

## Empowering Hispanic youth

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Hispanic parents must get more involved in their communities and with their children's education, scholars and community leaders said Tuesday.

Speaking at a summit on Hispanic youth, scholars said a 2006 survey of Paterson youth showed that Hispanics were more likely than others to drop out of high school, use alcohol and drugs and engage in risky sexual behavior. About 50 people -- many of them professors and Paterson community leaders -- attended the summit at Montclair State University.

Hispanics also reported a higher incidence of depression and anxiety, and lower self-esteem, than other youths, the survey showed.

Robert Reid, an associate professor of family and child studies at Montclair State who spearheaded the survey, described the findings as "alarming" but also reflective of the "trials and tribulations" that Hispanic youth beyond Paterson also endure. The survey of 648 Paterson high school students was publicly released Tuesday at the summit.

Though the gaps among the groups may not seem so dramatic to the untrained eye -- with Hispanics, for instance, reporting drinking alcohol an average of more than two days a week, compared to 1.5 for blacks and about 1.7 for "other" -- Reid said the discrepancies were "significant." On questions concerning drugs, alcohol, sex and mental health, Hispanics consistently delivered the most worrisome responses, he added.

"[Hispanic] kids reported that it was not as important to their parents that they finish high school," Reid said, "and these kids placed a lower value on obtaining a high school diploma or going to college for achieving success."

Paterson Mayor Joey Torres, whom Reid credited with pushing for the summit after he learned of the survey findings, said in an interview that schools and communities must help Hispanic parents help their children.

"Many parents are consumed by work, and many have a lack of education themselves," Torres said. "They feel that some responsibilities regarding the children are the roles of the educators. So teachers, for example, often have to be social workers, too."

Torres said communities should focus on helping parents learn English, and perhaps even advance their education -- whether it be obtaining a high school diploma or pursuing college studies. He said he has been discussing the creation of such a program with North Jersey colleges.

"We have to help Mom as well as Susie," he said. "We should afford both opportunities to get an education -- a GED could be Mom's way out" of hardship.

Torres and others who helped coordinate the summit said they hoped the gathering would lead to ideas and projects aimed at finding solutions.

### Fast facts

Some of the findings of the 2006 survey of Paterson students.

When compared with others, Hispanic youths are more likely to exhibit:

- More depression.
- More anxiety.
- More drug and alcohol use.
- More experiences of violence.

### School risk factors:

- Lower importance by teens on finishing high

Norberto Curitomai, a Paterson businessman who emigrated from Peru, said many Hispanic parents simply leave urban areas for the sake of their children.

"I moved from Paterson to Clifton to get my kids away from all the negative influences of the city," he said. "Many Hispanic parents just make a big sacrifice and, if they can't leave the urban areas, they send their kids to school in another town, or maybe to a private school. But we also have to learn to make officials and school administrators more accountable, and many parents are reluctant to do that."

In a statement read by a staffer, Sen. Bob Menendez said that the plight of Hispanic youth should concern everyone.

"Hispanics now account for 13.7 percent of the total U.S. population," Menendez, D-N.J., said, "Nationally, the growth among the Latino student population has surpassed that of other ethnic groups, with nearly one in five K-12 students in the United States of Latino background today.

"In short, our nation's future is in the palm of [the Hispanic] community's hand," Menendez said, "which is why the results of the needs assessment survey administered to high school students in Paterson is so alarming."

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school.

- Students reported low importance by parents to finishing high school.
- Lower value placed on getting a diploma and going to college.

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