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Changes to Primary Education to Increase Postsecondary Hispanic
Enrollment Rates in Tennessee

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Spring 2016

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1. Introduction

In recent decades in the United States, there has been a cultural push for young adults to continue their education after high school. One primary reason this is occurring is due to the trend that there are more jobs available that require a college degree as a prerequisite, including more than half of the 30 fastest growing occupations (“Higher Education”). In other instances, it may be due to a collective national desire to out-compete other better-educated nations. Regardless of the reasoning, children in today’s society are commonly expected at an early age to attend college, with parents and family members beginning college funds, in many cases, upon the birth of the child. Despite this national push for higher enrollment, the United States’ postsecondary educational system has discrepancies in its distribution of demographic variety in comparison to the nation’s population demographics. The state of Tennessee, in particular, is one state where the Hispanic enrollment rate in higher education is statistically lower than all other racial demographics, despite making up a large portion of the state’s population (Tennessee, 32). From February 2014 to November 2014, I interned with a Knoxville-area non-profit—Centro Hispano de East Tennessee—which assists Hispanic families. While there, I spent a large portion of my time with elementary-aged children. I was exposed very personally to the issues that young Hispanic students face, and I experienced first-hand the potential that this demographic has to contribute to the postsecondary educational sphere and society as a whole.

In this paper, I will first examine the immigration, demographic, and postsecondary enrollment trends nationally, as well as in Tennessee, to provide a better understanding of current demographics and to illustrate where the problem lies. I will then explain in what ways lower level education can better prepare Hispanic children for secondary and higher education, in order to improve the postsecondary education enrollment rates in Tennessee. To accomplish this, I

plan to examine the benefits of including various types of assistance in lower level education. I will explain the benefits of providing specialized assistance within elementary schools for the children, providing home assistance for the families, as well as using community outreach methods to aid newly immigrated families with young children. At its base, this topic has the potential to be politically-charged. However, examinations of the political scope of this issue are outside of the parameters of this research and will be left to later examinations.

2. Today's Society

Today more than ever before, the United States is known globally as a land of mixed cultures and a wide variety of ethnicities. Beyond this, the U.S. is comprised of a very dynamic demographic composition, with some small divisions growing even smaller, and others increasing at astounding rates. One such group that is growing tremendously is the Hispanic demographic. As of the 2010 Census, Hispanics are the largest and fastest growing minority group in the nation. Although the spread of this growth is occurring in every state, there are certain states that have a higher concentration of Hispanics than others, such as New Mexico, California, and Texas. A total of nine states, mainly located in the South, had their Hispanic population more than double from 2000 to 2010, and six other states' populations grew solely due to Hispanic immigration within that same decade (Liu, 1-2). According to projections based on underlying demographic assumptions, some believe that the Hispanic population will make up approximately 29 percent of the total national population and will make up approximately 40 percent of the child population by 2050 (Passel and Cohn). If that demographic spread turns out to be accurate, solid primary education will prove to be even more necessary in order for the educational disparities to be leveled out.

Geographically, Tennessee is experiencing a wide spread of immigration across the state with the most dense population areas falling in Davidson, Shelby, Rutherford, and Knox counties, respectively. From 2000 to 2010, Middle Tennessee experienced a large expansion of already existing Hispanic populations, whereas East Tennessee experienced a large influx of immigration to counties where the pre-existing Hispanic population was statistically insignificant. According to a figure found in "A Profile of Hispanic Population in the State of

Tennessee," a total of twelve counties moved to a higher population bracket, and a total of sixteen counties have a recorded Hispanic population of at least 1,001, according to the 2010 Census (Nagle, Gustafson, and Burd, 15), not including the undocumented individuals whom avoided the Census for fear of repercussion. For this reason, East Tennessee appears to be an appropriate area to focus in for improving enrollment rates, due to the lack of experience with successfully assisting and incorporating an ever-growing population of Hispanics into a traditionally rural part of the state. As far as population goes, Tennessee experienced a large population boom from 2000 to 2010, where approximately one-half of the population growth was composed of ethnic and racial minorities. Leading this portion of the population growth were the Hispanics, with an increase of 134.2 percent over that time period. This was the third highest growth in the United States, resulting in an overall Hispanic population percentage of 4.6 for the state of Tennessee, according to the 2010 Census (Nagle, Gustafson, and Burd, 1). Additionally, Nagle et al. states that 2010 Census data shows that the median age of the Hispanic population is young, at a mere 23 years old, and the age range of the population is composed of the individuals at prime working age and the very young children (2). The latter of these two provides insight into why improving lower level education now is so important. Taking advantage of the current high number of Hispanic children to improve postsecondary enrollment would result in more children receiving a better educational foundation and guaranteed improvement in the coming years.

