

# Las Niñas Silenciadas

## Broken Links between Language, Culture and Learning

February 2009

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Demographic trends clearly indicate that Latinas are the fastest growing segment of our population. We must address obstacles to school achievement that play a critical role in the emergence of truant behavior: lack of health and mental health resources for children and families; limited understanding of the essential links between language, culture and learning; and, a failure to establish strong, sustained and supported relationships between schools and families. Truancy is a multi-faceted problem, particularly damaging to the aspirations and opportunities of *las niñas*. This report, released by the Center for Children’s Advocacy, is the second<sup>1</sup> in a series that focuses on the needs of truant youth.

## Introduction

In urban classrooms from primary to secondary levels, the voices of *las niñas* may be muted or misunderstood in ways that make school success a fragile hope rather than a promise for many Hispanic girls.

Warning signs are present early on. In the early primary grades, many young Latinas may seem timid or shy, with less-developed receptive and expressive language skills than either black or white peers, less likely than classmates in other ethnic groups to have been prepared for school by high quality pre-schools.<sup>2</sup>

While timid Latinas may slip beneath the radar in busy classrooms, other young Latinas are all too visible, often described by their teachers as disorganized, impulsive, or overactive. While voices of this second group of *las niñas* are sometimes too loud and their levels of activity disruptive, their behaviors may mask an important message – that they are struggling to adapt to classroom expectations and frustrated by academic failure.

The results for both groups of Hispanic girls are similarly sad. National statistics indicate that fewer than 1 in 5 Latinas will complete high school in four years.<sup>3</sup> Without the skills and knowledge required for a 21<sup>st</sup> century global society, there is a serious risk that their strengths, talents and aspirations will be unrealized and their potential wasted.

Much has been made in recent years of strategies to close the “achievement gap” by articulating clear academic goals and monitoring student progress through standardized assessments. But despite the current emphasis on educational accountability, Hispanic children continue to lag behind non-Hispanic whites on measures of school readiness and school achievement.<sup>4</sup> Across the state of Connecticut, fewer than half of Hispanic children have demonstrated academic proficiency by the time they take the 4<sup>th</sup> Grade Connecticut Mastery test, in comparison with nearly 80% of white children. The consequences are serious, since federal school outcome data indicate that fewer than half of Connecticut’s Hispanic children graduate from high school, the lowest percentage of any ethnic group.<sup>5</sup> This problem assumes an added level of urgency in the city of Hartford, where Hispanic students make up nearly 80% of the school population in one school. This school was the focus of a four-year truancy prevention effort designed to reduce numbers of school dropouts.<sup>6</sup>

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## The Population

The focus of this paper is a group of seventh and eighth grade Hispanic girls who have been identified as at risk of dropping out of school because of frequent absences. They were referred to the Truancy Court Prevention Project (TCPP) by staff of their middle school, made up of 98% minority students of whom 75% are Hispanic.

The Truancy Court Prevention Project is a collaborative initiative among a legal advocacy not-for-profit organization, an urban school district, the state judicial department, a regional education resource center, and a multi-service not-for-profit agency. The TCPP was designed to address the attendance problems of eighth and ninth grade students referred by their respective public schools. These transitional grades were chosen because low-performing middle school students often have difficulty in bridging the gap between eighth and ninth grade.

As the TCPP began to work with students identified as chronically truant by school personnel, a pattern of long-standing academic failure began to emerge. School records, made available to the Project with parental consent, delineated trajectories of frustration and failure for many of the students. Initially, it came as something of a surprise that Hispanic girls made up more than half of referrals for truancy. However, upon further study, it became apparent that *las niñas* reflected a much greater national problem – that is, Latinas have the highest dropout rate of any racial or ethnic group.

For two-thirds of Hispanic girls, missing too many days of school, academic failure and disciplinary issues can constitute valid reasons for leaving school, with little recognition of the serious long-term life consequences that lie in store.

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## A Multi-Faceted Problem

### Teen Pregnancy, Mental Health Issues, School Failure

#### Teen pregnancy

Statistics in terms of lost human potential are grim.

