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Speaker: 'Information gap' can slow Hispanic school progress; [All Edition]

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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With regard to closing that achievement gap, a \$350,000 three- year pilot program at three Providence elementary schools took center stage at the forum. The program is sponsored by the National Center for Family Literacy and financed by the Toyota Foundation. The Dorcas Place adult literacy center in Providence coordinates the services.

Full Text (905 words)

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* At a literacy forum, Sarita E. Brown, president and founder of Excelencia in Education, tries to dispel myths about Hispanic attitudes toward education.

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PROVIDENCE - The first myth that Sarita E. Brown wanted to dispel is that Hispanic families do not value education. The other two myths: Hispanics do not want to speak English, and do not want to engage in civic life.

Brown, president and founder of Excelencia in Education, told an overflow crowd at a Latino Family Literacy Forum last week that "some of the biggest barriers to greater Hispanic involvement in public schools rest in common misperceptions about this rapidly growing population."

The forum, cosponsored by The Education Alliance at Brown University and the Providence Public Schools, was held Tuesday at the Courtyard Marriott.

Sarita Brown underscored what has recently been well publicized: despite major gains in high school graduation rates and an increase in college attendance rates, "Hispanic students still lag well behind white and African-American students in many key measures of school success."

But although many Hispanics come to this country with little formal education, a recent Public Education Network poll "showed that nearly all Hispanic parents [95 percent] believe it is very important for their children to go to college," Brown said.

Brown added that recent focus groups conducted with potential Latino voters, by the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials, found "that education was the number-one issue."

Said Brown, "What is often perceived as a values gap is, in fact, an information gap." Given their limited experience with the American education system, "many Hispanic parents lack the information they need to play a more active role in their children's education."

Immigrant Latino parents who may lack English-language skills find interaction with school officials daunting, said Brown, "and parents assume that school authorities know what is best for their children."

Dispelling another myth, Brown said Hispanics are becoming "increasingly more active in their communities," and today there are nearly 6,000 Hispanic elected officials in the country -- including almost 1,200 school board members.

Brown said that improving services for students learning to speak English, recruiting more minority teachers and promoting high expectations for students of all backgrounds can help close the achievement gap.

With regard to closing that achievement gap, a \$350,000 three-year pilot program at three Providence elementary schools took center stage at the forum. The program is sponsored by the National Center for Family Literacy and financed by the Toyota Foundation. The Dorcas Place adult literacy center in Providence coordinates the services.

Dozens of Hispanic parents of students at the Lima, Bailey and D'Abate elementary schools have completed the first year of the program, which focuses on adult education, parenting and children's literacy to serve immigrants who struggle with limited English skills and the lack of a formal education. Parents go into the schools with their children, as part of the program.

Sharon Darling, president of the National Family Literacy Center, said Providence is one of five cities her organization has financed through the Toyota Foundation. All five projects "have shown tremendous results in the first year -- better attendance, and parents talking about connections to school that they've never felt before."

Providence Schools Supt. Melody Johnson said after the conference, "It's very reaffirming to have broad recognition within the Providence community, but also recognition and support at the national level, that this has to be a village approach to taking care of our children."

Johnson added, "This is not a job that any one individual can do in the classroom or any one school can do alone. It's at a level of such complexity now that it takes the whole community to invest in its children."

She described the conference as "a clarification of the current reality, which is that the statistics are not good. We have a lot of work to do, particularly involving families."

Johnson said the good news "is that we have the data and we do have the interest. And I think now, we're starting to see the collective will" to accomplish what needs to be done.

Senate Deputy Majority Leader Juan Pichardo, D-Providence, was part of a panel discussion that included Johnson, Darling, Peter McWalters, state commissioner of elementary and secondary education, and Anthony J. Col n, vice president of the National Council of La Raza.

Pichardo is a board member of the Hispanic Family Literacy Initiative under the auspices of the National Center for Family Literacy.

"It behooves us as public and government officials, to really pay attention -- we need to educate not only the child, but the family," Pichardo said last week.. "It is the future of the state of Rhode Island."

McWalters took heart in the broad range of attendees, including Governor Carcieri and Providence Mayor David N. Cicilline, local and national advocacy groups, ESL (English as a Second Language) experts, and parents -- "a very decent representation of all constituencies of any state, if you're going to make something happen."

Said McWalters, "What we know from education is that if you're going to educate the child, you have to educate the parents. That's basically the bottom line. This is an agenda that the state has to get aggressively and increasingly involved in."

McWalters said the conference and Carcieri's announcement last week of nearly \$1.3 million in adult-literacy grants to 18 programs across the state made it "a good week."

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