In regards to postsecondary educational enrollment, the trends of demographic composition and comparative enrollment are not increasing at a matching rate. Nationally, just over 12 percent of postsecondary students are Hispanic. Additionally, 22 percent of primary and secondary education students are Hispanic. Seven states have a Hispanic segment that is higher

than 25 percent of the total kindergarten through twelfth grade population¹ (Liu, 3). Historically, the early 2000s and earlier showed trends of inequalities in representation of high school dropout rates, as well as in postsecondary enrollment rates (Noguera, 297). These trends have not changed much over the decades, with real improvement only occurring in secondary education, where the average Hispanic dropout rate fell to 14 percent in 2011. Higher education enrollment has risen to include over half of the Hispanic newly graduated students (Fry and Taylor) in recent years, but compared to other racial groups, the Hispanic demographic is still falling behind at a national level.

On a state level, postsecondary enrollment rates in Tennessee are lagging. As of spring 2010, only 2.5 percent of students enrolled in higher education form part of the Hispanic population. This places Tennessee on the lower end of the scale for Hispanic enrollment rates compared to Hispanic population, with only nine other states that had less than 2.5 percent Hispanic enrollment in public postsecondary education during the same time period (Liu, 4). This, in combination with the aforementioned high number of Hispanics entering the state's population, show that there is a concern that needs to be addressed. To catch up and to stay on par with other states that have a much better population to postsecondary enrollment ratio, it is important that the educational systems in Tennessee improve this rate in order to raise not only the Hispanic postsecondary enrollment, but the postsecondary education enrollment rate as a whole.

The combination of these statistics show that there needs to be more effort on the part of educational systems to increase postsecondary enrollment, especially in the Hispanic segment of the population. As a society, a large, expanding segment of the population is being neglected,

¹ These seven are New Mexico, California, Texas, Arizona, Nevada, Colorado, and Florida, ranging from 59.9 percent to 27.2 (Liu, 3).

and in order to reach higher educational goals at a national level, individual states need to work towards improving the lagging demographic sections. In Tennessee's case, that will require focusing on the Hispanic demographic. Because primary education provides the vital foundation that all other scholastic endeavors build upon, I propose that through the following methods, lower level education can successfully improve postsecondary enrollment by providing better access to a more solid educational foundation and a supportive environment that promotes higher educational success.

3. Specialized Assistance Within Schools

One area where it is easiest to begin working to improve the lower level educational foundation of young Hispanic students is within the schools themselves. Using this base method of reaching and working with the students can ensure that they receive an effective and full education. This is because the faculty in the schools can identify and address the issues that the struggling students face as they occur. There are various methods in which the school systems can implement in-school specialized assistance for Hispanic students to ensure that the students receive a solid educational foundation. In my research, the methods I will be focusing on are the use of in-school interpreters, English as a Second Language programs, and an alternate method of extra focus that can be used by the school system as a whole. I will also address some of the difficulties that these methods can present and ways to accommodate them.

The use of interpreters where there is a real need for interpretation is not an idea new to the United States. The 1964 Civil Rights Act, Title VI prohibition of discrimination began the process of individuals having the right to information and services in connection with programs that receive federal financial assistance. From there, the 1970 Memorandum clarified requirements for individual school districts to ensure that all students receive the same educational opportunities, regardless of their language or national origin (“Refugee Children in U.S.”, 1-2). This type of policy at a national level alludes rather strongly to the idea of employing interpreters in the school systems when there is reasonable need for interpretation. Enacting this type of assistance can be difficult, however, due to the financial costs associated with the hiring of a highly specialized faculty member. As of May 2014, the average hourly wage of an interpreter is approximately \$23.71 (Bureau). While some school systems may have no trouble accommodating another faculty member at such a rate, other smaller systems with

smaller budgets might, with spending limits being lowered for many areas. To accommodate this, I will address feasible and adequate alternatives later in this section.

