



Chalkboard Project Focus Group Highlights

– Hispanic College Students –

Introduction

The Chalkboard Project gathered opinions on how to improve Oregon's K-12 public education system from college student mentors of Latino high school students at the Fall, 2004 Oregon Leadership Institute (OLI) conference, a program of Oregon Council for Hispanic Advancement (OCHA). OCHA's mission is to be a champion for Hispanics in Oregon, ensuring equity in education and economic opportunity by empowering Latino youth. OLI provides Latino high school students with leadership training. OCHA is working as a partner with Chalkboard as it seeks to learn more about ideas for improving Oregon's K-12 public education system. This summarizes the results of 26 completed self-administered questionnaires and 31 written responses to questions followed by group discussion.

Summary of Questionnaire Results

The mentors responded to eight multiple-choice questions, which asked for reactions to various aspects of the Oregon public school system. Readers are cautioned that the percents reported are based on a very small sample size, and represent only the views of those surveyed.

Quality of Public Education for ELL Students

Over half of the mentors thought Oregon schools in general are doing a "somewhat bad" or "very bad" job. Most thought that schools are doing a neutral job or worse at serving English Language Learner (ELL) students. Nearly four in ten did not think that there are appropriate programs in place to successfully educate ELL students and about the same number did not know. Half thought that schools are "good" at communicating with parents, and most of the other half thought schools are not.

Most Important Factor for Student Success

The mentors placed about equal responsibility on involved parents (27%), quality school programs (27%), and quality teachers (23%) when asked about the single most important factor for student success. None said after school programs.

Parent Involvement

Not a single mentor described parents as very involved with their child's education, while 23% said they were "somewhat involved," 46% said they were "not too involved," and 12% said they were "not involved at all."

Student Preparation

Opinions were split on whether schools are preparing students for high school graduation and college; however, only one said Oregon's schools are preparing students to find a job after high school.

Efficiency

The mentors were split on whether schools need more money, with 42% agreeing that local public schools do not have enough money, 38% agreeing they do not have a funding problem, but rather are not spending money efficiently, and 19% unsure.

Highlights from Written Responses and Group Discussions

This summary is based on the Latino college student mentors' written and oral responses to questions about their experiences and ideas about K-12 education.

Best Practices for Improving Student Achievement

"I think the best method is to have better teachers and smaller classrooms and more teachers that speak different languages."

The group focused generally on schools having smaller class sizes, employing diverse faculty members and staff, fostering strong ESL programs, and having inclusive and engaging projects and activities. Many placed a strong emphasis on how important individual attention is for bilingual students. Mentoring and tutoring programs were considered quite important, as were any school programs that would get students active and motivated in school and after-school activities.

Diversity

"Bilingual Ed: helping students that need it. Diversity training – diversification. Childcare literature – ethnic literature. Tutors."

Further participant suggestions for how schools can be more sensitive to the needs of minority students:

- Promote diversity by providing more cultural resources and integrating cultural awareness into the general curriculum.

- Hire more Hispanic and bilingual teachers and staff – mentors noted how helpful it is to have minority role models and mentor figures.
- Support ethnic literacy by funding book acquisition.
- Educate students about Latino art and culture (and about other cultures).
- Respond swiftly to bullying and discrimination.
- Find ways to involve and motivate more Latino students in school activities

Funding

“Clubs don’t have enough money. No more field trips. And too expensive for sports.”

Many mentors pointed to Oregon’s inflated class sizes, testifying to how difficult it can be to learn in a large, quick-paced class in which there is little time for individual help. Others mentioned educational opportunities lost when field trips get cut, when there isn’t funding for books and materials, and when schools aren’t able to offer college-level courses.