Nearly half the girls who drop out of school become mothers before age 20, with significantly poorer prospects for employment in adulthood than their same-age peers. The multi-generational nature of the problem is highlighted by the fact that children of high school dropouts are more likely to drop out of school themselves,<sup>7</sup> further exacerbating a cycle of poverty. In Hartford, local statistics show rates of teen pregnancy among Latinas (Table 1) that are more than double the rates of teen pregnancy among non-Hispanic black and white students and exceed national rates of teen pregnancy as well.

Table 1

<b>2006 Hartford Teen Births</b> Rates per 1000 by Age and Ethnicity <sup>12</sup>			
<b>Age</b>	<b>Hispanic</b>	<b>Non-Hispanic Black</b>	<b>Non-Hispanic White</b>
Under 15	not calculated	not calculated	not calculated
15-17	69.1	33.7	not calculated
18-19	164.2	93.0	not calculated
US 15-17	47.9	36.1	11.8
US 18-19	139.7	108.4	49.3

#### Mental Health Issues

There are costs to quality of life as well, since national statistics also place Latinas at high risk of depression, substance abuse, and delinquency.<sup>8</sup>

Mental health screening at the middle school in question suggests that 17% - 35% of Hispanic girls in Grades 7 & 8 are at high risk of clinical depression.<sup>9</sup> These rates can be compared with those of general community and clinical populations which range between 1% - 8%.<sup>10</sup>

Additional anecdotal evidence also notes high frequencies of cutting and suicidal ideation among young Hispanic girls. A recent study by the Latino Policy Institute of the Hispanic Health Council<sup>11</sup> cites high rates of clinical depression among Latinas in Hartford and a general lack of access to sufficient mental health services for Latinos throughout Connecticut.

(continued)

## School failure

To clarify school-related factors that might influence truancy for Hispanic girls participating in the TCPP, an educational consultant carefully analyzed each child's attendance records, report cards, work samples, formal and informal assessments.

It became apparent that for more than half of the students (Table 2), educational problems and high rates of absenteeism had surfaced early. These findings were consistent with another recent study of Connecticut kindergarten students<sup>13</sup>, which indicated nearly 20% of children in similar urban school districts<sup>14</sup> were absent for 20 days or more during their first year in school.

While the Connecticut-wide study provides no data about gender or ethnic representation in relation to attendance, children in these high-need school districts were from homes in which English is a second language, and from communities characterized by high levels of poverty and single-parent families. Among the schools in this reference group, Hartford has the highest levels of non-English speaking and single-parent families in Connecticut.

There are no data currently available to describe the long-term achievement of children who show patterns of early absenteeism except for a labor-intensive review of individual records, as was carried out in this study; however, long-term school failure and high frequency of school dropouts have been evident in Hartford high school completion rates below 33%.<sup>15</sup>

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## Profile Analysis

### Early Observations

One hundred and seven students have been referred to the TCPP during its three-year history. Sixty-five (60.7%) were Hispanic girls. In an effort to better understand factors that might increase or minimize rates of absenteeism, individual records of 46 Latinas were analyzed for patterns of achievement and school-related behaviors. (This subset of records was selected as presenting relatively complete documentation from Grades K-1 through Grades 7-8).

It became evident that academic and behavioral struggles often began in the primary grades. Beginning with teachers' earliest comments, drawn from report cards and cumulative records, two different social and academic profiles emerged (Table 2).

One group of *las niñas* was seen by their primary teachers as quiet, somewhat timid and compliant in the classroom. A contrasting group of K-1 girls had difficulty focusing, were often impulsive and disorganized. By eighth grade, both groups were frequently absent from school, prompting their TCPP referral.

Linguistic background, cognitive and academic performance further distinguished the two groups. If specific intervention and support strategies are to be effective, it is important to understand the learning profiles of each group. Table 2 provides details on language background and access to bilingual services, rates of early absenteeism, cognitive and academic issues as indicated by teacher descriptions and other data in individual school records.