The benefits that come from employing an in-school interpreter extend beyond the children themselves, and those benefits will also be further discussed in later sections. However, one of the primary benefits that directly effects the children's ability to learn is the additional responsibilities and stress of a current faculty member acting as an interpreter as well. The amount of effort and time required to be a teacher in lower level education is tremendous. Adding the role of ad hoc interpreter has the potential to be too difficult for many educators to handle. Even if the school is small in population, there is a high likelihood that, if a situation arises where a student needs interpretation or translation assistance, the teacher or other faculty member acting as interpreter will have to stop his or her current task. This type of situation can result in a loss of core instructional time if the faculty member acting as interpreter is an instructor. Such lost educational time has the potential to be extremely detrimental considering children are only in a school setting for a set amount of time every day. With an in-school interpreter, the teacher or teachers that would normally be required to fulfill the role of ad hoc interpreter would be able to focus all of their time and energy in the classroom instead of dividing their energies between the classroom and the unpredictable moments where interpretation or translation is necessary. In addition, the students in need of translation or interpretation will receive a better experience than with a teacher or other faculty member that is not practiced in interpreting, improving their educational foundation. In the case that the faculty member is not a teacher, the lost time can still be detrimental to the educational process, although this situation would be more suitable if a full-time interpreter is unobtainable. Another related benefit of having a faculty member strictly dedicated to translating and interpreting is the stress

that is relieved from the other faculty members. Without an interpreter, any bilingual faculty members would need to be prepared at all times to be able to interpret for a student. This added stress could distract from lesson planning and class time focus. With the workload delegated to an in-school interpreter, the teachers will be better able to focus on educating their students, ensuring that all of them are educated to the fullest extent. An additional benefit that comes from having an in-school interpreter is the connection that he or she can build with the students and the resulting impacts. Most individuals perform better when they feel comfortable, and children are no different. In the case of a Hispanic student struggling to adjust and understand certain situations, a familiar face of a faculty member strictly dedicated to assisting in the explanation of what is occurring can aid in the student feeling more comfortable in the educational environment. An additional reason that employing an in-school interpreter would be beneficial for building a solid educational foundation for Hispanic children is that the school district might not have a bilingual faculty member to ad hoc translate. Hiring an in-school interpreter would be far more efficient than using an employee with rudimentary Spanish skills or a volunteer with a schedule that does not lend itself to regular school hours.

In East Tennessee, the use of an in-school interpreter has already proved to be extremely beneficial in the improvement of lower level educational success. In the Knox County school district, Elementary School has employed a full-time in school interpreter since 2011. According to the *Knoxville News Sentinel* in an article about the Knox County school district's rising Hispanic population, Lonsdale Elementary has a student population that is 48 percent Hispanic which is widely diverse in heritage. The principal stated that the interpreter has been able to create real connections with the students and their families, and the children are performing better in school (McCoy), helping the students not only better understand what is occurring on a

day-to-day basis in school, but also to intrinsically provide the opportunity for these students who speak little English to feel comfortable in a bilingual environment. This type of relationship building and environment modification are imperative for a student to be able to focus on educational goals while at school instead of not fully understanding what is expected of them in the classroom environment or being distracted by possibly feeling isolated from native English speakers. While this particular example comes from a large district with an extremely high population percentage of Hispanics, other smaller school systems with smaller ratios of Hispanic students can still benefit from an in-school interpreter.

For smaller school systems with budgets that do not have much room for additional staff wages, there are still ways in which the systems can provide an in-school interpreter of some form to students who need the additional support linguistically by means of interpretation or translation. One way that smaller school districts can provide a more solid educational foundation for Hispanic students is making use of the technology available in today's society. An example of one such program that can function in the place of a full-time in-school interpreter is the use of a program offered through a public school system's website. The online program, Speak Your Languages, has various programs, but in the situation of a small school system with a limited budget—not unlike many school systems found throughout East Tennessee's more rural areas—the one that would be most beneficial is its introductory interpreter and interpreter courses for individuals that are bilingual but have not had any professional training (“Interpretation and Translation Services”). A program such as this would be able to make use of any teachers or other faculty already employed or local volunteers whom have already been acting in the role of ad hoc interpreter, but would make the process more effective and beneficial to the children involved. Beyond online training, there are training programs and workshops for

