School Experiences of Latina/o1 Students: A Community-Based Study of Resources, Challenges, and Successes

Part I

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1 In this study we will use the term Latina/o to represent this racial, ethnic, and language diverse population that includes Mexican-Americans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Dominicans, as well as others from the Caribbean, Central America, and South America. Hispanic is another term that is also used to describe our population.
Report Overview

This preliminary report details initial findings from a collaborative research study conducted by researchers from the University of Rochester’s Margaret Warner Graduate School of Education and Human Development (hereinafter referred to as the Warner School). Informed by a community call to action regarding concerns about the Latina/o drop-out problem within the Rochester City School District, we, the researchers, together with the Education Task Force of the Ibero-American Action League, Inc. established the following research questions:

- What are the critical transition points for Latina/o students in the Rochester City School District?

- What contributes to the development of educational aspirations of Latina/o students?

We were interested in understanding what factors influenced Latina/o students’ transition through their educational pathways. Specifically, we sought to understand the barriers that impacted Latina/o student drop-out. Data for this study included student records from the Rochester City School District (RCSD) regarding educational status and attainment between 2003 and 2007. Additionally, we conducted 31 focus groups, which included 41 parents or guardians and 95 current and/or former students at nine community locations. The majority of participants identified as Puerto Rican.

Our findings are presented through RCSD student records which detail Latina/o student drop-out and transition trends. Additionally, data from focus group interviews reveal multiple factors that influence Latina/o student drop-out, transition and persistence. Drop-out factors include safety in schools, structural and organizational factors within schools, and racial and ethnic tensions. Transition factors include geographic transition and adaptation and acculturation factors. Finally, persistence factors include the role of community and school-based programs and the influence of persistence factors on the development of educational aspirations. Recommendations are presented following each section.
Contents

Introduction: A Call to Action ................................................................. 5
State of Latina/o Education ..................................................................... 5
The Study ............................................................................................. 6
Latina/o Student Departure Trends ......................................................... 10
Latina/o Student Drop-Out Trends ......................................................... 12
Drop-Out Factors ................................................................................. 16
  Safety in Schools ........................................................................... 16
  Structural & Organizational Factors ................................................. 18
  Racial & Ethnic Tensions ................................................................. 20
  Recommendations ....................................................................... 22
Transition Factors ............................................................................... 22
  Geographic Factors ...................................................................... 28
  Adaptation & Acculturation ......................................................... 29
  Recommendations ....................................................................... 32
Persistence Factors ............................................................................ 32
  Community & School-Based Programs ........................................ 33
  Influence on Educational Aspirations ........................................... 36
  Recommendations ....................................................................... 39
Conclusion ......................................................................................... 40
References ......................................................................................... 42
Appendix A: Study Timeline ............................................................... 46
Figure

Figure 1: Student Persistence Model ................................................................. 34

Tables

Table 1: Student Participants by School .......................................................... 8
Table 2: Student Participants by Grade Level ..................................................... 9
Table 3: RCSD Drop-Out Trends ..................................................................... 14
Table 4: GED Transfer Data for RCSD ............................................................ 15
Table 5: 2004-2005 7th Grade Status ............................................................. 23
Table 6: 2005-2006 8th Grade Status ............................................................. 24
Table 7: 2006-2007 9th Grade Status ............................................................. 24
Table 8: 2004-2005 10th Grade Status ........................................................... 25
Table 9: 2005-2006 11th Grade Status ........................................................... 26
Table 10: 2006-2007 12th Grade Status .......................................................... 26
A Call to Action

The persistent high dropout rate and underachievement among Latina/o students in Rochester, NY prompted a community mobilization effort during 2008 by the Ibero-American Action League to examine the complex issues related to educational attainment (Ibero-American Action League, 2008). This study was an outgrowth of the community’s efforts to understand and address Latina/o educational attainment and dropout trends, representing a partnership between Ibero-American Action League and researchers from the University of Rochester. This study is framed by the concept of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). Through this lens, we approached this study with the view that Latino/a youth and families have experiences and opinions that need to be heard and resources to be drawn upon, rather than viewing Latina/o youth and families as problems to be resolved. Therefore, our aim in the data collection process was to engage youth and families in identifying both problems and solutions, and offering recommendations.

This study grew out of concerns about the low levels of achievement, low graduations rates, and high dropout rates among Latina/os in the Rochester City School District (RCSD) that have been well documented in key reports from 1986 (RCSD, 1986) and 1999 (RCSD, 1999) and in local media (Brizard, 2007). Latina/os make up about 12.5% of the total population of Rochester, with the predominant group being Puerto Rican (9.96%) and just over 20% of the total RCSD population includes Latina/o students. Recent RCSD data indicates that only 38% of Latina/os have graduated from high school compared to the district average of 51% (Ibero-American Action League, 2008). In light of the persistent and dismal outcomes for Latina/o students in the RCSD, this study was conducted to examine the school experiences of secondary students and recent dropouts with attention to their transitions between schools and grade levels in Rochester.

An Educational Task Force was assembled by the Ibero-American Action League consisting of community members, students, and parents. This Task Force was charged with implementing the education strategies outlined by the Ibero-American Action League strategic plan and creating and implementing action items based on the current research project (Ibero-American Action League, 2009).

State of Latina/o Education

Latina/os are the fastest growing population in the United States and Latina/o children make up 20% of those under eighteen years old (Mather & Foxen, 2010). Mather and Foxen (2010) report that 63% of Latina/o adults eighteen and older are U.S. citizens and 58% of children under eighteen live in immigrant households. These data suggest that many Latina/o students live in complex families where U.S. citizenship varies among its members. In addition, Latina/os make up 33% of the total population in poverty in the United States. For Latina/o children living in single parent households the rate of poverty is disproportionately high compared to the total child population. That is, 38% of

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2 Information based on 2000 Census Data. Note that more accurate data will be available after 2010 Census Data information is shared.

Latina/o children living in single parent households were in poverty compared to 32% of all U.S. children living in single parent households during 2008.

With respect to education, over one third of Latina/o students were found in the 100 largest school districts in the country during the 2004-2005 academic year (Garofano & Sable, 2008). These schools tend to serve a disproportionate number of poor students and 12% of all students served in these schools include English Language Learners and migrant students (Garofano & Sable, 2008). Overall, 80% of English Language Learners across all public schools are Latina/o and Spanish speakers (Mather & Foxen, 2010).

Educational attainment

It is well documented that a disproportionate number of Latina/o students do not complete high school (Orfield, Losen, Wald & Swanson, 2004). Latina/os continue to have the lowest educational attainment of all racial/ethnic groups with approximately 43% of Latina/os achieving less than a high school diploma. When reviewing Latina/o subgroup educational attainment statistics, 49% of Mexicans and 33% of Puerto Ricans have less than a high school diploma with Cubans obtaining the highest high school completion rate at almost 39% (Chapa & De La Rosa, 2004). According to Perez Huber et al. (2006), out of every 100 Latina/o students who enter elementary school in the United States, 54 are projected to graduate from high school and of these students only 11 are projected to graduate from college, with only four projected to graduate from graduate or professional school, and less than one will earn a doctoral degree (p. 2). National dropout estimates show that although dropout rates have decreased since the late 1980s, the rates of dropouts for Latina/os are higher than national averages. For example, while 8.7% of young people from a cohort of 16 to 24 year olds in 2007 dropped out of high school without obtaining a GED, dropout rates for Latina/os was 21.4% (Synder, Dillow, & Hoffman, 2009). In addition, Puerto Ricans have experienced high rates of dropouts particularly in large urban cities including Philadelphia, Chicago, and New York City for almost 40 years (Nieto, 2003). Exiting high school leaves limited educational and occupational opportunities as once Latina/o students drop out of high school, only 10% obtain their GED and the unemployment rates for those with a GED are lower than high school graduates (Fry, 2010). As a result of dropping out, Latina/os have limited access to jobs that provide living wages and are at high risk for involvement with crime and the social welfare system (Belford, 2008). Therefore, finding ways to keep Latina/o students in school provides the best chance for long-term success.

The Study

Informed by the community call to action described above, we, the researchers, together with the Education Task Force of the Ibero-American Action League established the following research questions:

- What are the critical transition points for Latina/o students in the Rochester City School District?

- What contributes to the development of educational aspirations of Latina/o students?

The questions resulted from multiple meetings with the Education Task Force that began in December of 2008 and continue today. We have intentionally developed a community-based design
for this research and are guided by the assumption that research seeking to understand the experiences of marginalized groups should be approached from an asset-based, culturally relevant perspective. As such, our mixed-methods study is guided by three primary theoretical frameworks:

(1) Community-based research: engages the community as participatory partners in project research design and implementation, values community knowledge and works towards shared understanding and improved ways to address societal problems (Israel, Eng, Schulz, Parker, 2005; Polanyi & Cockburn, 2003).

(2) Funds of knowledge: refers to the bodies of knowledge and skills in a household that have accumulated over time (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992).

(3) Community cultural wealth: recognizes the “knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed and used by Communities of Color to survive and resist racism and other forms of oppression” (Yosso & Garcia, 2007, p. 154; Yosso, 2005).

The next steps for this study involved requesting individual student records from the Rochester City School District regarding educational status and attainment between fall 2003 and spring 2007 in February 2009 and creating the focus group interview questions that were first piloted with a group of parents and students in March of 2009. Over the course of the next few months the interview questions were refined and official requests were submitted to the University of Rochester and the Rochester City School District (RCSD). We requested permission to conduct focus group interviews and obtain RCSD student records. In August of 2009 we received approval to move forward with the study from the University of Rochester and in October of 2009 we began recruiting participants.