## academic and behavioral struggles often began in the primary grades

Table 2

<b>Profiles of Two Groups of Hispanic Girls</b> Based on Early Teacher Descriptions			
Group 1 - compliant (timid, well-behaved, limited motivation) Group 2 - disruptive (attentional and organizational issues)			
	<b>Group 1</b> % (n=31)	<b>Group 2</b> % (n=15)	<b>Total</b> % (n=46)
<b>Bilingual Home<sup>16</sup></b>	77.4	85.7	78.2
<b>Bilingual Services<sup>17</sup></b>	37.5	8.0	29.4
<b>Early Absences</b>	45.1	21.4	56.6
<b>Cognitive Issues<sup>18</sup></b>			
- Attentional	35.4	57.1	41.1
- Language	33.3	64.3	41.1
- Other	41.9	14.2	33.3
<b>Academic Issues<sup>19</sup></b>			
- Reading	70.9	85.7	73.9
- Math	41.9	12.2	33.3

## Continuing Concerns: Lack of Sufficient Educational Supports

Group and individual profiles suggest three areas where *las niñas* lack sufficient educational supports, beginning in the early grades:

### Inadequate Attention to Physical and Social-Emotional Development

**Group 1** Girls in Group 1, described as “quiet”, “timid”, and “shy”, were twice as likely (45.1%) as their more active peers (21.9%) to show patterns of early absenteeism. This is a significantly higher rate than that (26%) of the entire population of boys and girls in the TCPP. The reasons for high rates of absenteeism are rarely stated, although occasional references to asthma or other illness and injuries suggest that health conditions may play a role. Other factors might include temperamental tendencies to be slow to warm up in new situations, difficulties with separation from parents, or anxiety about the group or some aspect of school.

In any case, there is little evidence that the pattern of early absences triggered serious attention to issues of physical health or social-emotional development. In contrast to their peers, these girls, despite their demonstrable academic struggles, appear to have become much less visible in the classroom. They were more likely to be socially promoted and were frequently retained, but significantly less likely to receive special education services in the course of their schooling.

**Group 2** By contrast, one in five girls who were more active, distractible and, at times, disruptive also demonstrated high rates of early absenteeism, but were more than twice as likely, as a group, to receive special education services over time (Table 3). Yet, there is no evidence that any of these children received in-depth, comprehensive evaluations during their early school years.

While the over-referral of minorities for special education continues to be of concern, the rates of social promotion and retention ought also to be a red flag signaling potential for long-term academic failure.

Table 3

Intervention Patterns for Two Groups of Hispanic Girls			
	Group 1 % (n=31)	Group 2 % (n=15)	Total % (n=46)
Social Promotion <sup>20</sup>	45.1	33.3	41.3
Retention in Grade	54.8	60.0	56.5
Both Retained and Socially Promoted	25.8	33.3	28.2
Days Absent <sup>21</sup>	26.7	27.3	27.0
Special Education Status <sup>22</sup>	12.9	28.5	17.4



## Failure to Address Issues of Second Language Acquisition and Differences in Learning Profiles

More than three-quarters of the combined group spoke Spanish at home. However, only about one-third had received bilingual or other language support services. Of the two subgroups, the quiet, compliant group of girls (Group 1) was more likely to receive bilingual support, although typically these supports had been withdrawn by Grade 3, just as academic language becomes more abstract and demands for reading and writing as primary learning modalities intensify. Patterns of bilingual service delivery need further exploration, especially when considering the contrasts between these two subgroups of Latinas.

The data present a confusing picture in that 85% of children from Group 2 were identified as having come from homes where Spanish was the primary language spoken (compared with 77% of Group 1). However, only 8% of these children had received bilingual support services. They were nearly twice as likely to be identified with (receptive and expressive) language problems. Were these problems the result of limited English proficiency or indicators of underlying language disorders?

Learning patterns of girls in Group 2 also differed from their quieter peers in that they were much less likely to be described as struggling in mathematics and somewhat more likely to experience reading problems – although on average, nearly three-quarters of all of the girls were delayed in reading skills. These differences were fairly dramatic, with 42% of Group 1 girls showing problems with mathematics compared with only 12% of those in Group 2.

Without more specific observation and academic assessment, it is difficult to say whether these two groups of girls represent distinct cognitive profiles, but there are certainly indicators of significant differences in the area of mathematics and language problems, with Group 1 girls less likely to be described as having language delays (due to their bilingual support?) but more likely to have difficulties with mathematics. Quiet, compliant girls, were also more likely to demonstrate other cognitive processing issues such as difficulty with visual-motor and graphomotor skills, auditory processing problems, memory deficits, etc.