bilingual faculty or volunteers that can be used in the place of hiring another faculty member. One such program that has proven successful is called Interpreters in Schools. While it takes place in England, the methods the program uses are applicable to U.S. schools and similar to smaller scale programs in the United States. The training is divided into manners of working directly with the children as well as workshops based on the skills necessary to be a successful interpreter in a lower level educational environment (“About the Project”). Online training opportunities or workshops for current bilingual faculty or volunteers can be an excellent way for smaller school districts with smaller budgets—such as those in East Tennessee—to be able to provide their students with the access to translation and interpretation.

Another alternative to the more costly approach of hiring an in-school interpreter in low budget settings is the use of interns. The use of interns has become common practice for many companies and organizations in recent years, and for the postsecondary students, many employers expect them to have completed one. The primary schools can work with local colleges or universities to create partnerships through which the students can intern. Since the interns will be working in schools, there is no need for them to be certified². This would allow for current postsecondary Spanish students to gain hands-on experience as well as aid the primary schools by providing access to interpreters that they not only need, but can also afford at little to no cost. This type of collaboration can have multiple benefits for both parties. For current postsecondary students, they receive more hands on experience that can lead to a better career. For the schools, they receive interpreters at little to no cost, which can reduce excess spending of resources or allow for an interpreter in the cases where there is no additional funds available in the school’s budget. This and the aforementioned ways that schools with smaller budgets can afford

² The majority of interpreting professions that require certification are legal, court interpreters and medical interpreters.

interpreters, which can assist in the ability to create a strong foundation for the rest of their educational careers.

My second proposed method of improving students' educational foundation within the schools is via specialized assistance by providing English as a Second Language programs. Due to the United States' increasingly changing demographic, English as a Second Language, or ESL, programs have become better known and more common across the nation. While ESL programs include all individuals who are learning English as his or her second language, in today's society, the first thought of many goes to Spanish-speakers. Just as the 1964 Civil Rights Act, Title VI prohibition of discrimination and the 1970 Memorandum clarified requirements for individual school districts to ensure that all students receive the same educational opportunities, regardless of their language or national origin ("Refugee Children in U.S.", 1-2) alluded to the idea of using interpreters in the school systems when there is reasonable need for interpretation, this legislation includes providing support such as English as a Second Language programs. Some states have chosen to move away from English as a Second Language programs and instead use a full immersion method that I will expand upon further later. Traditionally, the classes are taught by a certified teacher, who is not necessarily bilingual due to the wide variety of backgrounds of the students. The programs usually begin with a screening exam which places each student into their own proficiency category, which better allows the instructor to meet the needs of each individual student. Successful examples of these programs can be seen throughout the United States. In Illinois, the Wilmette Public Schools District 39 has an English Language Learner Program that screens the students, placing each student into a category ranging from 1 Entering to 6 Reaching. The certified ESL teachers then work with each child individually as well as in groups using various activities to build the students' vocabulary, speaking and

listening skills, cultural awareness, and more in order to ensure that the children reach a proficient level that allows them to leave the program to continue and excel in English-only classes. This program has had success in the students passing the exit exam for the program and excelling in English-only classes, at times with minor extra assistance (“English Language Learners”). In Massachusetts, the Salem Public School district conducts its ESL program in a slightly different manner. The program is adjusted to fit the needs of each individual school in the district. The kindergarten through eighth grade Nathaniel Bowditch School combines English-only classes with the ESL program, with two instructors in each classroom. Both instructors are responsible for the grade-level content in English, and the ESL instructor is also responsible for teaching the content in Spanish as well. If the ESL teacher sees the need to pull aside the Hispanic students that are struggling, he or she can separate the children and give them additional support. All the other elementary schools in the district have certified English as a Second Language teachers, but not all of the programs are integrated with the English-only classes like in Nathaniel Bowditch School. This district-wide program has proven successful throughout its use (“ELL Program Descriptions”). These school districts demonstrate the flexibility that English as a Second Language programs can have in order to best fit the student population and each student’s individual language needs, as well as the successful nature of this type of program.

