



Helping Latinas Succeed in School: How Federal Policymakers Can Address Barriers to High School Graduation

Latinas overall have very high aspirations for academic and career success, yet **41% of Latinas do not graduate from high school on time with a standard diploma.** In their joint report, *Listening to Latinas: Barriers to High School Graduation*, the National Women’s Law Center and the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund highlight the many challenges that help to explain this disconnect. These challenges include obstacles that affect both Latinos and Latinas, such as poverty, immigration, and limited English proficiency, as well as obstacles that particularly impact the educational experiences of Latinas, such as teen pregnancy, other family caretaking obligations, and the combined effects of gender and ethnicity discrimination. As a result, despite their high aspirations, many Latinas doubt their ability to reach their goals and face significant limitations on their choices and chances for educational success. And Latinas who drop out of high school encounter particularly severe economic consequences—they are more likely than their male counterparts to be unemployed, to earn low wages, and to have to depend on public support programs.

It is critical—for Latinas and their children, for our nation’s health and prosperity, and for the fulfillment of our commitment to the American values of fairness and equality of opportunity—that we devote serious resources to improving Latinas’ graduation rates and to ensuring their ability to achieve their academic and career goals. To that end, federal policymakers should take a variety of steps.

Congress should:

Help Latino students graduate on time and prepared for post-secondary educational and/or employment opportunities.

- ▶ Ensure that young Latino children are prepared for school by expanding access to affordable, high-quality child care and early education through increased investments in child care, Head Start, pre-kindergarten, other early learning initiatives, and family literacy programs.
- ▶ Fund initiatives that are designed to get Latino students “college ready” and that give them guidance about pursuing post-secondary educational opportunities, such as counseling, mentoring, career exploration, and college preparation programs.
- ▶ Enact the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act, so that hard-working students brought to the United States as children, but who are not yet United States citizens or permanent residents, can have the opportunity to attend college—with federal financial aid—and to seek employment upon their graduation.
- ▶ Increase support for students in need to secure a higher education, such as by increasing the maximum Pell grant award, making the funding of Pell grants mandatory, and adjusting the award so it keeps pace with inflation.

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Provide Latina students with access to educational and career role models.

- ▶ Direct funding to expanding and replicating successful mentoring and other programs that provide Latinas with access to educational and career role models as well as support and encouragement to meet their goals for higher education.

Help Latino parents get more involved in the education of their children.

- ▶ Fund and expand successful parent involvement initiatives.
- ▶ Expand educational opportunities for Latino parents, including adult ESL and GED programs.


Ensure that school environments are culturally inclusive and free of discrimination.

- ▶ Fund adequate civil rights enforcement and the development of multicultural, inclusive curricula.
- ▶ Overturn harmful Supreme Court decisions that undermine students' ability to hold schools fully accountable for sexual and other harassment. Specifically, Congress should adopt the Civil Rights Act of 2009, which would—among other things—overturn *Gebser v. Lago Vista Independent School District*, a decision that severely limits the extent to which schools can be held liable when students are sexually harassed at school.

Take steps to help prevent teen pregnancy, as 53% of Latinas become pregnant before age 20. For more information on the connection between teen pregnancy prevention and dropout prevention, go to www.nwlc.org/dropout.

- ▶ Enact the Prevention First Act (H.R. 463/S. 21), omnibus legislation that provides a comprehensive approach to reducing unintended pregnancies through improved access to contraception and comprehensive sex education.
- ▶ Enact the Real Education About Life (REAL) Act (S. 611/H.R. 1551), which would authorize the first federal funding stream dedicated to providing comprehensive, medically-accurate, age-appropriate sex education to our youth. For more information about the REAL Act, go to <http://www.nwlc.org/pdf/realact09.pdf>.
- ▶ Enact the Communities of Color Teen Pregnancy Prevention Act, which would provide grants for school- and community-based programs, public education campaigns, research on reproductive health disparities, and the development of a national information clearinghouse aimed at preventing the incidence of unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections among teens in racial or ethnic minority or immigrant communities.
- ▶ Increase funding to \$700M for the Title X Family Planning Program, which provides confidential, publicly-subsidized family planning and preventive health services to low-income women and men. Title X-funded clinics are estimated to have helped prevent 5.5 million teen pregnancies between 1980 and 2000, which would have resulted in more than two million births to teen mothers and a comparable number of abortions.