Group 2 girls presented the opposite picture, with higher frequency of reading problems but less difficulty with mathematics; more frequent attentional problems, but fewer information processing problems observed. Whether problem behaviors masked these characteristics is impossible to discern without more focused observations and evaluations.

In any case, the need for close attention and awareness of the process of language acquisition for English Language Learners, especially as it relates to literacy, and the importance of better understanding of ways children take in and use information is clear, especially for children whose activity levels and distractibility may be their most obvious characteristic.

## Limited Strategies for Supporting Academic Progress

On average, according to cumulative attendance records, the Latinas in this study were absent for more than five weeks the previous (7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade) school year. Group 2 was more than twice as likely to have received special education services, but nearly two-thirds were also retained in grade at least once.

Girls in Group 1, perhaps because of generally low visibility in the classroom, were less likely to receive special education services, but more than half were retained in grade, and a quarter of the group had both been retained and socially promoted. Several students had been retained or socially promoted as many as 4-6 times. Retention in grade was the most prevalent intervention for both groups.

Comparative intervention data reflecting academic progress are included in Table 3.

In short, these girls, already at high risk in terms of demographic factors, present with multiple indicators suggesting a need for comprehensive evaluation and focused, intensive academic, health and social-emotional support. A recent study notes that truancy was the reason for the highest percentage of referrals of children for families with services needs, reflecting the complexity of the problem in a comprehensive analysis of gaps in services, critical legislation, and focused policy recommendations for truancy prevention/intervention.<sup>23</sup>

Fewer than one in five received that attention on the part of the school system, raising concerns about the knowledge and implementation of federally mandated Child Find procedures within the school and the district. Concerted, comprehensive action that appreciates the

complex and holistic nature of child development as a foundation for academic achievement, physical and mental health is essential for las niñas and the future economic and social welfare of their communities.

## **Strengthening Links to Learning**

When all of the data are combined, the urgent nature of the problem is clear. Language, culture and learning are intimately related, but, for many Latinas in urban schools, these relationships are fragmented, placing Hispanic girls at risk of negative social, emotional and academic outcomes.

National trends suggest that truant girls, like those in this study, are at high risk of dropping out of school<sup>24</sup> and becoming teenage mothers. Children of teen mothers are less likely to succeed at school, more likely to live in poverty, more likely to have health problems and to engage in problem behavior.<sup>25</sup>

Population projections indicate that Hispanic girls will be increasingly at risk of school failure by virtue of their increasing numbers and limited research that can clarify complex underlying developmental, social and mental health issues that appear to present serious obstacles to school completion.

The scope of the problem and social trends emphasize the need for systemic strategies as a large part of any solution that will engage, nurture and inspire Hispanic girls in urban schools. Broad, basic elements found to be successful across numerous truancy and dropout prevention programs require special adaptations for Latinas that will help to repair broken links between language, culture and learning.

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## Action Steps Needed for Success

Critical action steps designed to engage and support *las niñas* from school entry through middle and high school include:

### Engage Parents and Families

Beginning even before school entry, the highest priority should be accorded to establishing relationships with parents, particularly young single mothers whose own experiences with school may have been less than satisfactory and whose beliefs about preparing their daughters for kindergarten may focus on the authority of the teacher, rather than the parent's own role in providing important learning experiences.

A recent study<sup>26</sup> suggests that Latina mothers may value learning to respect authority as the most important part of the kindergarten experience. Could this emphasis on respecting authority serve to engender increased anxiety for young Latinas in the early years of schooling, expressed through observations of timidity and shyness?

This study suggests that mothers' satisfaction with school affected their children's educational success. The documentation available to the TCPP does not include mothers' level of education or mothers' satisfaction with their own schooling. However, interpretation of available district-wide data (which includes extremely low rates of school completion) in combination with high dropout rates suggests that this factor may play a role in early absenteeism for some students as well as in reinforcing patterns of performance leading to truancy in upper grades.

### Provide Culturally Responsive Parent Education

Educators are sometimes prone to attribute attendance problems to parental lack of commitment. However, given the high rates of teen pregnancy and school dropouts in Hartford, many young mothers may be pessimistic about their children's potential for academic success; may be stressed by the realities of managing low-income households; and may themselves be in need of emotional support, physical and mental health services.