Although benefits from ESL programs can be enormous in the academic sphere, the results are not limited to just the educational environment. In order to be successful in their academic careers, research has shown that children need to be equipped at an early of an age as possible. In the United States, and Tennessee in particular, that means having at least a limited proficiency in English. By starting in lower level education, such as elementary schools, with an

English as a Second Language program, Hispanic students with language struggles will be far better prepared to excel in lower level education as well as secondary and higher education, where the language spoken in academia will more than likely be English. Studies have shown that it is easier for children to learn a second language when they are young. The brain is better equipped to pick up language quicker and more effectively than teenage or adult individuals. When the second language is learned early in life, the brain combines the languages in the left hemisphere where language is controlled. If the language is learned later, the active areas of the brain are in both hemispheres (Abdelilah-Bauer, 30-31). This scientific phenomenon within a language learner's brain attests to the reason that starting children in an English learning program as early as possible is imperative for Hispanic children with language struggles to be as academically successful as possible. In combination with this stronger command of English as a second language, Hispanic children who receive ESL classes in school will be much more apt to feel comfortable using English as well as Spanish. This resulting confidence and self-esteem will cause the students to perform better not only in the educational environment, but also in society. Evidence of this can be seen in "Linguistic Acculturation and Emotional Well-Being in U.S. Schools," where the author states the importance of knowing English in order to thrive in the United States. The article also addresses the importance for schools and social institutions to assist Hispanic children when cultural and linguistic gaps occur. The study hypothesizes that language use moderates well-being, and therefore children with a strong grasp on English as well as Spanish will perform better in school and function better in broader society (Perez, 892-893). To be successful postsecondary education students, Hispanic students not only need to be adjusted to the academic English environment, but also the public sphere. With benefits such as these that have been proven from Hispanic students learning English in a hands-on, slowed pace

at an early age in school, using English as a Second Language programs in elementary schools appears to be an excellent method at bettering postsecondary enrollment in the Hispanic population in Tennessee.

Some critics argue that the full immersion method of teaching non-English speakers the language is the best method, and it is not without its benefits. In California, all public schools are required to employ the “full inclusion classroom approach” (Chen) under Proposition 227 which requires that all classes are instructed solely in English. The proposition provides funding for additional English tutoring, but no specialized programs for the English learners. Some studies have shown that this method of mainstreaming the Hispanic students into the core school body in English-only classes functions better for teaching the students English, although some of the studies were conducted as early as the late 1990s. One researcher claims that students who learn formal English in an English as a Second Language program are incapable of transferring that knowledge into other school subjects, such as mathematics or history (Hawkins). More recently, linguistics and second language acquisition research have shown that Hispanic students are capable of this sort of transfer, because they can use the language with more confidence and liberty, and therefore perform better in all subjects, not limited to English (Perez, 892). While this sort of program gives the students a strong incentive to learn English—because if they do not, they will not be able to adequately participate and perform in schools—I believe that the negative repercussions of this method outweigh the benefits of rapid language acquisition. However, more studies and first-hand experience in schools have shown that using an English as a Second Language program is the most efficient when funding permits.

An example of an ESL-type of program can be seen functioning well already in Tennessee. In Knox County, in addition to having in-school interpreters as aforementioned, the

school system also employs ESL education to further provide a solid foundation for their English Language Learners, or ELLs. The county's district has had great success with the program, with over 60 educators across the district working to some degree in the English Language Learner program. The mission of this department is based firmly on the aforementioned reasoning to why Hispanic students need a strong basis in English in order to improve their chances of academic success: "...to provide our ELL students with greatest possible opportunity to achieve academic success" ("English Language Learners Department"). Lonsdale Elementary not only has a full time in-school interpreter, but also an ELL program ran by the school district. The program in this particular school includes one-hour sessions of ELL services as well as literacy and reading instruction. These blocks are integrated into the school schedule to minimize core instruction time lost (McCoy). Emphasis such as this into the school's English learners has improved the quality of education immensely for the school's Hispanic students and significantly closed the gap between the Hispanic students and those of all other demographics.

