ignored by the authors. Hispanic immigrants, in particular, use more in services than they pay in taxes.⁴⁵ Their costs are felt more at the state and local level, where most education spending takes place. But nowhere in their analysis do the authors acknowledge that slowing immigration would slow these costs, providing more resources to Hispanic students already here.

Their failure to be honest about immigration’s role in the growing education crisis makes their

recommendations disingenuous. They present a searing indictment of the public schools’ failure to equip a burgeoning Hispanic population, arguing this failure is serious enough to imperil our very democracy. They warn that states with a large number of Hispanic students will experience significant economic declines.⁴⁶ And that this will take some time to reverse: “Improving the culture of schools is slow, hard work, especially if the actors are constantly changing, and the resources are inadequate, as is chronically the case in poor schools. And poverty is not abating; rather the gap between the wealthy and poor is widening.”⁴⁷

But after providing this much-needed candor which most social commentators are reluctant to do, they fail to follow the facts to their logical conclusion: curtailing mass immigration would immediately alleviate these pressures, vastly improving Hispanic students’ chances for success. It may be the only way to remedy this growing crisis.

End Notes

¹ *The Latino Education Crisis: The Consequences of Failed Social Policies*, by Patricia Gandara and Frances Contreras, Harvard University Press, 2009, pp. 16-17.

² “Immigrants in the United States, 2007: A profile of America’s Foreign-Born Population,” by Steven A. Camarota, Center for Immigration Studies, November 2007, http://cis.org/immigrants_profile_2007.

³ Gandara and Contreras, pp. 2, 5, 304.

⁴ According to the Pew Hispanic Center, the 10 largest Hispanic population groups in the United States, identified by country of origin, are: Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Salvadorans, Dominicans, Guatemalans, Colombians, Hondurans, Ecuadorians, and Peruvians. In the 2000 census, 48 percent of Hispanics identified themselves as white; see Table 10 in “Overview of Race and Hispanic Origin,” 2000 Census Brief C2KBR/01-1, by Elizabeth M. Grieco and Rachel C. Cassidy, U.S. Census Bureau, March 2001, <http://www.census.gov/prod/2001pubs/c2kbr01-1.pdf>.

⁵ Camarota, 2007, http://cis.org/immigrants_profile_2007.

⁶ Gandara and Contreras, p. 19, cited from “America’s Kindergartners: Findings from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998-1999,” by J.K. Denton West and E. Germino-Hausken, National Center for Education Statistics.

⁷ Patricia Gandara and Frances Contreras, pp. 20-21, cited from “The Nation’s Report Card: Mathematics, 2005,” by M. Perie, W.S. Grigg, and G.S. Dion, National Center for Education Statistics and “The Nation’s Report Card: Reading, 2005,” by M. Perie, W.S. Grigg, and P.L. Donahue, National Center for Education Statistics.

⁸ Gandara and Contreras, pp. 22-23, cited from “The Lost Children of Unz: Characteristics, Program Participation, and MCAS Outcomes of Latino Dropouts from Programs for English Language Learners and Regular Programs in the Boston Public Schools,” paper commissioned for the Conference on Restrictive Language Policies, University of California, Los Angeles, April 10-11, 2008, published by the Mauricio Gaston Institute for Latino Community Development and Public Policy.

⁹ Gandara and Contreras, p. 23, cited from “Losing Our Future: How Minority Youth Are Being Left Behind by the Graduation Rate Crisis,” by G. Orfield, D. Losen, J. Wald, and C. Swanson, the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University and the Urban Institute Advocates for Children of New York and the Civil Society Institute, 2004.

¹⁰ Gandara and Contreras, pp. 27-28.

¹¹ Gandara and Contreras also note the sizable gender gap present in all groups, with females outperforming males. Some researchers have blamed this on the feminization of education while others have blamed post-industrialization itself, arguing that it is best suited for traits that are seen

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as more feminine. Whether any of these critiques are valid is beyond the scope of this review and do not change the chronic poor performance of both male and female Hispanics.

¹² Gandara and Contreras, p. 200.

¹³ Gandara and Contreras, p. 24, using 2005 U.S. Census Bureau data.

¹⁴ Gandara and Contreras, p. 5.

¹⁵ The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education report, published in November 2005, is at: http://www.highereducation.org/reports/pa_decline/index.shtml.

¹⁶ Gandara and Contreras, p. 19, citing P. Gandara, G. Orfield, and C.H. Horn, "Expanding Opportunity in Higher Education: Leveraging Promise," State University of New York Press, 2006.

¹⁷ Gandara and Contreras, p. 206.

¹⁸ "Educational attainment by gender and average years spent in formal education," Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/56/9/37863998.pdf>.

¹⁹ It has been pointed out by many observers that the level of schooling and industriousness of contemporary Mexican immigrants is similar to the immigrants of yesteryear. But the modern America economy has changed dramatically, leaving today's immigrants with far less opportunity.

²⁰ Gandara and Contreras, p. 295.

²¹ Gandara and Contreras, pp. 56-57.

²² "Illegitimate Nation: An Examination of Out-of-Wedlock Births Among Immigrants and Natives," by Steven A. Camarota, Center for Immigration Studies, May 2007, http://cis.org/illegitimate_nation.html.

²³ "Alingual Education: Young victims of mass immigration," by Mark Krikorian, *National Review Online*, June 13, 2002, <http://old.nationalreview.com/comment/comment-krikorian061302.asp>.

²⁴ Gandara and Contreras, p. 32, citing the U.S. Census Bureau's 2008 Current Population Survey.

²⁵ Gandara and Contreras, p. 138.

²⁶ Gandara and Contreras, p. 140.

²⁷ Gandara and Contreras, p. 146.

²⁸ Gandara and Contreras, p. 25.

²⁹ Gandara and Contreras, p. 147.

³⁰ Gandara and Contreras, p. 114.

³¹ Gandara and Contreras, p. 32.

³² Gandara and Contreras, p. 113.

³³ "Where Immigrants Live: An Examination of State Residency of the Foreign Born by Country of Origin in 1990 and 2000," by Steven A. Camarota, Center for Immigration Studies, September 2003, <http://cis.org/ImmigrantsStateResidency>.

³⁴ Steven A. Camarota, November 2007, http://cis.org/immigrants_profile_2007.

³⁵ Gandara and Contreras, p. 49.

³⁶ Gandara and Contreras, p. 122.

³⁷ Gandara and Contreras, p. 113.

³⁸ Gandara and Contreras, p. 59-60.

³⁹ Gandara and Contreras, p. 124.

⁴⁰ Gandara and Contreras, p. 305.

⁴¹ Gandara and Contreras, p. 300.

⁴² Gandara and Contreras, p. 308-327.

⁴³ Gandara and Contreras, p. 299.

⁴⁴ Gandara and Contreras, p. 302.

⁴⁵ "Costs of Immigration," Center for Immigration Studies, <http://cis.org/Costs>.

⁴⁶ Gandara and Contreras, p. 305.

⁴⁷ Gandara and Contreras, p. 306.