As a member of the U.S. Department of Education’s Hispanic Dropout Project, I visited several districts and schools that had been acknowledged for the exemplary education of their Hispanic students. My experience when visiting one of these successful schools, Katanna Middle School, was especially revealing. (The names of the school and the principal have been changed.) Katanna’s school district serves its Hispanic students well: dropout rates are almost nonexistent and postsecondary attendance rates are close to 70 percent, with 40 percent of the Hispanic graduates attending to four-year colleges. (Nationally, only 10 percent of Hispanic graduates attend four-year colleges.) This successful record make the programs at Katanna Middle School noteworthy.

The educational philosophy that permeates the school is focused on providing support wherever and whenever it is needed. The school aspires to provide its Hispanic students with far more than mere survival skills and employs an intricate web of strategies intended to propel students past the immediate, seductive dangers of dropping out, gang affiliation, and teen pregnancy. Believing that schools must engage both students and families to sufficiently prepare and motivate students to stay in school, Katanna’s staff members work on several levels that extend from the purely symbolic (covering graffiti with fresh paint overnight to keep the school clean and attractive) to the personal (working with teens on pregnancy prevention) to the academic (designing and teaching curricula that are culturally relevant and emphasize high levels of student-teacher interaction) to outreach programs that are sympathetic to Hispanic culture and increase parents’ awareness and understanding of the school’s aims.

The school district now requires that staff members be bilingual to ensure that they can communicate with students and their families. “We have a strict and stringent hiring policy because of the ethnic makeup of the students,” Principal Will Johnson indicated. Although he is not bilingual and thus would not be hired under this policy, the principal supports the current policy wholeheartedly and shows his support for Hispanic culture through participation in community celebrations and events. For example, Johnson says, “I wouldn't think of missing the Cinco de Mayo festival. That kind of participation is so

By Eugene E. Garcia
appreciated by the parents, the kids, and the older kids who are coming back. This is their community, and you are sharing it. A tremendous amount of respect goes with that."

To further personalize instruction and build a community of caring that envelops students and their families, Katanna has been restructured so teams of teachers work with approximately 90 students in an interdisciplinary approach to instruction at each grade level—sixth, seventh, and eighth. One group of three teachers has kept the same students for three years, another group for two years. The teams are deliberately structured to maintain flexibility and respect teacher choice.

Another important strategy is building and extending a sense of a personal future for students who may come from families in which graduation from the eighth grade is the ultimate educational accomplishment. "We have
concentrated heavily on the college futures of the kids since we moved to this site eight years ago," Johnson says. "It was difficult to convince the parents, but we now feel we have turned a corner."

To many Hispanic parents in poverty, children's economic contributions to the family are considered more beneficial than extended education, and high school can be viewed as unnecessary when poverty is a grinding daily reality. The school has countered that belief with a heavy emphasis on college as something that is accessible to its students, both academically and financially. Counselors employ a program called College Readiness, which pairs Katanna students with Hispanic college students for twice-a-week tutoring sessions. During the year, students also visit a local college campus overnight. Principal Johnson makes clear the importance of convincing students that a college education is possible: "By doing these things they start to get a picture that they really can do it or it really can happen to them."

Understanding and respecting Hispanic culture is imperative for educators at the school. Johnson adds, "Schools often don't understand the culture that the kids and parents come from. They have parent programs at night and only in English." The school emphasizes practical, productive ways to confront poverty. Says Johnson, "We have computer classes for parents. We have nutrition classes. Because they tend to shop locally in markets that overcharge them for everything, they learn it is probably worth it to get out of the neighborhood to buy bulk groceries because they live in such big families."

In another program, a core group of parents are peer educators of other parents—drawing them into the school and informing them of its goals. And for Principal Johnson, such parent engagement is vital:

We hope that this group will be our link to the parents with whom we are not in contact. Each one of these parent leaders will work with a team of other parents and with teachers. The intent is to bring them in and have them feel accountable for the whole school. In the past, parent meetings turned into individual complaints. Those parents are looking at the huge picture of what it means to be a parent, what it means to have a kid in this school, and what they want for their kids in the school. What we in schools haven't done well is clear: We haven't realized the potential that parents offer us. They are bright people who don't speak this language; many were important people or held important positions in their own country but came here and now can't do that. They are underemployed. [Some feel] there is shame in that, in cleaning rooms in a hotel because that is the best you can get.
Engaging students in school is no small task. How does the staff at Katanna approach the challenge? First, the principal says, you get used to instructional noise:

We are very much against the teacher who lectures. That turns kids off. We use a lot of instructional conversation, a lot of cooperative learning. If I walk into a classroom and it is silent, I get very nervous. But if I go into a classroom and the teacher is on the sidelines, and all the kids are in groups of four arguing about a novel— that is what I like to see.

Second, an extremely strong education program is combined with careful teacher selection, Principal Johnson says, and language proficiency isn’t the only determinant:

We select the teachers who teach ESL very carefully. We base our selection on what we know about them and their ability to teach ESL. There are so many levels within ESL: kids who talk faster, kids who are in a different place, kids who arrive late in the year. We never put all ESL kids together. Instead, they are mixed in with English readers along with what we call sheltered readers and fluent readers.

Finally, much of the literature taught at the school reflects Hispanic culture, which helps students stay engaged, and the largely bilingual staff moves easily between English and Spanish in everyday speech. All these elements come together in the most positive ways for parents, teachers, and students.

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