Although the benefits to students educational foundation are proven from having an English as a Second Language program in schools, smaller school districts and systems may struggle to provide such programs due to financial reasons. Critics of the idea of providing a separate ESL program to the schools' current curriculums are likely to state the financial burden of extra educational costs such as faculty and facilities is not worth the added benefit of having this sort of program for the students and that a full immersion experience is sufficient. This is not unlike the situations I addressed previously concerning difficulties some schools may have with finding the funding for in-school interpreters, and like with these issues, there are alternative methods that can be used in the place of these programs in order to derive the same educational benefit from providing students with actual English lessons instead of strictly using the full

immersion method. One such alternative method I propose would be easier to fund than an in-school classroom program is the use of online or computer-based software. In today's technology-driven society, even the smallest of school systems now have access to computers or a fully furnished computer lab. This investment that the schools have already made can be utilized as a tool for improving Hispanic students' academic success. This in combination with computer programs and websites centered on English Language Learners becoming increasingly popular provides ample opportunity for school districts and systems with limited budgets to ensure their students are being educated to their fullest potential. Pearson, a company well-known for providing educational materials to schools of all levels nationwide, offers a range of "successful, research-based programs that support the formative development of elementary English language learners" (Pearson) that elementary schools can choose from. A school with limited funds to allocate to English learning programs could invest in software like what Pearson offers which can be used year after year. If software such as the one Pearson offers is still outside of a school system or district's financial capabilities, I have found through my research that there is a wealth of websites that Hispanic students could use while in school in an ESL program that would in effect not cost the school any additional expenses. An example of one such website, everythingESL.net, is a database created by an ESL teacher, listing various websites that are applicable for elementary-aged children (Haynes). An English as a Second Language program based on website materials has the opportunity to be as efficient in teaching Hispanic students English as a traditional ESL class. Even in the case that the school in question does not have a computer lab that the students can access, the instructor could effectively teach the class using a single computer connected to a projector, first instructing the students, and then allowing each child to take a turn working through the activity with the assistance or support from his or her

classmates. While it is not an ideal scenario, basic ESL programs like this have the opportunity to still be more successful in better preparing students than the full immersion method alone.

My third suggestion for specialized assistance is broader and can be done by the school districts individually instead of a school system taking on the task as a whole. While standardized tests and academic scores are not always favored as means to judge the abilities of student bodies or faculty as a whole, they can be beneficial in assisting administration and for faculty to identify Hispanic students who need extra assistance with schoolwork or school-related activities. In the state of Tennessee, there is a law requiring annual statewide testing. The assessment as of April 2016³ was called the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program, which was better known as TCAP. The TCAP tests were administered at the end of every year and were required for every child to take. Because the focus of this thesis is on Tennessee in particular, this assessment program provided an excellent example of making productive use of something that the schools are already spending time and resources on. Such use of the results from this assessment have already proved useful in one East Tennessee school system. The results from such assessments can be organized by racial identification and provide a means for school systems to see whether or not there is an educational gap between racial demographics, such as Hispanics and Caucasians. Due to the coming change in assessment providers⁴, the way in which the testing material can be used may change slightly, but the overall principle of using already required assessments to better address the needs of minority students will still be applicable. In the Knox County system, the gap between the Hispanic students compared to all other students was larger than acceptable as of the 2013-2014 school year. The individual

³ After repeated delays and uncertainty on whether materials would be received in time, the Tennessee Department of Education terminated its contract with Measurement Inc. (Gonzales).

⁴ The education department plans on working with other state departments to secure a new vendor (Gonzales).

districts, not the system as a whole, took the information from the assessments and analyzed the amount of Hispanic students struggling and in which areas the most problems occurred, even when the number of Hispanic test takers was below thirty five—the system is not held accountable for any particular subgroup if it falls below that number (McCoy). Beyond the TCAP exams, the Tennessee Department of Education also has an English Learner Assessment that can be administered to students to acquire a better judgement on where the child in question needs assistance while in school, as per the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 (“Student Assessment”). Although the NCLB Act has been replaced with the Every Student Succeeds Act⁵ as of December 2015, the Tennessee Department of Education still has the English Learner Assessment available. Elementary schools throughout Tennessee can use these results to better address their students’ needs without requiring students to take more assessments than necessary. As I mentioned previously, the information is readily available to the school systems. The next step for many school systems is to incorporate positive changes with it. By assessing the students’ abilities using a standardized testing system, the schools can then ensure that each struggling student will have the opportunity to receive the adequate help he or she needs in order to succeed at system standards, as well as be better prepared to advance into higher education.

