

Bilingual family liaisons increasingly important service for schools

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Lissette M. Piedra, a professor of social work at Illinois, says a school district's decision to cut support services aimed at helping Hispanic students and their families navigate through the public school system will prove to be a short-sighted one. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

Even during tough economic times, a school district's decision to cut support services aimed at helping Hispanic students and their families navigate through the public school system will prove to be a shortsighted one, especially given long-term demographic trends and the need for a highly educated workforce, says a University of Illinois expert in social services for vulnerable populations.

According to Lissette M. Piedra, a professor of social work at Illinois, eliminating auxiliary positions such as bilingual family liaisons to save money now will ultimately only hurt a community, especially ones with a growing [Latino population](#).

"Bilingual family liaisons are huge assets to local schools and communities, and the fact that these positions are being threatened due to state budget shortfalls is a cause for concern," Piedra said.

Schools often employ bilingual family liaisons to assist non-native English-speaking students and families in adjusting to the U.S. public school system, working with them on everything from paperwork in English to helping them find where they can purchase inexpensive clothing, school supplies and food.

Family liaisons also operate as cultural brokers, helping teachers, administrators, and school personnel understand the cultural differences that could interfere with academic success.

Frequently, cultural misunderstandings can lead to the misguided notion that Latino parents lack interest in their child's education, Piedra said.

"School personnel need help understanding how the concept of parental involvement may mean different things to Latino families," she said.

"Many parents are willing to work long hours so that their children can have the clothes, books and pocket money to succeed in school.

While some parents may not have the language or literary skills to help their child with homework, they will insist that their child attend school, respect their teachers, behave in class and study hard to avoid a life filled with low-wage labor - often holding up their own lives as cautionary examples."

Nationally, about one-in-five public school students are Hispanic. Sixty percent of the total growth in the nation's public school enrollment over the past 15 years was due to the increase in the number of Latino students, a trend that shows no sign of decline.

As national demographics change, schools must accept that a growing number of their future students will be Hispanic, Piedra said.

"These auxiliary positions become invaluable because a lot of future students are going to be the children of immigrants, which means that the parents are going to need extra help accessing institutions because they don't speak the language, and they don't understand how to navigate complex educational bureaucracies," she said.

There's also the impact on teachers to consider. Often, a teacher will recommend that a liaison conduct a home visit to resolve one issue, only to discover during the home visit that the family needs other services and additional information, Piedra said.

"A lot of times, especially with language or cultural barriers, you have to show somebody how to do something," she said. "So when you eliminate bilingual liaisons, you put the burden back on the teacher, and you've multiplied the amount of work they have to do. Having a bilingual family liaison to help deal with issues of clothing, books, food and housing allows teachers to worry about teaching. It's an inexpensive fix for a population that needs more support."

According to most child development research, the number one predictor of a child's academic success is [parental involvement](#). But if parents comes from a different culture, speak a different language and are often working long hours at multiple jobs, their ability to participate in an American-style educational system becomes that much more limited, Piedra said.

"A family liaison is the kind of person who helps families remain engaged, if only as a conduit of information," she said. "If it helps the child stay in school, then it's a worthwhile investment."

In Illinois, 76 percent of Hispanic youth graduate from high school compared to 93 percent of their white counterparts. In this context, the presence of a bilingual family liaison conveys the crucial message to Hispanic students and their families that the educational institution wants to keep them connected to the school system.

"As the baby boomer generation retires, a lot of high-quality jobs are going to open up," Piedra said. "The critical question right now is: Are we preparing this generation for those jobs? Because most of those jobs require a college degree or higher, and if there's a mismatch between how well educated our labor force is and the available jobs, those jobs are going to go abroad or we'll be hiring people from abroad with those skills.

"We have a golden opportunity for greater social inclusion for many who have been historically underrepresented in sectors of society. But that inclusion, with all its economic benefits, hinges on whether we choose to invest in public education and commit to making those institutions accessible to the children of immigrants and their families."

By adapting systems and information to be culturally sensitive to the needs of Hispanic students and their families, family liaisons facilitate academic engagement and achievement.

"If you find educational institutions alienating, your options are limited. Because education is a main artery toward upward-social mobility, those who reject the educational track risk a downward social trajectory," Piedra said.

When young people opt-out of mainstream institutions, and when society permits the social disengagement of youth on a large-scale, "we do so at our peril," Piedra said.

"Given the current demographic shifts and the pivotal role the children of immigrants will have in the future labor force, society cannot afford to allow cultural and linguistic differences to stymie the academic achievement of this group."

It's no accident that gangs are ethnically identified, Piedra said.

"People need to feel a sense of belonging," she said. "If they don't feel like they belong at home, at school or in the workplace, they're going to turn to places where they feel they do belong."

And those places are often problematic, and they're not good for the individual or society. Collectively, when you have those numbers, it's a cause for concern."

Piedra argues that the size of the Latino youth population and the role its members will play in future labor markets warrants a larger public investment in their well-being.

"It's a vulnerable group, but when faced with an economic crisis, people lose sight of the long-term," Piedra said. "There's a lot of data to suggest that Hispanic families value education, that they want to have a good education for their children. Just because they're more vulnerable than a typical native-English-speaking child doesn't necessarily mean that they're unteachable or unwilling to learn."

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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