



# Helping Latinas Succeed in School: How State and Local 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, and to ensure that all Latino students graduate on time and “college ready,” state and local policymakers should take a variety of steps.

## **State and local policymakers should:**

### **Ensure that young Latino children are prepared for school from the start.**

- ▶ Expand 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.
- ▶ Conduct outreach to Latino families to ensure they are aware of and have access to these programs.
- ▶ Expand access to family supports including housing, health care, nutrition assistance, and tax benefits. The adequate funding of programs that provide support for low-income families is necessary to enable Latino students from poor families to focus on school and teen parents to support their children.

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

- ▶ Identify successful mentoring and other programs that provide Latina girls with access to good role models as well as support to meet their goals for higher education, and provide funding and technical assistance to enable other schools to replicate those programs.

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

- ▶ Identify successful parent involvement initiatives, and provide funding and technical assistance to expand and replicate those programs.
- ▶ Expand educational opportunities for Latino parents, including ESL and GED programs.

### **Take steps to help prevent teen pregnancy, as currently 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](http://www.nwlc.org/dropout).**

- ▶ Fund and require schools to provide comprehensive, medically accurate, and age-appropriate sex education that includes information about contraception, abstinence, and how to avoid sexually transmitted diseases, in a culturally appropriate manner.
- ▶ Expand access to affordable contraception by increasing funding for programs that provide confidential, publicly-subsidized family planning and preventive health services to low-income women and men.

### **Support pregnant and parenting students and improve their graduation rates.**

- ▶ Provide schools with the funding and technical assistance 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](http://www.nwlc.org/pregnantandparentingstudents).

### **Enhance educational data collection requirements.**

- ▶ Require and fund the development of longitudinal tracking systems so that schools and communities can monitor the performance of all students, including those who are otherwise likely to fall through the cracks.
- ▶ Require schools to report graduation rate data disaggregated by gender and by status as a pregnant or parenting student, to provide a more accurate picture of girls' educational status and to enable interventions and resources to 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.

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](http://www.nwlc.org/listening).**