With these three methods of specialized in-school assistance and their individual variations and modifications, I strongly believe that schools throughout Tennessee can improve the educational gap between Hispanic students compared to all other demographics, and in turn, provide opportunities to build a more solid educational foundation to promote postsecondary educational success. Other school districts and systems have proven these methods to be

⁵ A bipartisan bill that builds upon the positive progress created by the No Child Left Behind Act and its predecessor, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, while correcting problems that surfaced in NCLB (“Every Student Succeeds Act”).

effective thus far, including in Tennessee, and the research shows that the extra effort on the part of the schools is effective in students reaching the postsecondary level.

4. Home Assistance for Families

Although providing specialized assistance for Hispanic students while they are in school is a necessity to ensure a strong educational foundation that will then promote better performance in secondary education and higher enrollment in postsecondary education—the main goal of this research,—just working with the children in the school buildings is not enough to guarantee that their needs are met. To reach the goal of postsecondary education enrollment increases, the school environment and the home environment need to be brought together. There are various ways that this collaboration can be accomplished, but in my research, I will be focusing on bilingual messages and paper work as well as oral interpretation.

Before examining my proposed methods of providing in-home assistance to Hispanic families of elementary-aged children, the importance of family involvement needs to be analyzed. In order to be successful in school—regardless of age—students need at home support. Studies have shown that students who have involved parents, especially when they are active inside the school walls, have improved test scores and overall academic improvement. Although these ideas are generally accepted, there is still some disagreement as to which type of involvement is best. The more common, Americanized style of parental involvement has the parents supporting the school and its efforts, manifesting in the forms of a Parent-Teacher Association—PTA—or by parents assisting in the educational process by working with the children at home (Jones and Velez, 2-3). However, immigrants with children or other minority families who are unaccustomed to this type of hyper involved system may feel overwhelmed or may not understand the benefits and as a result, will not involve themselves in their children's educations beyond ensuring that they attend school when required, leading to a likelihood of ending their educational careers at the secondary level. To combat this, school systems where the

demographic makeup of the school leans heavily towards students of minority families should find ways to support the families⁶.

To fully understand why home assistance specifically for Hispanic families of primary school-aged children is important, we must first understand the family dynamics of the Hispanic culture and its influence on at-home support and involvement in the child's academic success. Traditionally, the Hispanic family social structure is arranged in a type of hierarchy, where the father figure provides for and is responsible for the family and its actions. The mother acts as a devoted caretaker, and the children are cared for with large amounts of attention. The entire family is generally included in important aspects of life, such as the children, and the family unit is a close-knit one. In regards to sentiments, it has traditionally been said that Hispanics place a high value on "dignity in conduct, respect for others, love for the family, and affection for children" (Correa and Tulbert, 256-257) and that the families have a wealth of emotional support for their children, who "are brought up to believe that contribution to and sacrificing for the benefit of the group is more important than personal aggrandizement" (Correa and Tulbert, 257). Also, Hispanic culture traditionally contributes a belief that teachers and schools have an absolute authority over the children's educations, and the parents should not interfere in school life. Instead, the parents are expected to nurture the children, and the schools are expected to educate them (Espinosa, 3). Hispanic families that have been immersed in the United States culture for an extended period of time or are multi-generational in the United States may not necessarily follow this traditional example, but it is still important in order to better understand the family dynamics with which the schools are interacting. At first glance, it would appear that

⁶ While minority students are frequently the ones experiencing the academic gap, it is not to say that it is caused by parents who do not care about their children's education. It is more commonly caused by some type of economic or educational disadvantage in the families, which tend to occur more frequently in minority groups (Jones and Velez, 4).

Hispanic families have all the necessary characteristics to have academically high performing students, but as research has shown, that is not always the case. For the majority, the traditional Hispanic family structure “epitomizes the values normally associated with high academic performance” (Cattanach, 23) where the families typically promote open communication about behavior, goals, and school, as well as have clear rules and boundaries about what is and is not acceptable (Cattanach, 23). This type of home environment traditionally is an excellent environment to promote educational success. However, it appears that there are discrepancies in the way Hispanic parents view their children’s abilities and in the ways that the schools are making use of the unique circumstances that the Hispanic students come from. According to a study⁷ conducted on Hispanic parents’ effects on their children’s academic careers, many of the parents were found to care greatly about their children’s educations, but also that the families provide the children with a socio-cultural capital⁸ that should result in high academic success (Jones and Velez, 28). Additionally, the distant, task-oriented nature of the American education system clashes culturally against many Hispanic families ideals of connection building, causing parents to feel like the education system is not interested in connecting with parents and families (Espinosa, 3). However, it is important to note here that not all families function within these parameters and schools should treat each case individually to determine the needs of each student and his or her family unit.

