

# Graduation rate lowest for Hispanic male students

**The Boston Globe**

## Declines as other groups make strides

By James Vaznis, Globe Staff | February 6, 2009

MALDEN - Little more than half of the Hispanic male students last year graduated from high school within four years, a slight decline from the previous year, even as other demographic groups began closing an achievement gap, according to a state report released yesterday.

The poor performance of this ever-growing segment of the high school population is raising questions about the quality of programs that teach immigrant students how to speak English and concern among some advocates for Hispanic students that state and local school leaders may be too apathetic.

State leaders say they are committed to addressing the problem, noting, for instance, that they are working in partnership with Boston, Chelsea, Springfield, and Worcester on a new teacher and leadership training program to help these students.

"We need to be doing better," Mitchell Chester, state commissioner of elementary and secondary education, said in an interview.

Hispanic males have had the lowest rate of any student group broken down by race, ethnicity, and gender since the state began tracking graduation rates three years ago. According to data released yesterday by the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 52.6 percent of the 5,112 Hispanic male students who started as freshmen in fall 2004 graduated four years later, compared with a state average of 81.2 percent.

Low graduation rates among Hispanic males has become a growing issue in recent years across the nation. Two years ago, a report, led by the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University and the Urban Institute in New York, called trailing graduation rates a "Civil rights crisis."

Gary Orfield, codirector of the Civil Rights Project, based at the University of California at Los Angeles, said the low rates are a glaring failure of Massachusetts' 15-year effort to overhaul public education, which he contends has overlooked the needs of the fast-growing Hispanic population. Hispanics comprise nearly 14 percent of the state's student enrollment, up from 8.8 percent 15 years ago.

"Massachusetts has not gotten used to the fact it's going into a big demographic change," said Orfield, who places some blame on the state's Hispanic community. "Latinos need to get mobilized. This is a life-or-death issue for their future. . . . Not getting a high school diploma is a life sentence to marginalization and poverty and living on the streets. It's a horrible threat to the future of a community."

Massachusetts has made some headway in boosting graduation rates for another historically low-performing student group:

black males, whose rate is among the lowest of all groups. Their rate has increased two years in a row, from 57.5 percent in 2006 to 62.7 percent last year.

The results frustrated local Hispanic advocates, who say many schools offer insufficient support for new immigrant students. Sometimes, they say, schools place students with poor English skills too quickly in regular classrooms, while other students may linger too long in isolated programs.

They also expressed concern about female Hispanic students' low graduate rate, which budged only slightly upward last year to 64.4 percent.

"I'm afraid its going to get worse with the budget situation we are in," said Samuel Hurtado, coordinator of the Latino Education Action Network/English Language Learners Work Group, a part of Massachusetts Advocates for Children, a nonprofit that works on behalf of disadvantaged students. "Usually support for bilingual students is the first thing that gets cut. So we'll see what happens."

In Boston - where the district's overall graduation rate increased 2 percentage points to 59.9 percent - Superintendent of Schools Carol Johnson is creating a "newcomers" academy, where newly arrived immigrants will be able to work on their English skills while receiving academic tutoring. She also is looking into opening a school in East Boston, home to many Hispanic families, where students could learn in both English and Spanish.

Springfield, like Boston, is conducting a top-to-bottom review of its English language programs with assistance from the state to improve instruction as part of a new pilot program. About 53 percent of Springfield's 26,000 students are Hispanic, while its overall graduation rate last year was 54.4 percent.

"We recognize it's a problem," said Azell Cavaan, a Springfield schools spokeswoman.

Some educators say the key to boosting graduation rates, in some cases, may be no different than proven remedies for all academically struggling students: top-notch teachers, longer school days, early intervention, and intense tutoring.

"There is no magic bullet; it's about quality schools," said Miren Uriarte, a research associate at the Mauricio Gastón Institute for Latino Community Development and Public Policy at the University of Massachusetts at Boston.

That has been the focus at Excel Academy Charter School in East Boston, where nearly 70 percent of the 200 middle school students are Hispanic and more than half are not native English speakers. Many of them enter the school with reading skills two years below grade level. To ratchet up success, students attend class nearly eight hours a day, and many receive tutoring after school or on Saturday mornings. Eighth-grade scores on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System exams are among the highest in the state.

"We set a really high bar and give them the boost they need to get up there," said Ann Waterman Roy, the school's executive director. "They require a lot of opportunities to catch up." ■