

Results from the 2010 Arlington Public Schools Latino Graduation Café

Prepared for Arlington Public Schools

At the request of Arlington Public Schools, Hanover Research analyzed the results of a Latino Graduation Café hosted by the Arlington Latino Network in 2010. Participants in the Café were presented with three topics for discussion. This report seeks to identify the key themes and trends which emerged during this exercise. It is the hope that these themes and trends will help to identify actionable steps for improving outcomes of Latino students.

Executive Summary

In 2010, the Arlington Latino Network hosted a Latino Graduation Café with the goal of identifying strategies to better serve the Latino student population and to bolster the success of these students. Ninety participants consisting of Latino high school students, alumni, parents, and school staff members were presented with three different topics and were encouraged to discuss each in detail. At the end of each discussion, participants were instructed to write down comments about the session on post-it notes. This report seeks to identify the prevalent trends and themes of these comments.

Below we discuss the most widespread themes by topic. It is reasonable to conclude that the themes with the most comments are those that are most commonly on the mind of participants in the Café and are likely important to the experience and success of the Latino student population.

Topic 1: What would a school system look like that supports the success of all Latino students?

When presented with the first topic, several dominant themes emerged. In the top tier (10 or more comments), the most commonly cited themes included support (16 comments), teachers (16 comments), equality (11 comments), and parents (10 comments). There were another six themes which were the main idea of between 5 and 9 comments: cultural (8 comments), communication (6 comments), information (6 comments), respect (6 comments), unity (6 comments), and program related (5 comments).

Topic 2: What do we already have that is working?

The only theme for this topic to be the primary focus of more than 10 comments was programs (11 comments). Teachers and staff were discussed by six participants while counseling and support were the focus of four comments each.

Topic 2a: What are our challenges and what is needed?

When asked about challenges and what is needed, communication (11 comments) was the most prevalent theme. Other themes with relatively high incidence rates included support (8 comments), positive encouragement/attitudes (6 comments), and parents (5 comments). Counseling, mentors, and relationship building were each discussed by four participants.

Topic 3: What IF we...

For the final topic, three themes were considered top tier by being the focus of more than 10 comments. These included program-related (16 comments), communication (14 comments), and encouraging students (13 comments). Second tier themes which received between 5 and 9 comments consisted of teachers (7 comments), parents (6 comments), counselors (5 comments), and relationships (5 comments).

Introduction

In May of 2010, the Arlington Latino Network hosted a Latino Graduation Café that brought together members of the Arlington Latino community and Arlington Public Schools officials to talk about what it will take to ensure the academic success of Latino students so they graduation successfully into post-secondary education.

The Café gathered roughly 90 participants with balanced representation of Latino high school students, alumni, parents, and members of school staffs, including teachers, counselors, administrators, and School Board members. There were also representatives of local community organizations that work in partnership with Arlington Public Schools to support Latino youth and families.

Participants participated in a series of discussion rounds, modeled after the World Café process. In the Latino Graduation Café process, participants were presented with three main questions and were asked to thoroughly discuss each. After each round of the Café process, participants were invited to write their key insights on note pads and stick them on the wall so that other participants could review them during a break. The three topics were as follows:

- ❖ *Topic 1:* What would a school system look like that supports the success of all Latino students?
- ❖ *Topic 2:* What do we (Arlington Public Schools) already have that is working?
 - *Topic 2a:* What are our challenges and what is needed?
- ❖ *Topic 3:* What IF we (Arlington Public Schools)...

At the request of Arlington Public Schools, Hanover Research authored this report in order to synthesize the main themes that emerged from the dialogue, based on the clustering of the ideas that were generated. It is the hope that the results from this collective knowledge-sharing exercise will help to inform current efforts by Arlington Public Schools to identify actionable steps for improving outcomes for Latino students.

Methodology

Hanover was presented with the note pad comments provided by participants on each of the three themes. These were presented in three separate word documents. In total, 364 comments were submitted for review. Comments quoted in this report are verbatim and as such there may be errors in grammar.