**Recruitment.** Recruitment was a multi-step process that included community nominations of students and family members from school counselors, local community leaders, teachers, and community advocates. Information letters were sent to every nominated student or parent. Additionally, RCSD provided the research team with a contact list of parents of students who had dropped out of school. These individuals and their families were also sent information letters and invited to participate. Finally, recruitment occurred through already established programs within schools (e.g. Puerto Rican Youth Development, the Urban League and the Family Literacy Program) and through community events like the PRYD College Fair and the RCSD Parent Forum.

**Timeframe and locations:** Focus group interviews began in November of 2009 and continued until April of 2010 (see Appendix A). Focus group interviews were held at nine community locations including: Puerto Rican Youth Development, Monroe High School, East High School, Franklin High School, St. Michael’s Catholic Church, School 9: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Elementary School, School 22: Lincoln Elementary School, the RCSD Office of Adult and Career Education Services, and the University of Rochester.

**Participants:** In total, we conducted 31 focus groups, which included 41 parents or guardians and 95 current and/or former students. Of the parent/guardian participants, 83% (34 parents) were female and 17% (7 parents) were male. Of the student participants, 56% (54 students) were female and 43% (41 students) were male. Students represented seven of the district high schools (including several schools within schools), three of the local higher education institutions and former RCSD students (either transfer or drop-out). The majority of participants (approximately 66%) identified as Puerto Rican, but also offered the following as personal identifiers: Cuban, Dominican, Hispanic, and
Latina/o. Over ten participants identified as biracial or bi-ethnic (e.g. Puerto Rican and Black and/or another Latina/o subgroup like Dominican, Mexican, and/or Cuban). The following tables demonstrate the student breakdown by high school, grade and gender.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SCHOOL</th>
<th>FEMALE</th>
<th>MALE</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>East HS</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edison HS</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Franklin HS</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jefferson HS</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monroe HS</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Without Walls</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilson HS</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RCSD Grad (Medaille)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RCSD Grad (MCC)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RCSD Grad (UR)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Former RCSD (transfer)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drop-out / Push-out youth</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>54</strong></td>
<td><strong>41</strong></td>
<td><strong>95</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2: Focus group student participants by grade level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GRADE LEVEL</th>
<th>FEMALE</th>
<th>MALE</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7th</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9th</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10th</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11th</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12th</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community College</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four-Year Inst.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drop-Out Youth</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not report</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td><strong>54</strong></td>
<td><strong>41</strong></td>
<td><strong>95</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Rochester City School District Data

In addition to the focus group interviews, this study makes use of quantitative, non-identifiable, individual student records provided by the Rochester City School District’s Office of Research and Evaluation. Data for 6th and 9th grade students beginning with the 2003-2004 academic year through the end of 2006-2007 provide a longitudinal view about student status and progress including information about student background, school enrollment, dropouts, grade level transitions, and academic outcomes such as grades, course credits, and standardized test scores over four academic years. There were 4,021 sixth grade students and 4,647 ninth grade students between 2003 and 2007 in this database of student records. This includes 767 Latina/o sixth grade students and 898 ninth grade students. The four years of student data beginning at 6th and 9th grades allow for a descriptive understanding about the grade levels that are critical for Latina/o student persistence in the local schools. Latina/o students made up 19% of the 8,668 sixth and ninth grade students in the school records database. Among the 767 Latina/o 6th graders in 2003-2004:

- 54% were male and 46% were female;
- 23% were Limited English Proficient (LEP) or LEP exempt from reading,
- 17% were former LEP,
- 17% were labeled with a documented disability; and
• 81% were eligible for free or reduced lunch.

Among the Latina/o 9th graders in 2003-2004:

• 50% were male and 50% were female;
• 20% were labeled as either LEP or LEP exempt from reading;
• 27% were former LEP students
• 22% had a documented disability; and
• 64% were eligible for free or reduced lunch.

**Latina/o Student Departure Trends in RCSD 2003-2007**

We consider the process of student dropouts within a broader discussion regarding the various ways that students are characterized by the RCSD as leaving its schools. As a result, there are several reasons why students exit from the local schools including the fact that students can be expunged from the school rosters with 20 consecutive unexcused absences. The reasons that Latina/o students leave RCSD vary by whether students are in 6th through 8th grades versus 9th grade and above. For Latina/o students who leave RCSD during the upper elementary and middle grades (i.e. grades 6-8) the majority do so to attend another public or private school outside of the RCSD, district, or state. The RCSD database of school records indicate that:

• 92% (n=706) of Latina/o 6th graders in 2003-2004 were enrolled in RCSD schools,

• 7% (n=56) of the population left to attend a non-public school or a school outside of the district or state,

• 1% (n=5) left as result of leaving the United States, obtaining 20 consecutive, unexcused absences, or other reasons including placement in a reform school, youth home, jail, or a mental institution.

By 2005-2006 nearly 22% (n=171) of the Latina/o students who started in 6th grade two years prior in 2003-2004 left the RCSD with

• 20% (n=152) leaving to attend a non-public school or a school outside the district and state and

• 2% (n=19) were eliminated from RCSD rosters as a result of having 20 consecutive, unexcused absences, leaving the United States, changing schools or grades within the district, or other reasons.

At the high school level Latina/o students left the RCSD schools at higher rates compared to younger peers in elementary and middle grades between 2003 and 2007 and for different reasons. The RCSD
data show that by the end of the 2003-2004 academic year 24% (n=219) of the 898 Latina/o students at 9th grade exited RCSD including:

- 7% (n=58) either dropping out or leaving the RCSD to obtain a GED and
- 7% (n=58) leaving to attend a non-public school or a school outside of the district or state.

However, there were other reasons that the RCSD student records database provided as to why students left the local schools in addition to being officially considered a dropout or exiting to obtain a GED such as

- 6% (n=55) of Latina/os 9th graders were expunged from school rosters as a result of obtaining 20 consecutive, unexcused absences, and
- 4% (n=48) were no longer enrolled in RCSD because of expulsion, being a no show to a RSCD school, departure from the United States, or other reasons including placement in reform school, youth home, jail, or mental institution.

The rates of departure of Latina/o high school students significantly increased each year and 57% (n=518) of 898 Latina/o students who were 9th graders in 2003-2004 were no longer enrolled in the RCSD schools two years later in 2005-2006 where

- 17% (n=154) of the Latina/os in this high school cohort had either dropped out or left to obtain a GED;
- 16% (n=144) left as a result of 20 consecutive, unexcused absences;
- 12% (n=108) left to attend a non-public or a school outside of the district or state;
- 6% (n=50) left because of being a no show to a RCSD school, reasons unknown, or being exempt from instruction;
- 6% (n=50) were no shows to a RCSD school, exempt from instruction, or for reasons unknown;
- 3% (n=28) were expelled, home schooled, left for a postsecondary institution without a diploma, changed school/grades within RCSD, or placed in reform school, youth home, jail, or mental institution.
- 2% (n=22) left the United States; and
- 1% (n=12) graduated with a local or Regents diploma.4

After four years of high school in 2006-2007, 39% of Latina/o students left the RCSD including:

- 5% (n=45) dropping out or leaving to obtain a GED;

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4 The 1% of students that are reported as graduates represent students that either entered/reentered the RCSD between 2004-2005 and 2005-2006 academic years or students behind grade level who were able to graduate.
• 22% (n=199) leaving to attend a non-public school or a school outside the district or state;

• 8% (N=68) leaving school for other reasons including placement in reform school, youth home, jail, or mental institution; and

• 4% (n=36) being expelled from school, never showing up to a RCSD school, or being withdrawn because of 20 consecutive, unexcused absences.

The results describing the reasons why students leave the RCSD in 2006-2007 suggest further analysis of the school record database to understand whether the large numbers of students who exit ultimately return to the RCSD between the 2005-2006 and 2006-2007 academic years since the 2006-2007 data suggest that only 39% (348) out of the 898 Latina/o students in their fourth year of high school had withdrawn from the RCSD compared to the 57% of Latina/o exiting by the end of the 2005-2006 academic year. The school record database shows that the majority of Latina/o students that are characterized as leaving the RCSD in a given academic year are not “official” high school dropouts. However, it is not clear what practices and policies are in place within the RCSD to track students who are expunged from school rosters because of 20 consecutive, unexcused absences or are no shows to a RCSD school where they are expected to attend. This sub-population of students who exit the RCSD and are not official dropouts reflect a group at most risk of never returning to high school and ultimately becoming dropouts over time. However, these students may also represent a group that have the potential to return to the local schools if adequate resources are provided. In addition, it is a concern that the “unofficial” dropouts found in the RCSD student record database may be rendered invisible in the official dropout statistics released by the New York State Department of Education that are based on a calculation of the percentage of a cohort of 9th graders who graduate four years later.

Drop-out Trends

We draw on official reports of dropouts via data supplied by local school districts in New York to the State Department of Education to describe recent dropout trends for the RCSD’s high school classes of 2006 through 2009. This data shows shifts in dropouts and GED transfer for Latina/o students in comparison to all students in RCSD between 2006-2009. In general, the dropout rates have declined between 2006 and 2009 for all students including Latina/os in RCSD if only examining outcomes based on expected graduation dates four years post entering 9th grade. The data in Table 3 show the following trends for the classes of 2006, 2007, 2008, and 2009.

For the class of 2006:

• 48% of Latina/o students were dropouts after 4 years of entering high school compared to 36% of all RCSD students.

For the class of 2007:

• 32% of Latina/os had dropped out of high school compared to 26% of all RCSD students after four years of entering high school.

For the class of 2008:
• 31% of Latina/o students were dropouts after 4 years of entering high school compared to 26% of all RCSD students.

For the class of 2009:

• 36% of Latina/o students were classified as dropouts compared to 32% of all students in the RCSD after four years of high school.

This initial evidence shows that RCSD dropout rates have declined since 2006 for all students including Latina/os but a gap between Latina/o dropout rates and district dropout rates among all students remains. Since a significant proportion of Latina/o students are English Language Learners, table 3 also shows that the dropout rate for English Language Learners in the class of 2009 was 41%, which is higher than the dropout rates for all students, including Latina/os.