School success requires a respectful and resourceful approach to engaging parents. Ongoing parent training in English and Spanish should be designed to increase awareness of instructional and social goals (including regular attendance) in the early grades, must be provided at times when working parents are available and/or in digital, on-line or video format (perhaps using public television as a delivery system).

Important components include:

- Strategies that will help parents address their own concerns about their children's needs (e.g. alternative approaches to discipline; social, emotional and language development; and strategies for dealing with life issues that impact families);
- Benefits of early learning in both Spanish and English, importance of continuing to support the home language and the potentially negative impact on learning of abrupt transitions to English-only classrooms;<sup>27</sup>
- Importance of reading to children in the home language as well as in English, demonstration and practice in reading and telling stories;
- Strategies for building vocabulary in the primary and secondary language through daily experiences and family and community life;
- Suggested activities for building numeracy skills (e.g. telling time, measurement, and money in the context of the home);
- Career awareness designed to help parents recognize and foster the aspirations of girls for challenging academic and career opportunities; and,
- Regular communication with school personnel in a non-threatening environment that encourages sharing of expectations, observations, questions and concerns.

(continued)

### **Make Schools Community Centers that Support Dual Language Family Literacy, Enhance Cultural Awareness and Cultural Appreciation, and Facilitate Access to Community Resources**

Schools can help families to understand the importance of literacy, recognize and appreciate the importance of dual language learning, and, in collaboration with public libraries, become a resource for life-long learning:

- A lending library of books, CD's, video and audiotapes in Spanish and English to support parents' home literacy efforts, including modeling of language development approaches;
- Creation of networks of community contacts from similar cultural and linguistic backgrounds who can support parents and children in accessing physical and mental healthcare, job training, adult education, child care resources, and religious organizations; and,
- Current information about community resources and activities available to help children and parents access needed supports including social services, transportation, recreational activities, and school events in Spanish and English.

### **Create School-Based Mental and Physical Health Services Staffed by Bilingual Personnel to Provide Ongoing Screening, Referral and Site-Based Support**

Schools need to be safe, nurturing places for all students, but especially for those who are stressed and traumatized by daily violence in urban neighborhoods. This means recognizing that students in urban areas may be faced with constant physical threats and emotional trauma that many adults might find nearly intolerable.

Helping students to build conflict resolution skills as well as warmth and emotional support are essential elements in laying a foundation of trust that helps students to overcome ongoing anxiety and stress. School-based mental health services are essential for children and families for whom even trips to community clinics may pose difficult scheduling, transportation and child care problems.

Alliances with medical, mental health and community-based social services organizations can provide invaluable support to children and families within public schools, reinforcing the efforts of teachers and counselors to engage and nurture las niñas and other children who carry such heavy burdens of anxiety, frustration and depression that school attendance and

school work become overwhelming. Strong case management systems can bridge school and community concerns through effective multidisciplinary teams, early intervention and cost-effective collaboration. Implementation of school-community partnerships holds promise for significant long-term improvement in learning and life outcomes.

### **Enhance Cultural Competence of School Staff through Appropriate Training and Ongoing Professional Development**

In order to inculcate sensitivity to cultural and linguistic differences, and to clarify cognitive profiles of strengths and weaknesses for Hispanic girls, teachers and related services personnel must be adequately prepared for culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms. Without sufficient understanding of the process of second language acquisition, cultural perspectives on child rearing, and without a sufficient repertoire of instructional and behavioral support strategies, teachers may interpret failure to meet academic expectations as lack of motivation. They may not recognize that disruptive and defiant behaviors often serve to mask frustration and low self-esteem. As both students and teachers become increasingly frustrated, both adults and children may become increasingly less likely to identify and build on strengths, interests and aspirations as important motivators for academic achievement.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has provided useful guidelines for countering misperceptions about children from culturally and linguistically diverse families and enhancing teachers' cultural understanding and responsiveness<sup>28</sup>, and the National Center for Cultural Competence<sup>29</sup> provides a wide range of resources and materials to support schools and other mental health and human service agencies in meeting needs of children and families.

