

Diversity

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Language a Barrier for Latinos in Schools

Families struggle to maintain their culture

(AP) With Hispanic enrollment surging in schools, many Spanish-speaking parents are having trouble helping their children with homework or communicating with U.S. teachers as English-immersion classes proliferate in K-12.

An Associated Press-Univision poll highlights the language and cultural obstacles for the nation's Latinos, who lag behind others when it comes to graduating from high school.

The findings also raise questions about whether English-immersion does more to assimilate or isolate — a heated debate that has divided states, academics and even the U.S. Supreme Court. Arizona recently ordered its schools to remove teachers with heavy foreign accents from English-language instruction, while the Obama administration is seeking to push more multilingual teaching in K-12 classrooms.

The nationwide poll, also sponsored by The Nielsen Company and Stanford University, found the vast majority of Hispanics — 78 percent — had children enrolled in K-12 classes that were taught mostly in English, compared with 3 percent in Spanish.

Just 20 percent of mainly Spanish-speaking parents say they were able to communicate "extremely well" with their child's school, compared with 35 percent of Hispanics who speak English fluently.

Under federal law, if the parents' English is limited, schools must provide notices and information about student activities in a language they can understand. The Education Department's Office for Civil Rights is now reviewing some school districts to see if students are being denied a fair education.

Roxana Montoya, an El Salvador native in Miami who is learning to speak English, says she often struggled to help her 12-year-old son with school. Montoya said she would check the Internet to translate her questions for teachers and spend hours going through his middle-school coursework. "He'd get out at 3 and at 9, we still wouldn't be done with the homework," she said.

The educational stakes are high.

Roughly 1 in 5 people in the U.S. speaks a language other than English at home, with Hispanics representing the largest share, according to 2009 census



Doris Chiquito and her children Jonathan, 11, and Ariana Gonzalez, 8. Born in the U.S. to Ecuadorian parents, Chiquito is among those who hope their children will maintain the Hispanic culture. She enrolled her son and daughter in bilingual classes so they would also speak Spanish and not 'feel ashamed of being Hispanic.' (AP Photo)

data. Hispanics also now make up one-fourth of the nation's kindergartners, part of a historic trend in which minorities are projected to become the new U.S. majority by midcentury.

Still, Hispanics are nearly three times as likely than the general U.S. population to drop out of high school, and half as likely to earn a bachelor's degree.

Other AP-Univision poll find-

ings:

Many Hispanics lack confidence in the quality of education at their local public schools. About 47 percent said they believed the K-12 schools were excellent or good, compared with 48 percent who described them as "fair," "poor" or "very poor."

About 63 percent of Hispanics believe it would help the U.S. economy "a lot" if more students completed high school, compared with 40 percent for the general population.

Citing some of the racial gaps, Education Secretary Arne Duncan is urging parents to take more responsibility. He said the government will require districts to get input from communities on ways to improve underperforming schools before receiving federal money.

The Education Department also wants to devote an additional \$50 million next year to promote English learning. Part of that will be used for research and development of "dual-language immersion," a bilingual approach gaining favor among

many linguists.

Dual-immersion is a shift from the direction of states such as California, Arizona and Massachusetts, where voters have largely banned bilingual classes. On a broader level, some 30 states and numerous localities have passed laws making English the official language, a move that critics say will lead to more cuts in bilingual programs.

The debate has splintered the Supreme Court, which sided 5-4 with Arizona last year in saying the federal government should not supervise the state's spending for teaching students who don't speak English.

Doris Chiquito, 30, of Miami, who was born in the U.S. to Ecuadorean parents, is among those who would like their children to value Hispanic culture. Chiquito, fluent in English, says she enrolled her 11-year-old son and 8-year-old daughter in bilingual classes so they would also speak Spanish and not "feel ashamed of being Hispanic."

Her daughter, Ariana Gonzalez, says she likes having classes in both languages.

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