We also display available dropout outcomes for students one and two years past projected graduation dates. Since a proportion of RCSD students neither graduate nor dropout four years after entering 9th grade, the 5th and 6th year dropout outcomes provide additional insights about what happens to these students who linger in high school. These outcomes potentially help to understand what happened to the Latina/o high schools students we described above with the RSCD school records database who left the RSCD for other reasons besides dropping out or obtaining a GED. The 5th and 6th year dropout data for the class of 2007 (who were 9th graders in the 2003-2004 academic year) show that dropout outcomes actually increased one and two years after their expected graduation date of June 2007.

The dropout outcomes for the class of 2007 one year past the expected graduation date show:

• 42% of Latina/os dropout after five years of entering 9th grade compared to 34% of all RCSD students.

• 47% of Latina/os dropout after six years of entering 9th grade compared to 38% of all RCSD students.

Therefore, the Latina/o dropout rate for the class of 2007 was almost 50% after six years of beginning 9th grade. Similarly, the dropout rate for all RCSD students in the class of 2007 rises from 26% four years post entering 9th grade to 38% six years post entering 9th grade. These data suggest that we do not obtain a complete understanding about student dropouts after four years of entering high school in grade 9. The dropout process takes places over a number of years and through various pathways.
Table 3: Rochester City School District (RCSD) Dropout Trends

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Projected Graduation Year</th>
<th>Latina/o</th>
<th>ELL</th>
<th>ALL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2006 – 4 Year Outcome</td>
<td>48% (n=465)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>36% (n=2550)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006 – 5 Year Outcome</td>
<td>54% (n=465)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>42% (n=2550)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006 – 6 Year Outcome</td>
<td>58% (n=465)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>45% (n=2550)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007 – 4 Year Outcome</td>
<td>32% (n=424)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>26% (n=2281)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007 – 5 Year Outcome</td>
<td>42% (n=424)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>34% (n=2281)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007 – 6 Year Outcome</td>
<td>47% (n=422)</td>
<td>50% (n=86)</td>
<td>38% (n=2272)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008 – 4 Year Outcome</td>
<td>31% (n=444)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>26% (n=2220)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008 – 5 Year Outcome</td>
<td>38% (n=438)</td>
<td>47% (n=100)</td>
<td>32% (n=2211)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009 – 4 Year Outcome</td>
<td>36% (n=551)</td>
<td>41% (n=113)</td>
<td>32% (n=2924)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: ELL indicates English Language Learners

2006 – Projected graduation date for 9th graders entering high school in 2002-2003
2007 – Projected graduation date for 9th graders entering high school in 2003-2004
2008 – Projected graduation date for 9th graders entering high school in 2004-2005
2009 – Projected graduation date for 9th graders entering high school in 2005-2006

(Data compiled from NY State Department of Education Graduation Rate data

We also examine to what extent Latina/o students and their RCSD peers enter GED programs as an alternative to completing high school. The data in Table 4 show that low numbers of students who exit from the RCSD without receiving a diploma are transferring to GED preparation programs. The evidence is relatively consistent for the high school classes of 2006 through 2009.

For the class of 2006:

- Only 1% of Latina/o students transfer to a GED program compared to 2% of all RCSD students after 4, 5, and 6 years of entering 9th grade.

For the class of 2007:

- 1% of Latina/o students transfer to a GED program compared to 1% of all RCSD students 4 years after entering 9th grade.
- 1% of Latina/o students transfer to a GED program compared to 2% of all RCSD students 5 years after entering 9th grade.
- 1% of Latina/o students transfer to a GED program compared to 2% of all RCSD students 6 years after entering 9th grade.
For the class of 2008:

- 1% of Latina/os transfer to a GED program compared to 2% of all RCSD students 4 years after entering 9th grade.

- 5% of Latina/os transfer to a GED program compared to 0% of all RCSD students 5 years after entering 9th grade.

For the class of 2009:

- 1% of Latina/os transfer to a GED program compared to 0% of all RCSD students 4 years after entering 9th grade.

Although for most years 1% of Latina/os transfer to a GED program, there was a significant jump in GED program enrollments among Latina/os in the class of 2008 one year past their expected graduation date. Despite this spike in GED enrollment, the use of these services is quite limited. It is worrisome that low numbers of students are transferring to GED programs. Without a high school diploma or a high school equivalency, Latina/o students and the rest of their RCSD peers who do not earn a Regents or local diploma will have limited educational and occupational opportunities leaving them at risk for living below the poverty line.

**Table 4: GED Transfer Data for the Rochester City School District**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Projected Graduation Year</th>
<th>Latina/o</th>
<th>ELL</th>
<th>ALL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2006 – 4 Year Outcome</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006 – 5 Year Outcome</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006 – 6 Year Outcome</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007 – 4 Year Outcome</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007 – 5 Year Outcome</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007 – 6 Year Outcome</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008 – 4 Year Outcome</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008 – 5 Year Outcome</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009 – 4 Year outcome</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: ELL indicates English Language Learners*

Latina/o Student Drop-Out Factors

National research consistently demonstrates that Latina/os have lower educational attainment than their African American and White peers (Excelencia in Education, 2008). Furthermore, the school data provided above demonstrates that Latina/o student departure represents a complex process and a persistent problem in the Rochester City School District. RCSD school data has demonstrated when students are leaving and how their departure is categorized by district records. However, we wanted to also understand why Latina/o students are leaving. We turn to the focus group data on Latina/o student drop-out factors to address that question for Latina/o students in the Rochester City School District.

Data collected on drop-out factors was categorized into three areas: school and learning factors, personal/youth factors, and environmental factors. For the purposes of this report we will focus specifically on school and learning factors with particular attention paid to (1) safety in schools, (2) structural and organizational factors, and (3) racial and ethnic tensions.

Safety in Schools. A recent special issue in of Educational Researcher\(^5\) engages in an important discussion about school safety and violence prevention. The guest editors of this issue suggest that school safety (which they argue has broader reach than school violence) is important to understand from policy and practical perspectives and that “school safety and order transcend student misbehavior, bullying, and physical aggression” (Mayer & Cornell, 2010, p. 5). Mayer and Cornell urge for an integrative approach that responds to school safety by creating a “positive school climate, engaging academic programs, and support[ing] the needs of students and families” (p. 5). In what follows we highlight many of the challenges students faced with respect to school safety, violence and organizational climate. In what follows, we highlight the subsequent challenges:

- In school suspension procedures
- Surveillance features and failures
- Culture of violence and hostile relations

The first factor of safety and schools pertains to in-school suspension procedures. Students reported contradictory safety procedures with respect to placing students who have altercations or fights in the same room with one another during in-school suspension. Students felt uncomfortable at best and unsafe at worst because they were forced to stay in the same room with the person with whom they were fighting. Second, in-school suspension, as part of the punishment, does not provide opportunity for students to attend their regular classes. Students reported not getting the necessary academic information they needed in order to keep up with their classes. Therefore, when students returned to their regular classes they were behind and had difficulty making up the work. Students' sentiments parallel the research of Arcia (2006) who suggests that schools are relying too heavily on exclusion from classrooms as the main strategy for disciplining students. The following quote highlights the feelings of being unsafe and documents the length of time this particular student spent in in-school suspension:

\(^{5}\) Volume 39, Number 1, January/February 2010
Then three securities came from upstairs to separate us and separated us. Then they gave me [in-school-suspension] for a month. You cannot go to any of your classes, you have to stay right there the whole day until 2:00... People that fight, that go without uniforms... Getting kicked out of a classroom, or for like a major thing. Like me I didn't have a month [at first], they gave me two days...then she [the student with whom the altercation was had] was there and then she started talking mad junk so I grabbed a desk and I threw the desk. And they gave me [in-school suspension] for a month.

While it is clear that this student does share some of the responsibility for the issue, had students not been placed in the same room for in-school suspension a second altercation could have been avoided. Additionally, we must question if keeping students out of their classrooms for a month at a time is actually doing a disservice to their educational progress.

The next factor regarding safety in schools deals with the surveillance features and failures. Participants across all schools were able to share examples of students who had been assaulted with weapons and were aware of students who possessed weapons either recently or in the past. Students recognized the reasons for enhanced security and scanners, however clearly indicated that they felt criminalized in the process. This is evident in the two quotes below taken from two separate focus group interviews:

**Student 3:** I don't know. I don't like the whole how we feel like we're going into a jail when we first go into school.

**Student 1:** Bag scanners.

**Student 3:** Because at my old school, we didn't have no scanners at all – not none, and that's only 30 minutes away. We didn't have none. Like, you never felt like you were going into an airport when you're going to school.

In a separate focus group a student responded,

*The thing is, when you walk into a school with a scanner and an x-ray scanner, you feel like you're walking into a jail. You're not walking into a place where it's education.*

Students also shared that despite the enhanced security, they knew of others who had found ways around this system and had managed to bring weapons on to school grounds. Finally, for those larger schools or schools within schools, students commented on the challenges of having to go through one security entrance for multiple schools. Students' comments are not unique to schools within RCS as research has documented and cautioned that urban schools are becoming replicas or mirrors of prison complexes (Foucault, 1979; Meiners, 2007). While there is no easy solution to this issue, we must further examine if enhanced security systems like scanners are feeding into a self-fulfilling prophecy of delinquent behavior. If we expect our students to act like criminals and we treat them in ways that mirror prisons, will students begin to meet that expectation?

The last factor in this section is the school culture of violence and hostile relations. This particular factor was referenced over 100 times in focus group interviews with parents and students. Both
groups offered examples of the high schools that had bad reputations of fighting and violence. Although some students believed that schools were changing because of the new principal(s), others expressed anxiety in talking about the violence they encountered at school. There was no distinction between male versus female students reporting issues of violence. However, the majority of examples shared with respect to who was engaging in fights included female students, a population that is generally overlooked when discussing issues of violence.