Ongoing professional development for teachers and related services personnel must address the academic, physical health and social-emotional needs of Hispanic girls at every grade level including:

- Early warning signs of social-emotional, language and learning problems, among both groups of girls, that may be masked by behavior: quiet, anxious, and depressed girls (group 1), and disorganized, impulsive and highly active girls (group 2) – especially when these characteristics appear in the early grades and are combined with high rates of absenteeism and failure to make academic progress;

- Strategies for engaging and teaching children who require social-emotional support as well as assistance in managing problems of attention, impulsivity, memory, expressive and receptive language delay and other challenging learning profiles;
- Greater understanding of the process of second language acquisition, including practical strategies for enhancing language development across content and curriculum areas;
- Instructional skills designed to support children from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds such as scaffolding, differentiated instruction with use of instructional technology and Universal Design principles to adapt curriculum to individual needs;
- Increased awareness and responsiveness to parental expectations, educational experiences and perceptions, and specific strategies for engaging parents with limited English language proficiency or a background of unsuccessful educational experiences.

## Establish Supportive School Structures and Policy

Evidence-based policy and practice holds promise for more successful outcomes for *las niñas* and other struggling students, including:

- *Small Teacher: Child Ratios*

A review of multiple research initiatives over a period of 20 years<sup>30</sup> has shown an increase in student achievement when small classes (15-18 students) begin in early elementary years, are well-designed and implemented, and continue for more than one year. The Latinas in this study, identified and referred to the TCPP as truants in seventh and eighth grade, showed significant problems related to school failure (multiple retentions and social promotions), linguistic and cognitive difficulties. Smaller class size in the early grades would have allowed teachers much greater opportunity to observe how students were processing information as well as to identify breakdown points that threaten academic progress.

- *Inclusive Classrooms*

While over-referral of students from diverse linguistic, racial and cultural backgrounds is a concern, Response to Intervention (RTI) strategies provide early and intensive academic and behavioral support with less likelihood of discriminatory labeling. Results could reasonably be expected to lead to increased numbers of appropriate referrals for evaluation and services, and to earlier intervention within the general education

classroom. With reduced class size, individualized instruction for all children becomes more practical.

- *Dual language mastery*

The majority of the Hispanic girls in this study were bilingual. That is to say, while their schoolwork was in English, most spoke Spanish at home. State-mandated limitations of the provision of bilingual services prevent many Hispanic students from learning and communicating in two languages. In an increasingly multicultural community, dual or multiple language proficiency will become a marketable skill. Recognition and appreciation of bilingual mastery also communicates that diversity is valued, suggesting potential for stronger engagement with school.

- *Academic English language booster programs for bilingual students*

A flexible approach to preparing students for academic achievement in one or both languages would avoid rigid restrictions on bilingual support services and would instead provide (at a minimum) “booster” programs as bilingual students reach critical stages in their schooling. For example, as students move into the upper elementary grades, they are required to learn to an increasing degree through verbal language (reading, writing and listening). This trend increases dramatically in middle and high school. Booster sessions to assist bilingual students in mastering increasingly abstract and decontextualized language in content areas would help to insure that language learning continues to address changing needs and provides students with the linguistic tools they need to achieve within more “academic” language environments.

- *Elimination of social promotion (promotion by exception) and retention*

The continued academic struggles of the majority of girls in this sample reinforce the well-established fact that social promotion and retention are ineffective strategies for addressing the needs of struggling learners or fostering increased engagement in school. Academic failure is often attributed to attendance, but it might equally be the case that academic failure prompts avoidance and high rates of absenteeism.

- *Routine referral to Student Assistance Teams*

When absence rates exceed ten days, there should be routine referral to Student Assistance Teams. If this referral includes a comprehensive assessment of all aspects of individual student social-emotional, academic, health and behavioral status, it could help to avoid years of academic struggle and frustration.

## Summary

Latinas face many challenges in navigating the complex academic and social demands of often-competing cultures.

It is interesting, albeit ironic, that we've known for a long time that Hispanic girls in the United States are at high risk of early pregnancy, drug use, suicide, and academic failure. The fact that the same risk factors exist in 2009 and have not been addressed successfully by our schools and communities should be cause for extreme concern. A coherent, consistent, and multidisciplinary approach that links schools, public health systems and community-based networks of human service providers is essential.