Comment clusters were handled by individual topic area. As a first step, all comments were alphabetized in order to add structure to the list. Each comment was

then assessed one by one and a theme was selected or created for each. After a first run through, comments were then sorted by theme. A second assessment of each comment was then performed to ensure that the comment was placed in the most appropriate theme. At this point the combining of like themes was also created. The resulting theme classifications after this step are the ones presented in this report.

Methodological notes:

- ❖ In each collection of comments, there were certain submissions that could not be categorized and were considered invalid. These were typically items where the comment was ambiguous or did not fit with the topic. For example, on the question: “what would a school system look like which supports the success of all Latino students?” responses such as “awesome” and “teachers” were omitted.
- ❖ In some cases, a comment could fit into two or more themes. In these situations, we did our best to determine the theme which was most relevant and labeled these items with that theme.
- ❖ Several sub-themes were identified during the process. When applicable, these are discussed our report.
- ❖ Certain comments included multiple ideas which were not specifically connected. For these, each idea was treated as its own comment for the purposes of our analysis.

Results

In this section we discuss the general themes which were identified from each of the three topic areas. Each topic is presented on its own as each is focused on a different facet of what needs to be done in order to improve Latino student success. A list of all responses for each item can be found in the appendix.

Topic 1: What would a school system look like that supports the success of all Latino students?

For this topic, a total of 157 comments were recorded from Café participants, 135 of which were considered valid. We identified a total of 18 themes which had two or more comments fall under their umbrella. The following table presents these themes and the number of comments associated with each:

Theme	# of Comments	Theme	# of Comments
Support	21	Program related	6
Teachers	15	Tolerance/Understanding	5
Equality	11	Mentors	4
Parents	10	Language	3
Cultural	8	Community	3
Information	7	Financial	2
Communication	6	Latino focus	2
Respect	6	Opportunities	2
Unity	6		

The most common theme (21 comments) within this set of comments was the need for enhanced support. Within the theme, there were several sub-themes. Parents were commonly mentioned (5 comments) as an important source of support that is needed to ensure student success. One participant commented: “Warmth among parents (is the) number one concern education for their children.” Another sub-theme within support is related to the school’s responsibility to provide support to teachers, students, and parents (4 comments specifically, others inferred). “School (should be) supportive of teachers and staff, programs and clubs, sports, (and) motivation” was one such example. Other support comments mentioned aspects such as better first language support, enhanced support networks, treating students as humans rather than numbers, special education support for HILT students, and support for undocumented students.

Teachers were the second most common theme in this section (15 comments). Of the teacher-related items, a sub-set was related to improved training for educators (7 comments), many of which specifically requested cultural training. One participant noted “Teachers must have an understanding of the different cultures. If I don’t

understand the culture, I make assumption(s) that may be wrong—students sense that assumptions are biased.” Another subset of comments related to teachers pertained to better involvement on the part of educators. For example, one note read “(More) teacher involvement. Many students have hidden talents that teachers can find and exploit.” Other teacher comments focused on issues such as higher expectations for teachers, better commitment, and more rigorous evaluation standards for educators.

Eleven Café participants mentioned that equality is critical for a school system which supports all Latino students. Most comments simply stated that there was a need for more equality in schools. These can be summed up with the following: “Make them feel the same! Everyone should be equal!” A few urged equality for more specific aspects of the education system. Two comments indicated that it is paramount for more minority students to be included in Advanced Placement courses, as they should have access to the same curriculum. Another suggested that school uniforms would be a step in the right direction towards fostering equality.

The next most prevalent theme was related to the role of the parent (10 comments). A few of these comments simply mentioned that parents must take a more active role in their student’s education (3 comments). Others pertained to how the relationship between parents and the school can be improved in areas such as better parent inclusion in the system, parent involvement in the PTA, and the need for the school to understand varying Latino family structures.

There were eight participants who commented on the importance of culture for the success of these students. The general theme of this comment group was that there needs to be better cultural awareness by teachers, students, and the overall school system for cultures other than their own. The following comments illustrate this trend, “students who are graduating and intelligent (have) not always felt comfortable in school because of different perceptions of (their) culture” and “celebrate cultures, languages and ethnicities”.