The reasons students engaged in violent behaviors ranged from someone having a bad day to gaining and maintaining respect as articulated by a female student below:

No, not to protect themselves [those fighting], it's like you have to get your respect. Every time you gotta fight with someone, let's say you don't want to fight with them and they are always talking about you, but you don't want to fight them... But, if you are going to fight with someone, not for no boy, or talking about you, you want to get your respect. You want that person to know that if you talk bad to me I am going to talk bad to you. So that you know I know how to control myself, if you want me to respect you, you have to respect me. The same respect you give me, I will give you. If you don't give me respect don't think I will give you any either.

In other instances female students shared examples of older students beating on younger students:

I got jumped by seventh, eighth and ninth graders earlier in the year with padlocks. They took the padlocks off their gym lockers and all of them beat me like that. They got suspended, but they should've gotten long-term. They didn't get long-term, they came back – within a month they came back. I know they had the padlocks, but I beat them even though they had the padlocks. So I didn't care, my face wasn't messed up. I really wasn't scared about it because I don't know. I mean they're dangerous, I know one of them could've killed me if they knocked me in the head hard enough.

One male student offered the following as to why female students are more often engaging in violence, “Dudes just argue now instead of fighting, because they don't wanna get arrested and kicked out of school. Girls, they'll just swing”. Contradictory to what we might assume, female students provided many examples of the ways in which they were working to maintain their academic identities through programs and extra curricular activities; yet, many are engaging in deviant behaviors – a tension worthy of additional follow-up.

**Structural & Organizational Factors.** Structural and organizational factors consist of three primary findings:

- The availability of bilingual programs for Latina/o students,
- Use of public transportation,
- Schools within schools.

The first, the availability and enrollment in bilingual programs, was a factor that was referenced specifically with students and family members from Monroe, Franklin and Edison High Schools. Findings suggest that limitations due to space and availability of bilingual programs are resulting in
students with high need being diverted away from the high schools that do offer such services. This was particularly evident when discussing the experiences of recently immigrated students from Puerto Rico. Specifically, parents/guardians expressed concern that two high schools (Edison and Franklin) were developing a reputation for being “dumping grounds” for students arriving recently from Puerto Rico. This is illustrated in the following quote:

At Edison – about five or six [students] that came straight off the island, not speaking a word of English. Edison Tech itself does not have a bilingual program and these students have to depend on agencies to come in and help them... These children were forced to come to this school because Monroe or other schools that do offer the bilingual education were too full. They were already at capacity. So, these students come here basically setting themselves up for failure because there’s no support anything like that as far as translating the schoolwork.

Additionally, students suggested that for those students who speak fluent English, they are placed in limited English proficiency, Spanish dominant classrooms. We see these two issues as interconnected. If dominant English (Latina/o) students are being placed in programs where they are not being challenged academically and have demonstrated English proficiency, are spaces being used by students who would benefit from other classes instead? In turn, this could make room for those students who are arriving directly from Puerto Rico and need the services provided by the bilingual programs. In an era where English-only legislation is making its way into more and more states across the country (Diaz Soto & Kharem, 2006; Garcia, 2009), the RCSD is fortunate to have bilingual transition programs. However, it is clear that capacity and resources pose a limitation to the number of students they can serve.

The next factor in this section is the use of public transportation. Multiple participants across both parent and student focus groups brought up concerns about the public transportation system and conversations about “the bus” took place in over half of the focus groups. Concerns about the use of public transportation included: confusion around what bus to catch, inconsistency with bus schedules – some buses came early, some buses came late, students not knowing how to take the bus, and finally, issues of violence and fighting on the bus. The conversation below highlights two of these issues, the inconsistency of the bus schedule and fights on the bus:

Student 1: I know the bus is really bad. Like, I know a lot of people that won't go to school because of the bus...They hate the bus – the RTS. They just hate it. They can't, because like I don't know. That's why I never used to go to school. I don't know why, but I just didn't go to school because of the bus. I just didn't wanna be on it in the morning.

Interviewer: Because things happen on the bus, or because it's not on time?

Student 2: Different bus drivers. Some come early. You'll miss your bus. They'll come late. You won't go to school, because there are not enough buses. There's fights, arguments. All they do is pull over, and wait for the people [to stop].

What these concerns suggest is that there are times when it is easy, and arguably safer, to not take the bus and attend school than to go to school. In fact, student 1 above notes that she/he did not attend school because of the bus.
The final factor in this section is the collapsing of schools or “schools within schools.” The notion of schools within schools is not uncommon. Researchers have noted that such practices show promise while also presenting challenges like the overall organization and governance of such plans (Lee & Ready, 2007; Wallach, 2010). Our findings show that students often found that having multiple schools within schools was confusing and ineffective in building student community. Additionally, students and family members addressed concerns about the collapsing of schools and placing 7th grade students in buildings with older high school students. Again, this last concern relates back to the notion of safety and violence as some of the younger students expressed concern about being smaller than or little (physically) compared the older high schools students and feeling unsafe. Parents specifically were concerned with the different developmental levels students were at.

**Racial & Ethnic Tensions.** The last section of drop-out factors highlight the racial and ethnic tensions experienced by Latina/o students. Two primary findings emerged:

- Students felt that some teachers displayed racial biases against them because they are Latina/o,

- Students described the tensions between Black and Latina/o students.

We turn first to feelings of racial bias from teachers because students are Latina/o. Unfortunately, the sentiments that students described with regard to racial/ethnic bias is consistently found in research. Studies suggest that students feel that some teachers favor non-Black and non-Latina/o students (Rakosi Rosenbloom & Way, 2004). Similarly, students in this study suggested that the racial tension they experienced from teachers led to feeling confused or inadequate about their ethnic and academic identities. Students were unsure of how to address these concerns because of the teacher/student hierarchy and power relationships. The following quote came from a student who had left the RCSD school system:

> And they'd pay more attention to the White people or the Black people instead of the Hispanic people. Sometimes we feel you know, ignored, yeah and we feel like “oh, they don't get along with us because we're Hispanic.” Because that happens a lot.

This student went on to share a specific example of Latina/o students being kicked out of a classroom, which this student believed was influenced by the racial biases of the teacher. Yet, these racial/ethnic tensions were also felt across student groups.

Students also mentioned feeling racial tensions between Black and Latina/os. While research addressing inter-ethnic school conflicts between Black and Latina/o students is limited, the research on interpersonal relationships among populations of color in school settings reveals compelling findings. Rakosi Rosenbloom and Way (2004) describe an interethnic conflict between varying Latina/o and Black student groups toward Asian groups. Asian students were the targets of bullying by Black and Latina/o students. Rakosi Rosenbloom and Way (2004) suggest that such bullying was the result of school tracking and language and cultural differences. In the current study, students are specifically addressing conflicts between Latina/o and Black students due to Latina/o students’ use of the Spanish language.

> They [Black students] can't stand the fact that we can speak a different language than what they could. When they talk to me, they're like, "How do you know Spanish? You're black." I'm like, "No, I'm Puerto Rican." And then they get mad that I'm Puerto Rican. If he [friend]
comes up to me and starts talking to me in Spanish, they get offended. And we're just talking about what he did yesterday or what he wants to do or what he's going to do after school and stuff like that. So they don't sit with us for the simple fact that they don't like that we talked Spanish.

Some students felt that they constantly needed to choose how to identify in order to fit in. For instance, if students made friends with Black students they felt forced to let go of speaking Spanish. If students continued to speak Spanish freely and hang out with other Latina/os they felt they could not fit in with English dominant groups. There were also tensions in how students were perceived based on their skin color. Students revealed that those Latina/os who could pass as White were seen as weak by Black students. Students who looked Black were seen as strong by the Black students.

Student 1: I got into fights and skipping. But it was more towards females that would come at me because I was so quiet. I was very quiet. They think I'm a white girl but I'm really Puerto Rican. They'd say “oh, look at this bitch over here, she's supposed to be Puerto Rican.”

Student 2: People like discriminate and they judge before they even; they don't see themselves. “Oh she's white so she's weak. We got her.” But if you're like black “oh, she's black. Let's just be friends with her.”

As demonstrated throughout our data, Latina/o students in the RCSD are not a homogenous group. One can see how complex the process of identity formation and sense of self is for Latina/o students, particularly when you layer issues of language and skin color on their daily experiences. Finally, there were concerns from parents that programs and services were specifically being targeted at Black students. The result of which was negligence (intentional or unintentional is not known) of Latina/o student needs.

I believe that there is some stuff out there. I truly believe that the Latinos are being kind of kept out of the loop; you know what I'm saying? There's not so much for them. I think a lot of stuff is catered more for Blacks.

Therefore, when we ask, “why are Latina/o students dropping out of school?” we find the answer is incredibly complex. Yes, there were many instances of students noting teen pregnancy (as a factor for both young men and women), opportunity to make money on the streets, suspension, skipping school and overall not liking school. However, we argue the factors leading up to these issues must be addressed. Factors include those that were reviewed above: safety in schools as understood by in-school suspension and surveillance procedures; violence and hostile relations; structural and organizational factors like bilingual education, public transportation and schools within schools; and finally, the racial and ethnic tensions experienced by students. All of these factors complicate students’ educational experiences and can lead to students either choosing to drop-out or feeling like they are being pushed out. We turn now to recommendations for addressing these drop-out factors.
Recommendations from Drop-Out Findings

We offer the following recommendations based on feedback from family members and students and informed by literature on these topics. We stress these recommendations are merely a starting point with respect to drop-out factors. Thus, many of these recommendations begin with reviewing the very polices that influence the structures in which students must function on a daily basis.

1. Conduct a review of in-school suspension polices to:
   a. ensure that enough physical space and resources prevent students from spending suspension time with those with whom they were originally fighting.
   b. provide effective academic opportunity for students who are placed in in-school suspension, including maintaining course work and assignments.