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- ▶ Enact the “Medicaid Family Planning State Option,” which would make it easier for states to make family planning services more accessible and affordable to the millions of women and families who depend on them. The State Option would allow states to expand Medicaid eligibility for family planning services without having to go through a lengthy and cumbersome process to obtain a federal waiver.
 - ▶ Ensure that the benefits offered through health care reform legislation include contraceptive care.

Support pregnant and parenting students and improve their graduation rates.

- ▶ Provide schools with funding to establish programs to support pregnant and parenting students. For information about what schools can do to support pregnant and parenting students and keep them in school, go to www.nwlc.org/pregnantandparentingstudents.
- ▶ Expand access to family supports including housing, health care, nutrition assistance, and tax benefits. The adequate funding of programs that provide support to low-income families is necessary to enable Latino students from poor families to focus on school and teen parents to support their children.

Include improved data collection provisions in the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act.

- ▶ Require schools to report graduation rate data disaggregated by gender, to provide a more accurate picture of girls’ educational status.
- ▶ Require that graduation rate data be disaggregated by status as a pregnant or parenting student, so interventions and resources can be targeted effectively.
- ▶ Require that all reported data be maintained in a format that can be cross-tabulated to allow educators, policymakers, and the public to analyze disparities by smaller, more revealing subgroups.

The U.S. Department of Education Should:

Assist Latino students to graduate on time prepared for post-secondary employment and/or educational opportunities.

- ▶ Make sure students are educated about opportunities to obtain funding for higher education and how to apply for them.
- ▶ Simplify the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) to decrease the burden and confusion involved in applying for financial aid.
- ▶ Provide grants for school-based programs and public education campaigns aimed at preventing the incidence of unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections among teens in racial or ethnic minority or immigrant communities.

Provide Latina students with access to educational and career role models.

- ▶ Identify successful mentoring programs and provide grants and technical assistance to enable other schools to replicate these programs.

Help Latino parents get more involved in the education of their children.

- ▶ Identify successful parent involvement programs and provide grants and technical assistance to expand and replicate them.
- ▶ Conduct outreach to Latino families to ensure they are aware of and have access to child care programs and early learning initiatives such as Head Start, pre-kindergarten, and family literacy programs.

Ensure that school environments are culturally inclusive and free of discrimination.

- ▶ Aggressively enforce nondiscrimination laws, including Title IX and Title VI, to send a strong message to schools about their continuing civil rights obligations and ensure their adherence to them:
 - ~ Conduct compliance reviews, investigate complaints, and issue new guidance where needed.
 - ~ Ensure equal access for all students to all educational opportunities, including necessary English Language Learner services, athletic programs, extracurricular activities, and career and technical education programs that provide training for high-skill, high-wage jobs.

Support pregnant and parenting students and improve their graduation rates.

- ▶ Increase enforcement of Title IX's requirements relating to pregnant and parenting students so that their ability to continue going to school is not impeded by discrimination.
 - ~ Require schools to change policies, practices, and school cultures that stigmatize pregnant and parenting students and erect additional barriers to their success.
 - ~ Provide technical assistance to help schools develop programs that provide supports to pregnant and parenting students.
- ▶ Educate the public about the prohibitions of Title IX.

Despite the barriers and challenges that many of them face, Latina students possess a remarkable resiliency and a strong desire to succeed. Policymakers at every level must ensure that every student has the tools he or she needs to graduate from high school and succeed.

To download *Listening to Latinas: Barriers to High School Graduation*, or for more information about the dropout crisis for girls, please visit the National Women's Law Center's website at www.nwlc.org/listening.