Information was the leading focus of seven comments. The types of information requested varied and included the following: general information about the school system, information about colleges and scholarships, information about AP courses, and information about the future. One comment which seems particularly relevant discussed the delivery of information: “Send information in Spanish and alert parents that packets contain information in Spanish.”

Communication was mentioned by six Café contributors. All of these comments referenced lines of communications between actors in the education process. Communication between students and parents, between parents and teachers, between students and teachers, and between parents and counselors were all mentioned.

The next theme, respect, was also mentioned prominently by six Café participants. Each of these advocated the need for respect for students from the school, the teachers, and other students. Respect for students cultures and individual identities were also mentioned.

Unity was the primary focus of another six of the comments. All unity comments were related to a sense of unity between students of different ethnic backgrounds. For example, one participant wrote: “There is quite a bit of discrimination in the schools. We, Latinos also separate ourselves from HILT students.”

Likewise, six comments were themed around potential program-related enhancements for students. The suggestions for program improvements varied within the theme without any real sub-themes emerging. One commenter requested a program for college visits, one recommended big brother/sister programs, while yet another suggested gender-specific programs, specifically Cohort for boys and United Minority for girls. Another comment with a strong level of detail read: “ESOL/HILT students should be able to study some classes in their first language to develop higher levels and concepts in science, math, and social studies while they learn English. ESOL/HILT students currently stay too long in ESL classes.”

Another set of comments pertained to the need for tolerance and understanding within the school system (5 comments). As the theme title indicates, participants want the school system to encourage tolerance and understanding of students from different cultures. One participant noted: “We need greater awareness and acceptance about the differences among learning styles, culture, (and) language.”

The need for mentors was a suggestion brought up by four participants. Simply, these attendees believe that the involvement of mentors with the students would bolster the success of Latino students.

Language was the primary focus of comments from three Café attendees. The main concern of these individuals was the need for more bilingual services within the system.

The community theme included three comments, all of which called for more community involvement in the education system.

There were three themes which included only two comments each: financial, Latino focus, and opportunities. Financial items cited the financial hardships of some Latino families and the need for expanded support from the private sector in the form of scholarships. Two comments specifically mentioned that the system needed to have a greater focus on the Latino student population. Finally, two additional comments simply stated that there needed to be broader educational opportunities for students.

Topic 2: What do we already have that is working?

The second topic asked Café participants to comment on what Arlington County Public schools has that is already working. There were only 37 notes collected for this item, all of which were classifiable and considered valid. The vast majority of the comments were fit into one of seven themes which are presented in the table below:

Theme	# of Comments	Theme	# of Comments
Programs	11	School Example	3
Teachers and Staff	6	Parent Liaison	2
Counseling	4	PTA	2
Support	4		

The most commonly cited facets of the Arlington Public Schools System which participants considered to be working were various programs (11 comments). Of these comments, three praised the HILT Program and three the High School Continuation Program. Other programs mentioned included Cohort at Wakefield, Emerging Leaders Program, the Evening Program, the Summer School Program, and unspecified programs similar to the Café.

There were six Café participants who commended the teachers and staff of the system. Four of these comments noted bilingual abilities while the other two discussed teacher dedication.

Four comments pertained to counseling and counselors. Two participants commented on the helpfulness and volume of counselors. The other two were more specific. One commended the smaller groups of students per counselor at the 9th grade level at Wakefield while the other praised 3rd period counseling.

Support was another theme for the comments from four participants. However, the source and target of the support praise varied among comments. Support for teachers, from teachers, from parents, and for students was all mentioned. One comment provided a request in conjunction with a positive message: “Arlington has support for HILT students but they need to extend (in Manassas they don’t have enough ESL courses).”

Three comments simply named schools that they believe are currently working. Two highlighted Arlington Mill and the other cited Woodlawn.

Two additional comments referred to parent liaisons, while two others were related to the Parent Teacher Association.

Topic 2a: What are our challenges and what is needed?