2. Conduct a review of school surveillance polices to determine:
   a. effectiveness of reducing incidents of weapon possession.
   b. if these surveillance mechanisms are leading to enhanced violent behavior.

3. Establish active and passive programming (e.g. posters, positive messaging) addressing issues of school violence and risk of violent behavior. This is particularly important for young women as findings demonstrate increased violent behavior with Latinas.

4. Assess current bilingual program policies and explore opportunities to expand such resources to additional high schools.

5. Provide on-going and consistent social justice, inclusion, and race sensitivity workshops to staff and students.
   a. Incorporate such themes into school curriculum so that students develop a sense of racial and cultural pride rather than racial biases.

Latina/o Student Transitions

Researchers often reference the educational pipeline to describe students' progress through the educational system (Perez Huber, Huidor, Malagon, Sanchez & Solorzano, 2006). Ideally, as students progress through the educational pipeline they demonstrate successful transition through each level of the educational system, starting with kindergarten and ending with college.

The school records show that as Latina/o students progressed between the 2003-2004 and 2006-2007 academic years, greater numbers of students did not move onto their expected grade levels. For the Latina/o 6th graders who were enrolled in the RCSD by the end of the 2003-2004 academic year (Table 5),

- 94% were on grade level and had reached 7th grade in 2004-2005. However, 6% of Latina/o students remained in 6th grade in 2004-2005.
By 2005-2006 (see Table 6) the numbers of students retained increased with

- 66% of Latina/o students reaching 8th grade while 30% remained in 7th grade and almost 4% were still in 6th grade.

As Latina/o students transitioned to secondary grade levels in 2006-2007

- 68% had reached 9th grade (see Table 7), 24% were in 8th grade, and 8% remained in 7th grade.

Table 5: 2004-2005 7th Grade Status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Level Attained</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6th grade (one grade below expected grade level)</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th grade (on expected grade level)</td>
<td>661</td>
<td>93.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th grade (one grade above expected grade level)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9th grade (two grades above expected grade level)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>706</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6: 2005-2006 8th Grade Status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Level Attained</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6th grade (two grades below expected grade level)</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th grade (one grade below expected grade level)</td>
<td>213</td>
<td>30.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th grade (on expected grade level)</td>
<td>485</td>
<td>65.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9th grade (one grade above expected grade level)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10th grade (two grade levels above expected grade level)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>706</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7: 2006-2007 9th Grade Status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Level Attained</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7th grade (two grades below expected grade level)</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th grade (one grade below expected grade level)</td>
<td>148</td>
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<tr>
<td>9th grade (on expected grade level)</td>
<td>422</td>
<td>68.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10th grade (one grade above expected grade level)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>619</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Latina/o 9\textsuperscript{th} graders who were enrolled in the RCSD by the end of 2003-2004 had significant difficulty transitioning between 9\textsuperscript{th} and 12\textsuperscript{th} grades.

In 2004-2005 (see Table 8)

- 59\% of Latina/os reached 10\textsuperscript{th} grade, 40\% remained in 9\textsuperscript{th} grade, and 1\% were either in 11\textsuperscript{th} or 12\textsuperscript{th} grade.

As of 2005-2006 (see Table 9) we see a significant drop in Latina/o student successful transition between 10\textsuperscript{th} and 11\textsuperscript{th} grades with

- only 35\% of Latina/os reaching 11\textsuperscript{th} grade, 33\% remaining in 10\textsuperscript{th} grade, 29\% remaining in 9\textsuperscript{th} grade, and 4\% progressing to 12\textsuperscript{th} grade.

By 2006-2007 (see Table 10)

- 51\% of Latina/o students were able to reach 12\textsuperscript{th} grade but 49\% remained in 11\textsuperscript{th}, 10\textsuperscript{th}, or 9\textsuperscript{th} grades.

These data are disconcerting because while students may officially remain enrolled in schools, the Latina/o students from 2003-2007 were not progressing as expected in the middle and high school grades. This further supports our reports’ findings that Latina/o students confront significant challenges in meeting the demands of schools and schools seem to be unable to adequately address their educational needs. This limited progress further suggests that those behind grade level are at significant risk of dropping out of high school.

\textit{Table 8: 2004-2005 10\textsuperscript{th} Grade Status}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Level Attained</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9\textsuperscript{th} grade (one grade below expected grade level)</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>33.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10\textsuperscript{th} grade (on expected grade level)</td>
<td>318</td>
<td>64.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11\textsuperscript{th} grade (one grade above expected grade level)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12\textsuperscript{th} grade (two grade levels above expected grade level)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>491</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 9: 2005-2006 11th Grade Status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Level Attained</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9th grade (two grades below expected grade level)</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>18.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10th grade (one grade level below expected grade level)</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>30.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11th grade (on expected grade level)</td>
<td>229</td>
<td>46.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12th grade (one grade level above expected grade level)</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>491</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 10: 2006-2007 12th Grade Status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Level Attained</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9th grade (three grades below expected grade level)</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>12.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10th grade (two grades below expected grade level)</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>17.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11th grade (one grade below expected grade level)</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>18.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12th grade (on expected grade level)</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>52.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>442</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
As the RCSD school records database shows, Latina/o students especially those in high school during 2003-2007 had difficulties progressing though school. Research indicates that students of color experience transition barriers beyond those of their White peers (Reyes, Gillock, Kobus, & Sanchez, 2000). These additional barriers are specifically influenced by cultural incongruence, language factors, lack of culturally specific resources, and deficit views by peers and/or administrators (Reyes et al., 2000). Student and family attributes including poverty and parental support, are often cited as explanatory variables for Latina/o educational outcomes (Wiggan, 2007). Unfortunately, these explanations further perpetuate a deficit understanding of Latina/os’ experiences. The hyper-segregation of Latina/o students in public schools place them in racially isolated school contexts that tend to be urban and under-funded and are often composed of students who live below the poverty line (Cammarota, 2006; Garofano & Sable, 2008). Such learning environments place students at a disadvantage because these schools tend to lack adequate instructional resources including highly qualified teachers to meet student needs (Kozol, 1991; Kozol, 2005). A number of studies show that being in an urban public school with mostly African American and Latina/o children can lower teachers’ expectations and sense of responsibility for student learning (Balfanz, 2000; Diamond, Randolph, & Spillane, 2004; Wiggan, 2007). These school context factors make it difficult for students to be prepared to transition between grade levels and schools. Therefore, findings from our study confirm much of the nationwide research on Latina/o students in urban settings.

The literature regarding student transitions provides an important lens to examine the process that leads to Latina/o students staying in or exiting from secondary schools. Our research has been informed by the following definition of student transitions in school settings. *Normative school transitions* refers to “students [who] enter a new setting and face numerous attendant changes to which they must adjust” (Reyes et al., 2000, p. 521). A variety of factors influence students’ normative school transitions. These factors include: relationships with peers and teachers; new instructional styles, grading policies, and settings; organizational, policy, and/or structural changes in schools, and changes in school diversity (Reyes et al., 2000). Other factors influencing normative school transitions in high school include a decline in student grades, attendance and extra curricular participation; lack of family involvement; lack of rigor in curriculum; and an overall lack of representation of Latinos in college-track and/or rigorous curricular coursework (Benner & Graham, 2009; Sciarrà & Whitson, 2007).

We extend this definition of normative transitions in the findings that follow which suggest that while Latina/o students do experience the various transitions outlined above, they also experienced transitions that (re)define their academic identities, highlight their geographic mobility and other factors that are sociolinguistic and socioeconomic in nature. For example, the identity or developmental transitions experienced by students were influenced by peers, key mentors and adult advocates, and many of the concrete transition examples highlighted above. Thus, external or structural transition factors (i.e., student body size and peer support) influenced internal transition factors like academic identities. Geographic transitions were noted when students migrated from one state (or country) to the next, thus disrupting their linear transition from year to year in one secondary school. This more nuanced definition of student transitions helps us to better understand students’ progress (or lack thereof) through various educational pathways.

Findings from the focus group data complement the transition factors noted by Reyes et al. (2000). Specifically, students experienced the following school-based transition factors: adjustment to uniforms, repeating a grade, falling behind in classes, schools as unwelcoming spaces, differing
levels of preparation for elementary to secondary schools, course and school placement issues, making new friends, school size and schedules. However, our data challenges and extends normative school transition factors in several ways.

**Geographic Transition Factors.** Geographic transition factors were specifically relevant for Circular Migrant Students (CMS), those students with multidirectional and multipart (im)migration patterns. Students’ (im)migration patterns included issues that were both physical and emotional in nature. Our data reveals that such transitions are indicative of the transnational and diasporic nature of Puerto Rican, Dominican and Cuban students within the Rochester City School District. We discuss two aspects specific to geographic transition:

- Circulatory Migrant Students
- socioeconomic factors

A significant number of participants can be characterized as Circulatory Migrant Students (CMS) (see Vega de Jesus & Sayers, 2007). Students referred to this process as the “back and forth” between Puerto Rico and Rochester; Rochester and other cities within New York; and/or New York and other states, suggesting that students’ migration patterns were not circular in nature, but included multiple stops in multiple locations. Additionally, many families reported living in Rochester multiple times and for various lengths of times. For example, the least amount of time reportedly lived in Rochester was one month, the most amount of time was 45 years, with many participants noting anywhere between 2 to 8 years. This back and forth mobility is highlighted below:

> I was born in Puerto Rico, came to live in Rochester when I was four. Around when I was eight I moved to Syracuse and then two years later I came back when my grandma died. And then ever since I’ve been living here in Rochester.

Because our community represents one that is quite mobile and, often-times transient and transnational, students experienced numerous disruptions their normative school transition process. The following quote by a male student highlights the implications of this migratory process for students. Note specifically the impact this process has on the role of language:

> When I went to Puerto Rico I had problems to speak in Spanish, so it took me like three years to get the hang of Spanish. But then I lost a little bit of focus on my English and then when I came here I lost a little bit of problem with English...It only effects a little bit because when you wanna speak this certain type of language you just forget about the words and you remember the other language, so it’s pretty hard...

