

ENTRE AMIGOS – Opinion column

October 20, 2009

Latinos and education, U.S. future at stake

By Mar Muñoz-Visoso

My grandfather pulled my mother out of school when she was fourteen. The reason: she flunked a geography test. The fact that the teacher went to my grandfather to explain many kids in her class had failed that test and to beg grandpa not to make the biggest mistake of his life did not make a difference. Unfortunately, my mother did not have her mother—who died four years earlier—around anymore to help persuade the old man.

For my mother this was traumatic. She swore that if she ever had children she would send them to the best schools. At that time and in that place, the schools with the best academic reputation were the Catholic schools—in many cases, they still are.

Recently, Loyola Marymount University conducted a study of low income Hispanic scholarship students in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. The study demonstrates the effectiveness of Catholic schools in educational attainment of Hispanic students: over 90 per cent graduation rate, over 80 per cent go on to post-secondary education. The difference with the LA public school system is abysmal.

My parents are not particularly religious people, which makes me marvel all the more at their sacrifice. About half way through elementary school a voucher-like system was implemented. Certain private schools were tapped in districts whose public schools were overcrowded and/or underperforming. It did not cover the total amount of tuition but it provided my parents some relief. The program also helped the government to achieve its goals to improve the quality of the public schools. As far as education goes, it can be said that my siblings and I are the happy product of a partnership between the Church and the State for the common good.

Although we also experienced four years of public education in high school, those early years in Catholic school very much shaped me as a person. I have participated in no few meetings where numerous Latino leaders have expressed gratitude and pride at being products of Catholic education. The ethical and moral values they were exposed to, in addition to a quality education, have shaped their life journey and professional careers.

Making quality education accessible and bridging the educational achievement gap is a great concern of the U.S. Bishops. Recently a group of Hispanic bishops visited Capitol Hill to talk to members of Congress on issues affecting Latinos; education was one of them. The bishops asked members of both parties to promote programs that keep students in school. In particular, they asked for expanded inclusion of Catholic students and teachers in federal education programs, especially reauthorization of *No Child Left Behind*; reauthorization of the D.C. Scholarship program, which has assisted low income students in the District of Columbia in attending private schools; passage of the DREAM Act, which will allow many undocumented students to pursue a higher education; and funding to help students attend community colleges.

Professor Marta Tienda, of Princeton University, in the 2009 Tomas Rivera Lecture to the American Association of Hispanics in Higher Education (<http://www.ets.org/Media/Research/pdf/PICRIVERA1.pdf>), makes an excellent study of the factors that have dampened Hispanic participation in higher education and proposes that not only are the problems solvable, they must be addressed. Closing the educational achievement gap at all levels, especially post-secondary enrollment and graduation rates, is key to maintaining U.S. competitiveness in a globalized world.

Hispanics will comprise an even larger segment of the labor force in the years ahead. So herein lies the challenge for public and private institutions alike, as well as for parents: keep our kids in school, consider their education the best of investments.

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