



## On Hispanic Education: Early elementary education of Hispanics

By Michael J. Garcia, Ph. D.

Dr. Garcia is a professional education consultant in East Lansing, Michigan

With Hispanic students ages 8-13 nationwide, grade level performance averages two or more years below their grade level. In addition, at each grade level, a larger percentage of Hispanics are enrolled below grade-level than white students (National Council of La Raza, 1985). An all out attack on below-grade level achievement by Hispanics in the early elementary grades (grades K-3) must therefore be undertaken. Just helping Hispanic students succeed and reach grade-level attainment in grades K-3 may be where we should be concentrating some of our greatest educational efforts.

In the case of Hispanics nationwide, 13.5 percent had less than five years of school; for persons of Mexican descent, almost 20 percent had less than five years of school. Statistics show that Hispanics start being pushed out of school (not dropping out) beginning in junior high school (grades 7-9); this is earlier than other minority groups and many of those leaving school are girls. In addition, the gap in achievement levels between Hispanics and non-Hispanics starts showing up in the third and fourth grades. Thus, it is of crucial importance that we help raise the achievement levels and achievement expectations of Hispanics before they arrive at the fourth grade!

In data collected from California, for example, by the third grade, 80 percent of English proficient Hispanic children were academically below grade level by the third grade. Push out rates in the seventh, eighth, and ninth grades are due in part to low achievement expectations in the fourth, fifth, and sixth grades. The 1983-84 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) study on language minority students, for instance, showed that one in four Hispanic children in fourth grade indicated that they did not expect to graduate from high school.

Adding to this problem is the fact that among Hispanic children, only about 16 percent of fourth graders who need it receive some sort of bilingual or ESL services. This is not surprising when one considers that more than 50 percent of language minority children whose reading abilities are substantially below the national average are not receiving bilingual or ESL instruction. It is no wonder that by the time Hispanic students reach the fourth grade they start to drop in achievement levels and in achievement expectations.

Breaking the pattern of below-grade level attainment for Hispanics in the first, second, and third grades would increase the high school graduation expectations of fourth graders. Such expectations would lessen the tendency of Hispanics to leave school at junior high grade levels and

this in turn might lead to more Hispanic students going on to and finishing high school. Since this is easier said than done, let's consider some things that need to be done to help make early elementary education a success for Hispanic students.

No Hispanic child should be enrolled in a school program that is not developmentally, linguistically, socially and academically appropriate. This necessitates having the schools, in which Hispanic students are enrolled, be able to assess where the child is developmentally in all areas of scholastic concern. Kindergarten through third grade for Hispanic students must be characterized by some of the most rigorous student developmental assessment and student performance evaluation techniques available in education. Such assessments should not be biased culturally or linguistically.

In conjunction with these assessment techniques, there must exist instruction of the highest caliber for Hispanic students in grades K-3. Such instruction should demonstrate consistent and actual grade level achievement by Hispanic students. Let's not let Hispanic students get below grade level in reading, writing, and arithmetic, especially in grades one, two, and three!

Schools with significant numbers of Hispanic children need also to keep in mind that Hispanic children are twice as likely as non-Hispanic children to have parents who have not completed high school. This necessitates that such schools make a greater than usual effort to help Hispanic parents help their children, especially in the early grades. Administrators and teachers working with Hispanic parents must model behavior at all times showing that they sincerely have high expectations for Hispanic students. This will influence and motivate the parents to do likewise.

Racial and ethnic isolation is most severe among Hispanic students; as much as two-thirds to three-quarters of Hispanic students attend racially and ethnically isolated schools. Beginning with K-3 grades, such isolation must be remedied; desegregated school settings are essential if other improvements in the education of Hispanic children are to take hold and remain. A definite contributor in the achievement level of minority students has been their more balanced mixing with non-minority students.

Helping Hispanic kids succeed in grades K-3 will require a variety of interventions additional to the above, but success in the early elementary grades by Hispanic students in grade K-3 must be given one of our highest priorities if we are to help them attain grade level competencies in subsequent grades.