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Article Published: Wednesday, September 24, 2003 - 1:42:48 PM PST

## 50 percent Hispanic dropout rate now seems to be a myth

IN a conference room in Philadelphia this summer I heard a familiar refrain. "The Hispanic dropout rate is 50 percent," said a participant in a workshop on the growing Hispanic presence in places like suburban Pennsylvania. Others in the room, already aware of this statistic, nodded soberly.

I have always had a problem with that number. From my preschool days in El Sereno, to the mountains of Tehachapi, to Eagle Rock, Burbank, college, and now Pasadena, that number has always seemed too high.

A study released this summer by the Pew Hispanic Center helped me understand what I had always sensed.

In "Hispanic Youth Dropping Out of U.S. Schools: Measuring the Challenge,' researcher Richard Fry writes that the standard method for calculating the dropout rate leads to a distorted picture of the status of Hispanic students in America's schools.

The distortion occurs because the standard method does not distinguish between native-born and foreign-born Hispanics.

For example, in one section of the report Fry finds a 34 percent Hispanic dropout rate among foreign-born Hispanics. But if one counts only the native-born Hispanic dropout rate, a dramatic number appears: 14 percent.

Combining the foreign-born and native-born figures, Fry reports a 21 percent Hispanic dropout rate.

These numbers may seem fantastic, even delusional, to some.

After all, one need not Google for long to discover studies that tout national Hispanic dropout rates of anywhere from 30 to 45 percent. Also, individual school districts, particularly those with high percentages of foreign-born youth, at times exceed the 50 percent dropout figure.

As I looked through a number of studies, I became grateful that I do not have to wade through statistics for a living. Methodologies and conclusions differ, often widely. Doubtless this Pew Hispanic study will be under the gun in academic circles this fall. I am sure many readers will disagree vehemently with Fry's conclusions.

Whether you believe Fry's numbers or not, his study contains two findings that are critical to the ongoing battle against Hispanic dropout.

First is a distinction between the dropout rates of foreign-born students with some U.S. education (20 percent) and those with none (40 percent). Fry's research finds that many in the second category never intend to enter school, yet they are often counted as dropouts and artificially raise the rate.

This dropout rate inflation is not helpful for educators and activists who seek to measure the effectiveness of interventions such as greater parent involvement, after school programs, and preschools. It is not fair to program assessment when a subgroup faces unknown challenges.

To name one, the greatest challenge to the 40 percent dropout group is the lure of the job market. One of the more fascinating details of the Pew Hispanic study is that immigrant Hispanic dropouts earn \$10,000 a year compared to \$7,300 for white dropouts and \$6,400 for native-born Hispanic dropouts. An effective intervention for these young people will have more to do with raw economic realities than educational methods.

The second critical finding involves English-language acquisition. Writes Fry, "A lack of English-language ability is a prime characteristic of Latino dropouts. Almost 40 percent do not speak English well. The 14 percent of Hispanic 16- to 19-year-olds who have poor English skills have a dropout rate of 59 percent."

These facts speak for themselves. I'm not sure how to amplify them, except to ensure they are reproduced in public forums such as this newspaper.

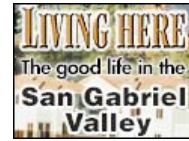
English language acquisition is critical to personal advancement in this country. I am saddened every time I encounter a Latino student who struggles, painfully, to deliver college-level English on a paper or exam. It makes me want to do everything I can to see that children acquire mastery of the language at an early age, even as I personally affirm the learning and practice of Spanish.

I am also reminded of something my high school English teacher did for me. She showed me a legal contract small type, legal gobbledegook and a solitary line at the bottom of

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the page. Then she bellowed, You want control of your life? You better be able to read this. Or the person on the other side of this contract will control you.

Whether a 21 percent Hispanic dropout rate is to be believed or not, it is useful to glean the Pew study for signs of hope. We know what we need to do: Identify challenges particular to subgroups, whether recent immigrants or third-generation students, and customize interventions. Ensure that young Hispanics dominate, not just know, English.

Most of all, we must remain committed. The myth of the 50 percent Hispanic dropout rate is an effective way to rally resources and people. Demythologizing this issue could have the unintended consequence of diverting necessary resources away from fighting the Hispanic dropout rate. It's with great caution that I write, hoping that a myth is not more attractive than the truth.

Rodolpho Carrasco is executive director of the Harambee Christian Family Center in Pasadena and serves on the U.S. Department of Education National Hispanic Task Force on English- language acquisition. Contact him at [rudy@harambee.org](mailto:rudy@harambee.org).

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