

How to Keep Our Kids in School

Across America, Hispanic children are getting a chance at a better life.

By Daniel Rome Levine

On a recent afternoon in downtown Denver's Hardrock Café, Nathan Oatman chatted with Adolfo Sandoval. "Do you ever get those ice cream headaches?" the 28-year-old Oatman asked. Sandoval plunged into a large bowl of chocolate ice cream with whipped cream, grinning. Thanks to his mentor, the 13-year-old is doing a lot better in school these days.

A year ago, however, Sandoval was getting straight Fs and talking back to teachers—someone who would not likely finish high school. An older brother had already dropped out of school, and Sandoval himself was likely to follow.

Then the young teenager met Oatman, who volunteers for Denver Kids, Inc., a dropout prevention program. "I thought it would be a neat experience," says Oatman, who works for the mayor's office of economic development. "I wanted to make a difference."

He did. The two met every two or three weeks, talking about school and what was happening in their lives. They went skiing and watched a professional soccer game. Sandoval began getting B's in school and even an occasional A, and he does not want to drop out. Oatman's example was important. "He's respected and I know that one day I can be like him," Sandoval says.

Losing Ground

Denver Kids is one of the programs that are helping the many Adolfo Sandovals in America stay in school. It's a serious problem: the high school dropout rate for Hispanics is nearly 30 percent, according to the latest government figures. It is 44 percent for those born outside of the United States.

Even those numbers underestimate the problem, since they include people who only later pass a high-school "equivalency" test, such as the General Educational Development (GED) exam. According to research by Jay P. Greene, a senior fellow at New York's Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, just over 50 percent of Hispanic public school students who entered 8th grade in the 1993-94 school year actually graduated with a high school diploma in 1998.

The Hispanic dropout rate is much higher than that of blacks (13 percent) or whites (7 percent). One reason is immigration, says Jay Smink, executive director of the National Dropout Prevention Center at Clemson University. "You have a continuous flow of children into schools who do not speak English and who are not quite culturalized into the schooling process. It is a new way of life for them and they are constantly struggling."

Another reason is the ever-present lure of the streets. Then, too, Hispanic youngsters may also leave school to take jobs to help their families.

In any case, however, dropping out is a costly decision. It's "like putting a stamp of loser on your forehead at a very young age," says Mark Dynarski, a dropout expert at Mathematica Policy Research in Princeton, N.J. "There is a tremendous gap over the course of a lifetime of as much as half a million dollars between the earnings levels of dropouts and graduates."

In the end, teenagers themselves will decide what path they're going to take—but adults can help them choose the one with the most opportunities for a better life. Here is how they are:

"They weren't against me."

School was never a top priority for Coralina Huerta; during freshman year at Dominguez High School in Compton, Calif., she says she attended classes just two days a month. Most of the others were spent drinking beer and smoking marijuana.

Then she moved to El Monte, 15 miles east of downtown Los Angeles. At El Monte High School, Huerta listened with her mother and aunt while a counselor pointed out her problems, such as talking and not paying attention. Then the school's dropout prevention specialist focused on Huerta's positive attributes, such as her outgoing personality.

She wasn't impressed by this "Student Success Team." What do they know! Huerta thought angrily, looking away whenever she was spoken to. But the counselors kept after her—and did so in a friendly way. Ultimately, their attitude got through. "I saw they were not against me," Huerta says. Greg Vaniman, El Monte's dropout prevention specialist, was her chief cheerleader. "You have it in you to do whatever you want to do," he said in regular pep talks. "You just have to decide to do it." Vaniman helped Huerta to solve personal problems, get to classes and do schoolwork.

Huerta's grades began improving—but she got pregnant and gave birth to a baby boy shortly after junior year. She didn't know how she could graduate, but Vaniman wouldn't give up, helping the young mother stay focused and in school. It worked. And then Huerta became fascinated by a class in forensics.

Huerta graduated from El Monte in May, 2001, and enrolled at East L.A. College. She's majoring in criminal justice and hopes to become an investigator in a coroner's office. Huerta credits Vaniman for her success. "If it wasn't for him I would have dropped out and be sitting at home right now without any goals," she says.

Vaniman credits California's School-Based Motivation and Maintenance Program, which disburses \$15 million to the 300 schools and pays his salary. This state program holds people accountable. "A lot of places out there hand you money and don't make you justify what you're doing with it," Vaniman says. "This program makes you." Schools that cannot show they're doing a better job keeping kids in school or raising grades lose their funding to competing schools. "There are schools lined up just waiting to take that funding away from you," Vaniman says. For the last six years, El Monte's annual dropout rate for Hispanic students has hovered just above one percent. In 1985, the year before it started the M&M program, it was 20 percent.

Helping Hands.

Time and time again a one-on-one mentoring relationship has kept kids from dropping out. Take Anita Banuelos, who like Coralina Huerta had a spotty school attendance record. Indeed, between the 7th and 10th grades, the Denver, Colorado girl was hardly ever in class. Most mornings she slipped out a side door of West High School at 7:30.

