

# Leave no group behind

Since the expectation of a civilized society is that things will steadily improve, it's always a jolt when we discover up is not the only possible trajectory.

In reality, though, the news that the high school dropout rate for Hispanic adolescents grew by more than 50 percent in the 1990s shouldn't be shocking. It's been climbing for years.

While the problem is particularly acute in the South and West, where the Spanish-speaking population has grown fastest, the numbers in New Jersey are nothing to brag about. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the Hispanic dropout rate nearly doubled here, too, rising from 22.4 percent in 1990 to 43.2 percent in 2000.

These are numbers that should concern all of us, as pointed out in a report released four years ago by the U.S. Department of Education's Hispanic Dropout Project:

"If our country stays on its current path, the low rate of Hispanic school completion means that a large segment of the country's soon-to-be largest minority group will be underprepared for employment, for making personal choices, and for engagement in civic life as is required for this democracy to grow and adapt as the founders intended it to."

The "dropout" numbers, it should be noted, aren't limited to high school enrollees who didn't graduate. About a third of that number is young people who never enrolled in school at all. If anything, that makes their situation worse, makes them even less likely to become productive members of the adult workforce.

While many factors are involved here, the primary reasons for this dropout rate are a lack of connection with school and a lack of faith that education will lead to opportunity.

To counter this, suggests Caroline Clauss-Ehlers, an assistant professor at Rutgers University's Graduate School of Education, we need to address the twin barriers of language

and culture.

"If you come to this country not speaking the language, and you get put into a (school) track that doesn't take that into account, you're not going to succeed," says Clauss-Ehlers.

"That's one issue.

"Another is that research shows parental involvement is absolutely key to things like math scores and reading. But many parents don't know how to be involved. . . . Or they might feel that coming in and talking to the teacher is disrespectful. That's a reflection of their different value system."

Nor can cultural differences be minimized.

"The American education system values individualism and competition," says Clauss-Ehlers, whereas competition is a foreign concept among many Hispanics. "The (Hispanic) focus is more on the group than the individual."

For centuries we ignored the education of another minority group, blacks, and we all ended up losers for it, as reflected in our efforts today to compensate. That lesson was part of the reason the Department of Education decided to pay attention to the Hispanic dropout problem.

But reports alone won't turn it around.

"We're already seeing some of the fallout of not investing in good public education," says Clauss-Ehlers. "We have an incidence of school violence that's unprecedented compared to other countries. We have a high number of kids who have serious emotional disturbances. A recent study showed 10 percent of kids in the New York City school system have post-traumatic stress disorder."

All of that "should be a wake-up call," she says. "We need to listen to what kids are telling us — they want more parental involvement,

more help from teachers, up-to-date textbooks and not to feel as though their teachers are judging them. We need to develop a relevant curriculum that draws on their personal experience."

We might begin, she suggests, by viewing the language barrier not as a liability, but an opportunity.

"Children who are bilingual have more cognitive flexibility," says Clauss-Ehlers, who is herself bilingual and works with the Hispanic community. "So it's important to think about how we can incorporate more than English in our classrooms."

Walter Secada, an education professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and project director for the government's Hispanic Dropout Project, did not exaggerate when, in 1998, he wrote, "It will be a disaster if a large percentage of the U.S. labor force does not have a high school education."

Granted, reversing this dropout trend will cost money. But the cost of not trying is vastly greater. As Clauss-Ehlers notes, an undereducated population begets lifelong problems we pay for — unemployment, social service costs, violence, incarceration.

"That's where we — as a society, as a community — have to make a decision," she says. "Do we want to be involved in the future of all our children?"

If schools made a concerted effort to incorporate both English and Spanish in the classroom, and to reach out to parents of Hispanic students, says Clauss-Ehlers, "we'd see an increase in school success rates."

We have mandatory education in this country not only because it's good for the individual but because it's good for everyone. If we leave behind a group that's quickly rising from 10 percent to 20 percent of our population, we do so at our peril.

*Fran Wood is a Star-Ledger columnist.*



**FRAN  
WOOD**