Continued failure to address the problem will exacerbate an already serious, multi-generational problem.

As educators and advocates, we must devote our considerable energies and expertise to this problem. There are no simple solutions and strategies. Successful solutions will require the active engagement of parents, teachers, administrators, community leaders and state agencies.

This study shows clearly that truancy is a multi-faceted problem particularly damaging to the aspirations and opportunities of *las niñas*. We must change perceptions that truancy is a problem to be dealt with primarily through disciplinary interventions and be prepared to address the obstacles to school achievement that play a critical role in the emergence of truant behavior – lack of health and mental health resources for children and families; limited understanding of the essential links between language, culture and learning; and, a failure to establish strong, sustained and supported relationships between schools and families from pre-kindergarten throughout the grades.

Demographic trends clearly indicate that Latinas are the fastest growing segment of our population. We must initiate immediate and comprehensive efforts to interrupt the cycles of failure experienced by *estas niñas*. If not, we run the risk of perpetuating a cycle of failure and frustration, creating an underclass of under-educated women who will not be able to successfully achieve their own aspirations or to be effective guides and role models for their children.

In such a circumstance, we continue to silence the voices of Hispanic girls by wasting the potential contribution that Latinas can make to the country on every level. We cannot afford, in this complex, global society, to leave *las niñas* behind any longer because we are unable to repair the broken links that lead to disengagement, depression, frustration and failure.

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## Footnotes

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- <sup>16</sup> *Bilingual home*: Evidenced by documentation in the record that Spanish was the language spoken in the home.
- <sup>17</sup> *Bilingual services*: Evidenced by documentation that the student had received any bilingual services including English as a Second Language support, bilingual education or bilingual special education, or Language Transition Support Services (LTSS).
- <sup>18</sup> *Cognitive issues*: Documentation including report cards, individualized assessments and teacher reports that students exhibited difficulty in aspects of attention, language, and/or other processing difficulties (e.g. graphomotor, visual-motor, auditory discrimination, etc.).
- <sup>19</sup> *Academic issues*: Documentation including report cards, individualized assessments, standardized test scores, work samples and teacher reports indicating below grade level performance in reading and/or mathematics.
- <sup>20</sup> *Social promotion* refers to the practice of advancing students to the next grade even though they have not mastered material in their current grade placement.
- <sup>21</sup> *Days absent* reflects the average number of days absent for girls in each group in the most recent school year for which data is available, generally the 7<sup>th</sup> grade, in this sample.
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## **Truancy Court Prevention Project**

The Truancy Court Prevention Project (TCPP) was launched in 2004 to address Hartford's high truancy rates.

A diversionary program which aims to help youth avoid being charged as "status offenders" and formally referred to the court system, the TCPP's focus is to ensure that each student reduces truancy, completes the school year and graduates from high school.

The TCPP is a collaboration between the Center for Children's Advocacy, Hartford Public Schools, the Connecticut Judicial Department, the Capitol Region Education Council, and the Village for Families and Children.

TCPP targets students in eighth grade at Quirk Middle School and Burr School; research shows that the transition from high school is often followed by a decrease in academic performance and an increase in truancy.

The Project provides intensive and holistic support to participants. A main focus is students' rights to appropriate academic assessment and support. There is a high incidence of long-standing academic failure among program participants.

The main components of the TCPP are:

- In-school, informal "court" sessions with a judge who meets with each student to monitor the student's academic progress and attendance.
- Case management that links students to services such as mentoring, counseling, after school and youth development activities, tutoring, and job placement. Case managers monitor students' academic progress and attendance and serve as liaisons between school, student and family.
- Review of each student's cumulative school record by an independent educational consultant to recommend opportunities for improved academic performance.
- Individual legal representation to students in areas that affect attendance, such as education, special education, access to health and mental health services, and public benefits.
- Legal advocacy on systemic issues that may contribute to high dropout rates. Past and current examples of such issues include fair discipline policy, the entitlement to appropriate bilingual education, and access to tutoring and school choice under the No Child Left Behind Act.

For more information about the Truancy Court Prevention Project:  
[www.kidscounsel.org/aboutus\\_programs\\_tcpp.htm](http://www.kidscounsel.org/aboutus_programs_tcpp.htm).

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