As discussed in the introduction, the second discussion topic posted to participants was a two-part topic. The second component asked Café attendees to list the System’s challenges and to make suggestions as to what is needed. A total of 61 comments were collected, 59 of which were considered valid. From the comment set, 10 separate themes were identified. Somewhat unsurprisingly, many of the themes and actual answers themselves on this particular item reflected responses to the first question which asked about what a school that fully supported Latino students would look like as this is in some ways similar to asking what is needed. The following table presents the themes and number of comments associated with each:

Theme	# of Comments	Theme	# of Comments
Communication	11	Mentor	4
Support	8	Relationship building	4
Positive encouragement/attitudes	6	Equality	3
Parents	5	Teachers	3
Counseling	4	Cultural	2

The theme for this item with the most related comments was communication (11 comments). Four of these comments cited either that there were current issues with the manner by which parents receive information from the school or that there should be better communication between the school and parents. One such comment read: “Parent education/parent support. (There is a) lack of communication and outreach from schools leaves parents not feeling involved/welcomed.” Another provided a more specific example of the pitfalls of poor communication: “Parents are unaware that in 7th grade their children can be placed in a higher math class, for example, which limits their choices later.” Three additional communication-themed comments discussed the language barrier and complained that when information from the school is translated, the message is often skewed or lost. Other comments requested that certain types of information be more adequately communicated, such as career options for students and how the credit system works.

Support was another often mentioned theme for this item (8 comments). Interestingly, five of these comments pertained to transforming schools into more of a family- or community-centered support system. One participant wrote: “Need to expand/increase respect/role of school to make it more than just a school; make it more of a community/family.” Another response suggested that the school definition of family should be changed to better reflect some Latino households, it read: “How do we feel towards those students who don’t have parents or who are too old to bring parents? Invite family and expand its definition in the mind of administrators and teachers so older siblings and cousins can also advocate.”

Six participants cited the need for more positive encouragement and attitudes. Examples included “culture of inspiring” and “motivational uplifting.”

Another five comments primarily focused on parents. Three of these advocated enhanced efforts of the school to get parents involved. The other two comments suggested that it was up to the parents to get more involved in their children’s education.

Counseling was the focus of four comments. Two comments were complaints that current counselors were not performing their job duties adequately. The other two advocated enhanced access to and support from counselors.

Mentoring was cited by another four Café attendees as something that is needed in the school system. Suggested sources of mentors included alumni, teachers, and parents.

The relationship building theme was also mentioned by four individuals. Three of these discussed the need to augment relationships between teachers and parents.

There were three participants who spoke on the topic of equality. Each suggested that all students should be provided with the same educational opportunities and high quality instruction. One comment read: “Giving all students the same opportunities for future education regardless of their ability to obtain a social security number—something like a ‘Dream Act.’”

Teachers were the primary focus of three comments, two of which criticized the level of support and teaching strategies of Arlington Public Schools educators. The other called for more teachers who inspire their students.

The final identified theme contained two comments related to cultural issues. Both called for improved cultural relations within the school system.

Topic 3: What IF we...

The final topic discussed at the Café asked participants to complete the sentence “what if we...” prompting attendees to brainstorm actionable ideas for improving Latino student successes. There were a total of 109 comments submitted for this topic, 101 of which were considered valid and were included in our discussion. The 101 valid comments were analyzed and the majority of these comments fit into 14 different themes. The following table presents the number of comments included in each theme.

Theme	# of Comments	Theme	# of Comments
Program-related	16	Mentors	4
Communication	14	Support	4
Encouraging students	13	Equality	3
Teachers	7	Unity	3
Parents	6	Events	2
Counselors	5	Flexibility	2
Relationships	5	Information	2

The most prevalent amongst the “What if we...” comments was a program-related theme. Of the 16 comments, there were four that directly mentioned the career center and suggested improvements and enhancements to it. Two participants commented that the system needs more programs like the career center, while two others recommended expanding the courses offered through the center. Two additional participants spoke about the Continuation Program. One stated that the system should look at alternative means of reporting the graduation rates of the Continuation Program, while the other mentioned that the Continuation Program should be a primary focus that is highly valued. Other comments in this theme made miscellaneous suggestions about new programs or expanding the scope of those that already exist. Examples included dual enrollment, more programs for newcomers, tutoring programs, expanded sexual education, and programs to support Latino students.