Ultimately, this student declares,

> ...I was able to grasp my two languages.

We share this quote for many reasons. First, it highlights the “back and forth” notion that participants frequently referred to. Second, it highlights the complicated sociolinguistic factors around learning, relearning and mastering two languages. Such sociolinguistic factors will be discussed in more detail below. This in turn influences the students’ placement and access to bilingual resources and successful progression through courses. Finally, the last part of this student’s quote emphasizes the ownership of his two languages. Despite the complicated geographic and academic transition
processes, at the end of his anecdote, he spoke confidently about “my two languages.” Perhaps the following student’s quote best summarizes many of the Latina/o student experiences, “my mom’s an immigrant. She doesn’t stay too in one spot too long.”

Drawing from the work of Vega de Jesus and Sayers (2007), our findings suggest that local Circular Migrant Students (CMS) may experience the following:

1) Lack of control,
2) “Back and Forth” Bicultural Identities,
3) Choque Cultural / Culture Shock,
4) Linguistic obstacles,
5) Prejudice, Racism, Rejection, and Stereotypes,
6) Unresponsive Schools,
7) Hope and Understanding.

(Vega de Jesus & Sayers, 2007, p. 18)

Our findings demonstrate that the geographic transitions and (im)migration patterns students experience are a persistent problem in the RCSD that directly and indirectly relates to drop-out and persistence factors.

Although we cannot account for every reason students experience such geographic “back and forth,” we can provide information regarding socioeconomic factors. These factors include: poverty, (lack of) employment, housing, and living in an urban area. Complicating these factors is the fact that many families are single-parent homes. Further, most of these homes are headed by a female which is consistent with local data that points to “Latino families being more likely to be headed by a female with children under age 18 compared with the local population as a whole” (Boyece, 2003, p. ii). Focus group interviews with parents/guardians revealed that parents experience economic difficulties and changes in employment which leads them to seek opportunities elsewhere. This lack of stable employment, and substantive income results in frequent and ongoing mobility patterns, thus disrupting normative school transitions for students.

**Adaptation & Acculturation Factors.** Students transitions were also influenced by adaptation and acculturation factors. Within this category we highlight two primary areas:

- Sociolinguistic\(^6\) transition factors
- Cultural incongruence.

Both of these areas impact students’ academic and grade level progress and influence feelings of homesickness. Often students’ experiences were coupled with those of their parents who described

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\(^6\) Including, but not limited to the societal and cultural aspects of Latina/o students’ and families’ Spanish language.
feelings of isolation, lack of a social support network, and reports of making only little steps to advance – described by one parent as “poco a poco”.

With respect to sociolinguistic transition factors, students emphasized issues with English language learning, Spanish language maintenance, and Spanish language regionalisms. The role of English Language Learning (ELL) was essential for parents and students, with distinctions often highlighting survival English and knowing enough English “pa’ defenderse”. For those parents aware of the bilingual services, both bilingual and interpreter services were often requested to ease the transition for students. Students were aware of which high schools offered assistance with sociolinguistic factors. Yet, as we highlighted above, those services are limited to certain schools and often came with stereotypes about Latina/o students that must then be navigated on top of their linguistic efforts.

Para que no empiece cometer los errores de temprano como también este escuela es bilingüe. So rápido que cuando tu vienes de Puerto Rico o de cualquier sitio que venga la primera escuela que te refieren es aquí en el Monroe porque es bilingüe y, tu sabe, empiezan hablar de la reputación no que si esto y lo otro y cuanto se interfieren los comentarios.

(In order to not start making errors from early on like this school is also bilingual. So, immediately when you come from PR or from wherever the first school that they refer you to is here at Monroe because it has a bilingual program and, you know, that’s when they start talking about the reputation and this and that and the interfering comments.)

These uncertain transitions were often made more difficult by feelings of cultural incongruence. Cultural incongruence can take on many forms including: language barriers, deficit views of Latina/o students, issues of prejudice and discrimination, low teacher expectations, and violent and hostile school spaces. Many of these forms have been discussed in detail throughout the report and as stated above, can have both direct and indirect effects on student drop-out and persistence. Parents also expressed feeling unwelcome in school spaces and often felt ignored or silenced. Additionally, parents offered that their students felt unwelcome in school spaces or blamed for their lack of adaptation. For example, the following two quotes highlight a mother’s concern with how her student was treated by lunch staff, and suggested students’ Puerto Rican identities were being blamed as part of the problem. She goes on to describe the difficulties in adjusting when the aforementioned are occurring on top of students’ needs to adjust to new school and classroom environments.

Lo único que pedimos es pues que lo del comedor que traten mejor a los nenes, y ellos no tienen la culpa que sean Boricua....

(The only thing we ask for is [to improve] the lunch staff situation—that they treat the children better [in a more respectful way]—and the children are not to blame because they are Puerto Rican.)

She continued,

Y el proceso de acoplarse también, entonces tras de que vienen con ese cambio de escuela, venir aquí a encontrarse con eso, pues se frustran y no quieren venir a la escuela, no quieren estudias porque de por sí ya le están poniendo una barrera.
(And the process of accommodation also, then not only are they [students] changing schools, but to come here and find themselves with that, well they get frustrated and they don't want to come to school, don't want to study/learn because already, they are faced with barriers.)

This particular mother is referring to feelings of racism and discrimination towards Puerto Rican children. Thus, suggesting that students, particularly Spanish-dominant students encounter schooling spaces that require a transition into new classrooms, new languages, new ascribed identities, and mixed reactions from school personnel that may include racial bias.

Students highlighted the adaptations that were necessary when learning about new cultures and racial groups. For example, a male student provided the following:

In Puerto Rico, you’re just used to like just Puerto Ricans in the school. You come over here, you gotta transition to like every race and everything. It’s not like racism, but it’s like kind of different.

Both students and parent/guardians encountered transition factors with respect to new cultures and possible racial bias. The following mother described her families’ experience:

Es un cambio brusco, porque este ambiente, el clima...el idioma, entonces muchas veces...mira yo no me imaginaba que hubiese tanto racismo aquí sinceramente porque son bien racistas la gente y con los Hispanos, con los Latinos son bien racistas y se ve en el trato...Son bien...porque en Puerto Rico, hay blancos, negros y todos nos tratamos iguales, y cuando uno viene aquí es totalmente diferente y entonces para mí fue bien difícil y frustrante y para los nenes también.

(It is a sudden change, because this environment, the climate/weather, the language...and then a lot of the time, look, I had no idea that there would be so much racism here, really, because people are very racist here and with [or toward] Hispanics/Latinos they are very racists, you can tell in the interactions, how people treat you. Because in Puerto Rico, there are Whites, Blacks and we all treat each other the same, and then when you come here it is totally different and this has made it very difficult and frustrating for me, and for my children as well.)

As demonstrated, normative school transition factors like movement between grades and adapting to new friends were experienced by students and by their families. Findings show that it is not just a matter of students transitioning into a new school environment; entire families must transition into a new city which includes various racial/ethnic groups and cultures. These transitions were further complicated by geographic transitions, sociolinguistic transitions and notions of acculturation and adaptation, issues specific to Circulatory Migrant Students like Latina/os. Despite these factors, families and students worked to maintain high academic identities and many experienced positive changes in their attitudes towards schooling. Parents and students described examples of resisting school personnel who demonstrated low expectations towards students or who blamed students for their difficult academic transition. Likewise, parents and students also described positive examples of those school personnel who demonstrated care towards their students which fostered academic aspirations. Ultimately, the transition process is a tenuous one which continues to be facilitated by
negative perceptions about Latina/os as chronic underachievers despite the affirmative efforts by
caring teachers and other school/community personnel.

We turn now to the recommendations based on transition factors.

**Recommendations from Transition Findings**

The following recommendations are informed by data about transition factors:

1. Have staff available at each school to deal specifically with mobility and migration issues
   related to student transitions, adaptation and educational progress.

Some of the parents we spoke with were unaware of the resources available in the local community
and within the district. Some of these parents were spoken with at local churches and others were
invited by parents who were already involved. Therefore we recommend,

2. Provide increased opportunity for parents to participate in transition programs such as the
   Family Literacy Program (in school) and family-based programs outside of school.

   a. Outreach to families in non-traditional ways such as by providing incentives for
      already involved parents to invite a new parent to attend and by outreach to local
      churches.

3. Enhance the bilingual staff available at schools and ensure interpreter services are
   available so that students do not have to fill that role.

4. Increase access to individuals who serve as community advocates for students and
   families.

The following recommendations are based on research conducted by Vega de Jesus & Sayers (2007
p. 19) and are relevant to the findings presented here.

5. In an effort to reduce feelings of cultural incongruence and marginalization, provide
   access to culturally responsive counseling services and support staff.

6. Make assessments and student test results (e.g. English proficiency tests) available to
   families if/when students must move to another school.

**Persistence Factors: Community & School-Based Programs**

The focus on individual and structural factors exclusively ignores that Latina/o students, families, and
communities have linguistic and cultural assets and resources that can be used in promoting academic
perseverance and success (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Yosso, 2005).
Despite the challenges that Latina/o students face, a significant theme arising from student focus
group data was that much of their academic and social support came as a result of community and
school-based programs. Community and/or school-based programs were referenced over 150 times in
over half of the interviews. These programs included those provided by external social service
agencies (e.g., Ibero American Action League and the American Red Cross), a local baseball little
league, and peer mediator programs. There were two school-based programs that were referenced
numerous times across all interviews - the federally funded TRIO Upward Bound program, and the
AVID (Advancement via Individual Determination) program. While schools were often portrayed as uncaring, unwelcoming, and even unwilling to support Latina/o students’ success, these programs and the peers and staff within them were seen as key resources.

