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Latino students' advocates focus on numbers

Test scores, dropout rates

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WORCESTER— Latino students in Worcester score worse on the statewide standardized tests than any other ethnic group, and they also score worse than their Latino peers statewide. As a group statewide, Latinos are also more likely to be absent and drop out of school, according to a recent report from the University of Massachusetts at Boston.

Faced with those facts, a local group of Latino advocates, parents and educators decided in February to form the Latino Education Advocacy Partnership and try to improve those numbers. Its leaders decided to focus on Woodland and Claremont academies (the former Accelerated Learning Laboratory) in Main South. At least half of the students in both academies are Latino (the districtwide average is 36 percent), and both academies also have very high levels (at least 82 percent) of low-income families.

Yesterday, the group held a press conference to discuss its efforts and statewide statistics on Latino students analyzed by the Mauricio Gaston Institute for Latino Community Development and Public Policy at UMass-Boston.

The Gaston Institute's report cites high suspension rates among Latinos, the critical importance of reading proficiently by the third grade, and the fact that Latinos are beginning to drop out as early as middle school. The early dropout numbers are "not a huge amount, but it's something that's starting to emerge as more and more of a problem. We don't know enough about it," said Gaston Institute researcher Nicole Lavan.

The news wasn't all bad: The achievement gap between white and Latino students in English language arts statewide has shrunk over the past five years, according to the Gaston Institute. The achievement gap in math, however, has not had the same improvement.

The advocacy partnership is an outgrowth of the Woodland and Claremont Academies Neighborhood Task Force formed by City Councilor Barbara G. Haller and the Worcester Community Connections Coalition of the Worcester Community Action Council, said Jabian Gutierrez, a senior at the College of the Holy Cross and an aide to Ms. Haller who, through the Latino Education Institute, has been hired as the parent advocacy coordinator for LEAP.

Latino parents want to be involved in their children's education, but sometimes they do not speak English or do not realize they need to be an advocate for their children, Mr. Gutierrez said. In March, he and Woodland Academy Principal Patricia E. Padilla went door to door to rally parents for a meeting. Seventy showed up and participated in focus groups about their hopes for their children and listened to speakers such as Worcester County Juvenile Court Judge Luis G. Perez.

The group has continued regular meetings and planned to hold a math night last night, Mr. Gutierrez said. His projects



include trying to build parent-teacher organizations at Woodland and Claremont academies.

“Our goal here is to change the culture within the building as well as outside,” Ms. Padilla said.

Paul Hernandez, a parent of children in both academies and who helped organize LEAP, said he is particularly concerned about the high dropout and suspension rates among Latinos and “the lack of motivation that exists in the schools right now among our students, especially Latino students.”

Centro Las Americas and the Latino Education Institute are working closely with LEAP, and the Latino Education Institute has applied for a grant from the United Way to provide extra English help to Woodland Academy kindergartners through second-graders and their parents. The Latino Education Institute already works with Chandler Magnet School in similar ways, but the goal at Woodland would be to improve students’ reading proficiency by Grade 3. The institute will not know whether it has the grant until next month, Mr. Gutierrez said.

Other LEAP supporters include Clark University, said Juan A. Gomez, executive director of Centro Las Americas. Gladys Rodriguez-Parker, community relations director for U.S. Rep. James P. McGovern, D-Worcester, is also involved and told everyone at yesterday’s gathering that their homework was to stay engaged.

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