Her father, who had never made it beyond 6th grade, wanted better for his youngest daughter. But they fought constantly. "I don't care about school," Banuelos said to Ana Horvath, a mortgage specialist and volunteer for Denver Kids, Inc. "I just want to leave." She also said she wanted to run away from home and live on the streets.

Horvath understood. She, too, once had a difficult relationship with her father, and considered running away from home. But she told Banuelos that her father was strict because he loved her and cared about her well being. The two hit it off. Horvath sometimes drove Banuelos through affluent communities in suburban Denver, saying, "The only way you can get here is through education. You can have any of this but you have to earn it."

Eventually Horvath and a Denver Kids counselor got Banuelos to focus on school. They also got her a job in the mailroom of Denver law firm Rothgerber Johnson & Lyons where she worked during summers and after school. In 1999, Horvath was in the audience when Banuelos received her diploma from West High School. Today Banuelos is a senior in Denver's Metropolitan State College where she is majoring in Marketing and Spanish. "If it wasn't for this mentoring program I would be working at McDonald's not thinking about my future," she says.

Not all mentors are adults. The Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program, for example, takes junior high and high school students at risk of leaving school early and pays them \$5.50 an hour to tutor younger students. The theory is that by placing them in a position of academic responsibility for others, some students will become more responsible for themselves.

This program, which is run by the nonprofit Intercultural Development Research Association. It operates in more than 240 schools in 25 cities across the country. One student tutor is Edgar Perez, a 15-year-old attending Francis Scott Key Middle School in Brooklyn, N.Y. His homeroom teacher, Amy Dawson, knew that Perez was extremely intelligent, but felt like an “outsider” at the largely black school. His grades were terrible and he was constantly getting into fights. Dawson asked Perez if he wanted to be a tutor, and he jumped at the idea. Out of 200 students who applied he was one of 15 chosen for a month’s training. Perez now tutors second graders in reading and math. His own grades have improved, and he has immersed himself in writing and poetry. “This program is keeping me in school,” Perez says. “I don’t want to let the kids down.”

Not rocket science.

Next to mentors, the traditional mainstays of the anti-dropout movement are dedicated, deeply committed educators--such as Manuel Isquierdo.

When Isquierdo became principal at Morton East four years ago well over 10 percent of students were dropping out every year. And every day some 15 percent of the student body was skipping class. After having just worked at a largely white school in the Chicago suburbs, Isquierdo was intrigued by the challenge an urban school, 90 percent of whose 3,700 students were Hispanic. His own background also fed his passion. Isquierdo’s parents, third generation Mexican Americans, are both high school dropouts.

Since Isquierdo took over, dropout rates have been slashed and attendance rates are up. “What we’re doing here is not rocket science,” he says. “If we can do it other schools certainly can.”

Since the school’s low attendance was directly tied to its high dropout rate, Isquierdo began aggressively monitoring attendance. He also mandated that no student would drop out without first meeting in person with a school counselor or outreach worker to try to stop them, or at least understand their motives for leaving.

Isquierdo set up a phone bank staffed by bilingual counselors who worked until 7 PM calling parents to tell them their kids had missed school. If parents were not reachable by phone, counselors visited their homes. Before, the school only sent letters home and students were able to throw them out when they arrived home before their working parents.

Says senior Mayela Arellano: “He has made it a lot harder to cut class. I’m afraid to even try now.” [TK:how the phone calls to her parents made a difference] Isquierdo also established a special program, called ABLE, where students the highest risk of dropping out could take all their classes. That’s where Rosa Sacedo turned for help. Two years ago she was working after school as a waitress at her family’s Mexican restaurant; meanwhile she frequently skipped classes, and her grades suffered. When her father urged her to quit Morton east and work full time, Secede turned to an ABLE teacher and counselor.

“I felt like I could talk to them and tell them about my problems,” she says. They persuaded her to stay in school, and to make up missing credits; Secede started attending night school and also took summer classes. She graduated last June [2002] and plans to join the Navy. One of her classmates, Danny Villarreal, had also been a dropout risk. When his grandfather died, his parents pulled out of school for a month to help with funeral arrangements in Guadalajara, Mexico. But when he returned to Morton East he’d been dropped from all his classes because of his lengthy absence.

Thanks to the ABLE program, Villarreal made up for what he had missed. He graduated last June [2002]. “I’m glad I got another opportunity,” says Milligram, who graduated last June. Of Inquired he adds: “He’s getting the point across that just because we’re Hispanic and from a poor neighborhood doesn’t mean we have to drop out. He’s showing us that there is a second choice in life and if you choose it you can make it.”

For More Information

- School Dropout Prevention Program, U.S. Department of Education Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. 800 872-5327 www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/DropoutPrev/dropoutpubs.html
- California Dropout Prevention Network, www.edualliance.org 831-425-0299