Findings suggest that community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) can be located among multiple players including students, families, community members, community and school-based organizations, indicating that involvement with community and school-based programs is important to Latina/o student grade level transition in secondary school. For the purposes of this report, we will focus solely on the role of school and community-based programs and those individuals within them (which we label as “institutional agents,” (Stanton-Salazar, 2001)) that influence the school persistence of Latina/o students.

Community and school-based programs. Established research on the subject and our findings suggest a theory of change regarding relationships between Latina/o students’ background, and access to community and school-based resources including high school persistence and aspirations. Findings suggest, as illustrated in figure 1, that Latina/o students have important personal background characteristics to be considered in an investigation regarding their schooling experiences (Harris, et al., 2010). These include race/ethnicity, family, and resources and barriers related to Spanish dominance and English language acquisition. Additionally, students’ experiences are influenced by environmental factors such as neighborhoods and peer groups. For example, our data demonstrate that participants reported complex (multiple) racial and ethnic identities that were often related to national origin (i.e., Dominican Republic or Puerto Rico). The model also illustrates the role that schools play in mediating students’ experiences as they participate (or not) with community and school-based programs. For example, teacher and school staff responses to Latina/o students and their families influenced schooling experiences in various ways and can ultimately influence persistence. Access to community and school-based programs were often facilitated and/or influenced by the various background factors that students negotiate.

We define community and school-based programs in three distinct categories:

1. Programs based solely in the community that do not have a presence (either formally or informally) in the schools. This might include a youth leadership program sponsored by the American Red Cross.

2. Community-school based programs with presence in the school. This might include the youth advocates who work with the Puerto Rican Youth Development (PRYD) or the mentors associated with the Urban League.

3. School-based programs that do not have presence and/or coordination based in the community. This would include programs like Upward Bound. Further distinction of this category of programs might be district-wide programs (such as AVID) versus specific school-based programs.
Figure 1: Theory of Change: Latina/o Student Persistence Model

STUDENT BACKGROUND FACTORS

PERSONAL FACTORS
- Family
- Race/Ethnicity
- Siblings
- Social/mental health problems
- Language and Language Barriers

ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS
- Community
- Peers

RESOURCES (INTERVENTION)

1.) Community-Based Program
   e.g. American Red Cross Leadership Program
2.) Community-School Based Program
   e.g. Puerto Rican Youth Development Program with in-school advocates
3.) School-Based Program
   e.g. AVID

No participation in community or school-based programs

MEDIATING FACTORS

SCHOOL FACTORS
- Teachers/School staff
- Mentors
- Racial Climate
- Safety
- Testing
- Tracking
- School Discipline and Academic Policies

OUTCOMES

STUDENT OUTCOMES: PERSISTENCE
- Successful transition from year to year measured by credit accumulation.
- Remain in school (e.g. no drop-out)
- Development of educational aspirations.

(Harris & Kiyama, 2010)
Despite challenges confronted in school, when students had access to community and school-based programs that were culturally and linguistically relevant it allowed for the development of caring and lasting relationships with peers, role models, and teachers based on 

*confianza* (mutual trust). The greater *confianza* developed, the more likely students were to seek assistance and resources from peers and teachers (Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Stanton-Salazar (2001) further notes that *confianza* is necessary for Latina/o students to engage in “regular help seeking and for the fluid, recurrent, and tailored transfer of key institutional resources from agent to student” (pp. 198-199).

The following were shared as specific examples of the resources provided by community and school-based programs:

- Professional development
- Academic development
- Personal development
- Incentives for staying in school (like incentives for good grades or opportunities for summer jobs; maintain active involvement)
- Cultivation of ability and confidence and opportunity for students to help other students (i.e. peer educator, seniors as examples of freshmen)
- Opportunity to be with Latina/o community while also expanding out and meeting others from different cultures and race/ethnicities
- Opportunity for students to develop their own “voice” - their individual agency and advocacy.

There is a specific factor that deserves additional attention. Students often referred to these programs as providing a “safe space” for them. This was noted in two ways – a figurative safe space where they could turn for advice and support like finding the emotional support that was needed when working through the difficulties or home or school, and a physical or literal safe area (such as a room in school or a building in the community) where they could go for support. The first example we share is the conversation with two students regarding their feelings about Puerto Rican Youth Development:

*Interviewer:* So what would school be like without PRYD?

*Female Student:* Hell. School would be hell without PRYD.

*Male Student:* I would drop out. To be honest, I would drop out of school if PRYD wasn't here.

What is clear in these statements is that the support provided by PRYD influenced students’ persistence in school. What we question is – what is the gap or role that PRYD (and other programs) are filling that our schools are not? While we cannot ignore the integral role these programs play, we must also question if responsibilities are being shifted from the schools to the programs? One particular student described the programs as “peace among chaos.” Another student provided the following description of the physical space that she could turn to when she needed support,

*This room [a room in a school building], is somewhere where you can just be open with yourself... You could be yourself. You don't have to be something else outside of these four*
walls to impress everybody else. You can be yourself. You can be yourself in this classroom. You can say what you want. You can express how you feel. And we got the whiteboard so we can express whatever we feel. We can write it on the board. We got our signs everywhere. I’m really dedicated to this group.

Students played an active role, as this student describes, in maintaining this safe space for themselves and others. Access to community and school-based programs can also be a significant moderator regarding Latina/o student experiences in schools because of the positive role social networks and the resources provided by those networks can have for educational outcomes. Findings consistently pointed to the school and community-based programs serving as “human bridges” (Stanton-Salazar, 2001) or organizational bridges to additional resources. It was often the case that if the program did not have direct access to the tools or resources that students needed, they would connect them with another individual or program that did. Our findings suggest that adults available through community and school-based programs (who were not employed as teachers or counselors in the RCS) acted as institutional agents for Latina/o as students negotiated within schools. Once mutual trust is established, the influence of such programs on students’ educational opportunities is evident. Yet, our data also revealed that if those programs and the people within them were removed, students felt a profound lost.

*Interviewer 1:* Entonces si sacas PRYD, si sacas Hillside, y estas aquí en [la escuela] y quieres hablar con alguien...

(Then, if you take away PRYD, if you take out Hillside, and you are here in [the school] and you want to speak to someone.)

*Student 1:* No tienes a nadie. (You don’t have anyone.)

*Interviewer 2:* Si no esta [program mentor] con quien habla?

(If it’s not [program mentor] who do you talk to?)

*Student 2:* Nadie. (No one.)

When students lack these embedded supports among caring adults available in community and school-based programs, they are less likely to be successful in school and are at risk of dropping out. Although these programs reflect federal and national initiatives, the introduction of Upward Bound and AVID into the local schools helps to create a cadre of Latina/o students who serve as a supportive academic peer group as they realize postsecondary aspirations. In an unconventional way, these programs serve as local community resources for Latina/o participants because they provide a level of protection from the negative characteristics of schools that do not support student success.

**Influence of persistence factors on educational aspirations.** Given the increasing presence of Latina/o students in U.S. public schools we must consider student experiences and outcomes relative to Latina/o student educational aspirations. We draw upon the following definition when understanding students’ aspirations, “a student’s ability to identify and set goals for the future,
while being inspired in the present to work toward those goals (Quaglia & Cobb, 1996. p. 130). Studies show that Latina/o families and students have high aspirations for education in the United States (Goldenberg, Gallimore, Reese, & Garnier, 2001; Kiyama, 2010). Goldenberg, Gallimore, Reese, and Ganier’s (2001) seven year study of Latina/o kindergarteners from immigrant families demonstrate that parents held high educational aspirations for their children. Survey responses obtained from the Latina/o parents from kindergarten through sixth grade ranged from 84% to 93% of parents reporting that they expected their children to attend or finish college. Parent interviews identified that they saw education as a means for social mobility and access to better occupational opportunities. Despite these aspirations, parents reported lower educational expectations. That is, while 91% of parents reported that they aspired for their children to attend or finish college only 49% of them expected college attendance or completion. Among high school students participating in the National Women’s Law Center and the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (2009) study, 98.5% of the Latinas surveyed (n=332) expected to graduate from high school or higher and 80% indicated aspirations to complete college or an advanced degree. However, only 51% of the same young women expected to graduate from college or obtain an advanced degree. Despite the evidence that Latina/o students and families have high aspirations for high school graduation and college, there is a disconnection between educational aspirations and expectations. Additionally, our findings parallel what has been documented in the literature, aspirations are complex and often incomplete as steps required to achieve educational goals can be misunderstood or unknown (Kiyama, 2010).

It was evident that school-based programs in particular played a significant role in furthering the development of students’ educational aspirations. It was also evident that students’ own intrinsic motivation and resiliency played significant roles in developing positive educational aspirations. Thus, we highlight two factors influencing educational aspirations:

- School-based programs
- Students’ intrinsic motivation and resiliency

When specifically examining college aspirations and opportunity, two school-based programs were noted as significant resources – AVID and Upward Bound. While similar sentiments were shared about the IB Program (International Baccalaureate) at Wilson HS, data on this particular school was limited to one student. Thus, we focus this conversation on AVID and Upward Bound. Currently, the AVID program is in 18 of the RCSD high schools. The Upward Bound program, coordinated through the University of Rochester’s Kearns’s Center, is currently in five RCSD high schools. If considering the multiple schools within schools in the RCSD, Upward Bound has presence in over ten high schools. Since Upward Bound began at the University of Rochester in 2007, it has successfully served 163 high school students (Upward Bound, 2010). Consistently, both students and parents commented on the importance of such programs and noted the goal of the programs in helping students prepare for college. AVID and Upward Bound cultivated a sense of pride in students that was developed with respect to their work, their behavior, and their identities as young academic scholars. While one student noted, “It was hard for me to switch from immaturity to maturity,” the sentiment was that students and parents were pleased with the fact that these two programs held students to high academic standards and helped them to set high academic expectations for themselves. With regard to specific educational skills, these programs helped students with learning styles, note taking, college search, college applications, and trips to local
college campuses. Students specifically noted the increase in their grades from B’s and C’s to A’s after becoming involved with these programs.