A total of 14 participants submitted comments pertaining to communication within the school system. Five of these discussed the importance of enhancing the lines of communication between parents and teachers or the school in general. One stressed the importance with the following comment: “Communicated between teachers and parents so that students who are not doing well received a call to discuss the problem instead of waiting for the report card to arrive with low grades.” Several comments discussed the value of student communication. One comment made a more direct suggestion which indicates that there may be current issues in teacher-student relations, it read “Students were not afraid to ask for help.” Other comments within this theme generally stressed the need to expand communication or the importance of it. One participant recommended that communication could be improved by making it mandatory: “Have mandatory information meeting for parents (e.g. at the intake center). The way we are communicating information to the parents is not working, so make it mandatory.”

The next most prevalent theme included a collection of responses related to encouraging students. Four comments made specific mention of the need for the schools to help uncover students’ hidden talents. Participants noted that these talents should be recognized and students should be encouraged to further develop them.

Another two comments simply noted the importance of student motivation for their success. The remaining comments were a mixed bag of recommendations and those stressing the need to encourage students. The following two examples made specific recommendations for how improve encouragement: “have an advocate for every student” and “Make a big group for all ethnicities (United Nations) to talk about supporting each other’s success.”

Seven of the participants left comments in this section related to teachers. Most of these discussed improvements that could be made to the teaching staff. Some simply stated that teaching should improve, while others offered solution ideas for perceived teacher shortcomings. One participant suggested that accountability measures for teachers should include success levels for minority student populations. Another comment stated that students need to be able to express teacher shortcomings without fear of retaliation.

Six comments were directly related to parents and their involvement in their children’s education. Two comments stressed the importance of parental support and involvement. The remaining four made suggestions that the system should educate parents to better create a sense of responsibility, motivate parents to participate in PTA meetings, react with their children, and support children.

There were five instances where participants discussed the role of counselors in student success. These comments mostly stressed the need for improved relationships between students and counselors as well as between parents and counselors. One suggested that counselors should do a better job of reaching out to the Hispanic student population. Another comment recommended expanding the relationship between counselors and students: “More social relationship with counselors rather than being there for just academic: try to inspire others, positive messages, help students balance strengths vs. weaknesses.”

Another five respondents made comments stressing the need for strong relationships within the school system. The nature of the relationships varied, and all of the following were mentioned: adult-student, student-teacher, teacher-teacher, parent-teacher, and student-teacher. One commenter simply stated that there should be relationships between everyone.

Mentors were a theme within this group of comments as well. Three simply stated the need to foster mentorships while one stressed the importance of stressing mentors.

Four comments emphasized the need to support various aspects of the educational system. All stressed the need to support students. One made mention that adults should be the ones to initiating support, not the students. Another comment recommended coordinators to offer ongoing support services: “(What if) we had

someone looking out for the kids falling through the crack(s)—a coordinator who follow(s) these students, makes sure they are on track, take and succeed in their classes and how to access help if they need it, to be a liaison with their teachers and specific planning for their future.”

There were three Café participants who discussed equality for all students within the Arlington Public School system. One specifically noted the need for equality in the areas of rules, grading, and expectations.

Unity was another theme which was populated by three comments. Two of these made direct recommendations for how relationships could be bridged between different populations within the school: “High schools were more combined as opposed to having ‘HILT hallways’” and a program where “HILT student(s) study and work with Native English speaking student(s).”

The final three themes of events, flexibility, and information each received two comments. One respondent recommended more events like the Café while another suggested including Career Center and High School Continuation Programs in high school orientation nights. The flexibility comments related to making school hours and opportunities more flexible so that students had better access to them. One of these comments was particularly detailed: “a new vision of alternative school day, alternative hours, and alternative seasons to respond to varying needs and circumstances (court involved, behavior issues, gang involved, failing grades, poverty).” Those in the information theme simply discussed the need for more information and better modes of disseminating information.

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