



L.A.'s Perfect Storm for Educational Reform

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In 2003, a coalition of Latino leaders and researchers produced the Latino Scorecard, a document that identifies and grades key areas impacting the quality of life for Latinos in Los Angeles County. The area of education received a D, which remained unchanged in 2006 when the grades were reassessed. The grade is based on low academic achievement, poor high school completion rates and minimal student preparation for California's four-year universities.

While these numbers are extremely troubling county-wide, they are even more dramatic within the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), the nation's second largest school district serving some 720,000 K-12 students. Although the District's elementary school scores on standardized tests have increased over the past 6 years, our youngest of students continue to underperform. In 2006, 74% of second graders scored below proficiency in English Language Arts and 50% in Math on the California Standards Test.ⁱ Learning only becomes more challenging for students as they progress to the secondary education levels as the content and curriculum becomes more difficult. With the majority of students entering high school unprepared, it is no surprise that fewer than 50% of entering LAUSD 9th graders finish high school four years later with more than 34,000 students exiting our education system prematurely, unprepared for life and the competitive workforce. Of those who do graduate, only 22% will complete the minimum coursework needed for admission into a California four-year universityⁱⁱ—a disturbing fact given that by 2020, 39% of all jobs in California will require a B.A.ⁱⁱⁱ

These troubling educational outcomes demonstrate a chronic problem that not only affect the individual student but carry economic, public and social consequences that impact our society as a whole. A recent study estimates a combined additional lifetime income of more than \$36 billion for California's 2005-06 high school dropouts had they stayed in school.^{iv} Furthermore, the state economy would benefit by \$1 billion annually through increased earnings and crime-related savings from a 5% increase in California's male high school

graduation rate^v—a conceivable figure given that 20% of Los Angeles 16 to 24 year olds are out of school and work at any given time^{vi} and that 68% of all state prison inmates have not graduated high school.^{vii} The failure of public education to serve our society's needs exemplify a denigration of learning in Los Angeles, a threat to public safety as well as current and future economic loss.

These staggering statistics evidence the dire need for Los Angeles to improve its schools. Recently, several initiatives and reforms have aimed to do so. Since 2000, L.A. voters approved \$19 billion dollars in school construction bonds to build 160 new schools, ending overcrowding and renovating schools that had been neglected since 1978 when Proposition 13 limited school boards' ability to tax. Since 1993, more than 135 charter schools have opened in Los Angeles offering progressive teaching and learning by promoting school site decision-making free of district constraints. In 2005, the Latino and African American communities across Los Angeles surged the district demanding a college preparatory education equitably provided to all students, better preparing them for success in universities, a 21st economy and civic engagement. In response to the dropout crisis and No Child Left Behind's school accountability measures, former Superintendent Roy Romer began the District's internal transition of its large high schools into small learning communities based on career themes to better personalize learning environments and make learning more relevant. Finally, Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, responding to polls leading up to his 2005 election, which identified education as the primary concern of voters, attempted to gain influence in local education through the passage of AB 1381 and most recently through his Schoolhouse plan.

The myriad of reforms underway within the district represent the ideal climate and components necessary to bring about true transformation in L.A. schools. Los Angeles is witnessing a rise in organic community (parents, students, business and the electorate) awareness and engagement in public education as stakeholders demand better schools;

there is increasing public attention on education as a result of media and civic leaders prioritizing it in their agendas; researchers continue to provide data that evidence troubling trends in local education while providing recommendations and documenting best practices; and most importantly, a number of public and private sources are making funding available to build schools, improve the most troubled schools and invest in progressive teaching and learning. These reforms and others, all in various stages of implementation, are well intentioned and spur incremental positive change. However, the lack of integration among these reforms and the resources associated with each hampers their potential collective positive impact.

Fortunately, there is a new Admiral, actually retired U.S. Navy Admiral, at the helm of Los Angeles Unified. Superintendent David Brewer has been charged with “turning the ship around,” as he has stated on occasion.

An old Chinese proverb may provide Brewer and our other leaders with some direction as they consider how to turn a ship in the midst of a storm.

“If you are planning for a year, sow rice;
If you are planning for a decade, plant trees;
If you are planning for a lifetime, educate people.”

There are many stakeholders in L.A. who have the opportunity and obligation to “plan” for our future workforce. Partial and uncoordinated reform will not remedy an outdated educational system. However, comprehensive reform that is anchored to collaborative approaches and aimed at aligning

educational opportunities with industry demands will close both the education and wage gaps, ultimately securing a brighter future for all Angelinos.

To achieve such a collaborative plan that meets L.A.’s social and economic needs, our community’s leadership should be equally as conscientious about who is involved during the planning process as what they are planning for. In addition to having civic, public, private and community leadership map out solutions, it is critical to nourish the participation of parents and students in such a development of education policy. The intricate diversity that exists within the fabric of Los Angeles often poses challenges for local and municipal government but it also provides opportunities to create global solutions that work at the regional level. Having a perfect storm comprised of the availability of resources, innovation, and commitment from stakeholders to improve education, can galvanize the necessary forces to create and inspire change in a city with a rich social and cultural fabric.

Brewer can use tools like the Latino Scorecard as a compass to determine the direction towards positive change. However, he and other leaders must coordinate the diversity of interests across Los Angeles into meaningful collaboration and a strategic alignment of resources. We know that it is not the schools alone that determine the success of our students, but the family supports, community health, public safety, economic vitality, etc. Los Angeles has rough waters ahead of it and safely reaching its destination requires strategic navigation, a comprehensive map and most importantly, all members need to be on board.

ⁱ DataQuest (California Department of Education). Retrieved March 5, 2007 from <http://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/>.

ⁱⁱ DataQuest (California Department of Education). Retrieved March 5, 2007 from <http://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Baldassare, Mark & Hanal, Ellen. (2005). *Getting to 2025: Can California Meet the Challenges?* San Francisco: Public Policy of California.

^{iv} Alliance for Excellent Education. (2007) *The High Cost of High School Dropouts: What the Nation Pays for Inadequate High Schools*. Washington, DC: Author.

^v Alliance for Excellent Education. (Aug. 2006) *Saving Futures, Saving Dollars: The Impact of Education on Crime Reduction and Earnings*. Washington, DC: Author.

^{vi} Fogg, Neeta & Harrington, Paul. (2004). “One Out of Five” A Report on Out of School & Out of Work Youth in Los Angeles and Long Beach. Boston: Center for Labor Market Studies.

^{vii} The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University. (Mar. 2005) *Confronting the Graduation Rate Crisis in California*. p. 11.