Finally, school-based programs, like community-based programs helped connect students with important institutional agents. These examples were not limited to AVID and Upward Bound and also included programs like the Teaching and Learning Institute and the Entrepreneurship Program. Individuals associated with these programs became key persons of influence for students. Institutional agents were often described as, “caring” which was interpreted to include asking about life goals, following up with students after class or at home, and talking to students about their influential peer groups. These institutional agents were often the teachers or mentors associated with the school-based programs. This is evident in the quote below shared by a male student participant in Upward Bound:

Like, a lot of my friends were in gangs and what not, doing horrible things, and for a long time, I felt like that’s what I wanted with my life. So, that was like my life at one point in time until like I met my mentor, and he sorta changed my perspective on life, ... Yeah, so I met my mentor... So, he sorta like showed me like there’s nothing wrong with being a smart guy.

While Latina/o students in secondary schools report the relevance of community and school-based programs to their school success, we do not know how involvement with these resources systematically influences high school persistence and outcomes over time. In this era where school districts are expected to use evidence based programs, it is necessary to understand how school-based advocates and community interventions shape how Latina/o students access resources that influence student performance, persistence, and aspirations.

Finally, Latina/o students demonstrated knowledge about postsecondary opportunities and offered specific information about their educational goals. Educational goals were often fueled by intrinsic motivation and resiliency. College conversations were referenced nearly 100 times in interviews with students. Students were very clear and confident on the areas of study they are interested in. Subject and career exploration was broad and include the following (among many others): gaming designer, elementary and bilingual education, fire science, marines, army, hair stylist (barber), mechanical engineer, math, history, science, art (illustration), medicine (chief of surgery), and lawyer. In many interviews when asked who planned to attend college, all students would nod yes or raise their hands affirmatively. However, with the exception of those students who participated in programs like AVID, Upward Bound and the Teaching & Learning Institute, few Latino/a students and families had knowledge of the concrete steps needed to apply to and obtain a college education. Therefore, disconnect between students’ aspirations and expectations were demonstrated. It is evident from our study that these programs make students aware of their college and career opportunities. Knowing the steps required not only to graduate high school, but to enter college are imperative for many more Latina/o students. It was clear that some of students’ intrinsic motivation resulted as a means to negate naysayers, and prove them wrong. We understand these students’ experiences as “contra la corriente,” (against the current) because students were demonstrating not only how they were going against stereotype and expectations that people had of them, but of their larger Latina/o community. And, as mentioned previously, it often took just one person to help a student understand their potential. The importance of positive institutional agents was a common thread in nearly all of the interviews as described by the following student:
Throughout my years I had a lot of people who believed in me, before I even did. In 3rd grade when I had a turn for the worse I had teachers who were telling me that 'you were better than this.' I didn't believe it and it's just people believing in me, you kind of start thinking to yourself 'well maybe their right' and then you go out to start prove them right and prove the people who thought you weren't, prove them wrong. It's just that inner motivation to make sure that you look good. I still remember, I think that it was a compliment, but I took it in a bad way. My principal when I was in 5th grade I took the ENA exams in 4th grade and he went and read them he came up to me and said 'wow I'm so proud of you and in Spanish finally doing good' and I kind of thought that I shouldn't be the only one. So I'm going out there to prove that a Hispanic can do anything that anybody else can do. It doesn't matter if I'm Hispanic or not it just matters that I have my motivation and that people are helping me and that anybody can make it through.

We encountered many students with fierce determination and positive academic goals. Yet, we do not want to let their motivational stories deter us from addressing the systemic factors that often derail students’ educational opportunities. For that, we turn to the recommendations.

**Recommendations from Persistence Findings:**

Several recommendations can be drawn from data regarding community and school-based programs. First, services for Latina/os appear to be concentrated in one or two schools or one or two programs. This ranges from school-based programs like the Bilingual Program at Monroe High School to the AVID and IB programs. Although present in many of the district schools, opportunity for involvement within schools appears to remain limited. It also includes the decreasing visibility of programs like PRYD in schools. Despite the smaller number of Latina/o students at other schools, access to such programs should be equitable. Thus, the first recommendation is:

1. Work to create programmatic opportunity in every school for Latina/o students.
   a. Establish partnership with community organizations to ensure community-based programs have a physical space and presence in each high school.
   b. Direct district resources to ensure that school-based programs are expanded to become available to students in every school.

Students and parents specifically provided recommendations about school and community-based programs. One student suggested that programs should be offered to all students during lunch, suggesting a need for accessible times. Thus, the second recommendation is:

2. School-based programs should be provided during accessible time periods for students.

Upon complimenting the work of community-based programs, one parent noted the distinct separation and, oftentimes, overlap between some of the initiatives. He suggested services should be more collaborative. Therefore, the third recommendation is:
3. Establish collaborative partnership and programming between community-based programs and initiatives in an effort to provide more accessible resources to students and parents and to preserve human and financial resources.

In an effort to create a positive college-going culture in schools, we recommend the following:

4. Create partnerships with local higher education institutions to have consistent college representatives present in high schools. These representatives should provide not only institution specific recruitment information, but general college knowledge information about applications and federal financial aid. (refer to the College Prep Center\textsuperscript{7} at East High School for more information).

5. Develop active and passive programming to consistently engage students in college knowledge in an effort to establish messages that college is an opportunity for all students, not just for a select few.

6. Research successful college outreach programs for parents\textsuperscript{8} so that college knowledge can begin in the home during elementary school when students are first developing their educational aspirations.

Finally, the space provided by the focus groups themselves became a form of education and opportunity for students. Many commented that they felt comfortable sharing their concerns and personal experiences. Others commented that it felt like, “a family.” Thus, a final recommendation is:

7. Partner with local community organizations and higher education institutions to continue such conversations as a means to allow students to express their concerns and use their voices in an environment that is non-judgmental and safe. Such group conversations should be facilitated outside individuals not employed by the schools.

Conclusion

We fully believe that that the trends and factors presented in this report represent a problem the entire community must address. The educational issues facing Latina/o students are not just a school problem or a family problem. Changes in the opportunity structure for Latina/o students will require a commitment from the entire community. We cannot continue to hear stories of Latina/o students being presented with more opportunities on the street, than in their school. Thus, it is our objective with this report to not only document the trends and factors influencing Latina/o student drop-out and transition, but to inform and to move you to action. The findings of both the school data and focus group interviews parallel much of what many urban districts face nationwide. However, there are key points that relate specifically to how Latina/o students experience school in the Rochester

\textsuperscript{7} The College Prep Center is a college advising program at East High School. It is a collaborative partnership between the University of Rochester and East High School.

\textsuperscript{8} Successful programs include the University of Arizona’s College Academy for Parents (http://sao.arizona.edu/cap); Arizona State University’s American Dream Academy (http://cdr.asu.edu/Programs/american-dream-academy-ada); or the University of Utah’s Adelante Partnership (http://www.partners.utah.edu/yes/adelante/adelante.html).
City School District. These experiences are influenced by structural and organizational factors like the use of public transportation, collapsing of schools or schools-within-schools, and the availability of bilingual resources in schools. Additionally, safety and violence in schools was a consistent theme across all focus groups, suggesting we must review the policies and practices related to in school suspension, surveillance, and screening procedures. Finally, these experiences are exacerbated by the racial and ethnic tensions felt by Latina/o students, which calls for more inclusive and culturally responsive spaces.

The transition experiences of Latina/o students and families speak to the need for schooling systems to provide necessary resources that make this frequent migratory group comfortable and welcome in schools and communities. Specifically, findings from this section call for us better understand and serve those students who are characterized as circulatory migrant students. Such students experience various socioeconomic, sociolinguistic, and cultural adaptation factors that may not be present for other student groups.

Finally, the role of school and community-based programs as persistence factors have important implications for state and district policy. If a positive relationship is found between student involvement in community and school-based programs and high school persistence, then local school districts will have evidence to establish policies that formally integrate community partnerships and school-based programs into all secondary schools. This is especially important at this time, as many states and local school districts are confronting budget challenges and are making cuts in personnel and programs, and thus need evidence of the value of competing programs to decide which ones they should invest in.

Our recommendations attempt to create safe and nurturing environments for Latina/o students to learn and become successful scholars. Such environments should work in collaboration with Latina/o communities, organizations and families. Therefore, we stress that all recommendations should include students and families in the planning and implementation processes. This report marks the beginning of many community forums, discussions with students, policy briefs, and additional reports that will occur over the couple years. It signals a starting point for the Education Task Force and the researchers at the University of Rochester. We expect to collaborate with the Rochester City School District and the larger community so that we can shift practices and policies to prevent Latina/o students from having to work “contra la corriente.”
References


Yosso, T.J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. Race, Ethnicity, and Education. 8(1), 69-91

Appendix A: Study Timeline

October / November 2008: Team invited to preliminary discussions with Education Task Force members regarding Latina/o drop out concerns in the Rochester City School District.

December 2008 – January 2009: Discussions about goals, focus, and participants for focus groups. Development of initial, guiding, research questions.

February 2009: Development of focus group interview questions.

March 2009: Pilot of focus group interview questions with over 20 parents and students. Held at Puerto Rican Youth Development.

March 2009 – September 2009: Ongoing discussions with RCSD research/evaluation personnel regarding student attainment and achievement dataset.

April 2009 – July 2009: Request (formal application) to the University of Rochester Research Review Board for permission to conduct research and collect data.

August 2009: Approval from the Research Review Board.

October 2009: Recruitment for focus group interviews.

November 2009 – April 2010: Focus group interviews with parents and students.

November 2009 – September 2010: Analysis of RCSD Achievement and Attainment dataset.

May 2010 – September 2010: Analysis of focus group interviews.