Before I examine an example of the benefits that can be obtained from a greater parental or familial involvement, I want to clarify that this particular program has a variety of extra

⁷ The study was conducted on Hispanic parents to determine the views on their children’s educations, the way in which they participated, and whether they provided an adequate environment for their children to succeed.

⁸ The social and cultural resources available to families as a result of their social class as well as “all the values, assumptions, beliefs, and knowledge that any group has to guide their interactions with institutions” (Jones and Velez, 3)

features that I am not pursuing in this research due to the practicality of applying all of them in Tennessee, where many school districts do not have the means necessary to support or collaborate on this type of program or do not have many similar needs to that of schools so close to the United States-Mexico border. That being said, I do believe that this program is an excellent example of the benefits that can be derived from improved parental involvement as well as a successful program that smaller schools can model after. This successful, overarching example of higher levels parent-involvement leading to better school performance can be seen in West Dallas, Texas, where an intensive parent-involvement program has been installed in local schools to aid in improving students' performance. In this example, the program is mainly ran by an external non-profit, The Concilio, which works in coordination with the local schools⁹. The organization provides programs with classes for the parents, such as English as a second language, nutrition, Zumba, and basic computer classes. It also provides campus-based parent liaisons, dual-language programs for students, and in-school social workers to assist with immigration issues that students' families may face (Cattanach, 23). While the methods I am proposing in this research are not as comprehensive as this example in West Dallas, Texas, I assert that there are positive results that can be applied to school systems in Tennessee. One is that the primary-aged Hispanic students improved academically after their parents became more involved in their education. Over a three-year period, scores in the participating elementary schools increased by 15-30% in core subjects such as science and mathematics, and over a seven-year span, 90 percent of the students who had parents complete the program graduated from secondary education, and 78% of those same students enrolled and completed a minimum of one year of postsecondary education (Cattanach, 23-24). With improvement percentages such

⁹ The organization works with schools and other outside organizations (Cattanach, 23).

as these, it is difficult to find a reason for schools in Tennessee to not attempt to improve parental and familial involvement in their children's educations with some of the methods as shown above.

My first proposed method of initiating relationship building that has the potential to induce positive results such as the aforementioned in young Hispanic students is the use of bilingual paperwork and messages for the parents and families. I will first focus on the paperwork aspect of this method. By sending home materials in the parents' and family members' native language, they have a greater ability to be involved in their children's education because they will be fully informed on the types of programs that are available in the school as well as the progress their children are making in school. In order to complete this at-home assistance for the families, there are a number of steps that need to be followed. First, the school district's administrators need to determine what materials are of enough importance that the young Hispanic students with limited English and language skills should not be entrusted with passing the information along to their parents orally or via ad hoc translation. Materials such as these may include parent-student handbooks, report cards, health forms, and field trip forms. After determining the most important written documents, the administrators will need to consider means of translating the documents over to Spanish. With the nature of the documents, it is in all parties' best interests if the translating is completed by professional translators. This will incur extra costs that the school districts and systems will need to accommodate. However, when considered in a cost benefit analysis¹⁰, the extra costs incurred by having important documents translated over into Spanish will reap a high benefit of improved academic success for the young struggling Hispanic students, which in turn will assist the schools in reaching achievement

¹⁰ A procedure for estimating all plausible costs and benefits, not necessarily in monetary terms, to determine the soundness of a decision ("Definition").

standards and in narrowing academic gaps between races. When deciding what information to have translated over, it is also important to consider the length of the documents. An average parent-student handbook ranges from fifteen thousand (15,000) to seventeen thousand (17,000) words. Other smaller documents' word counts can range from four hundred words to one thousand. An average cost for professional translation services falls around 11 cents per word for smaller documents, and approximately \$33 per hour for large documents, like a handbook ("Average"). Once these steps are completed, any first of the year home survey of the students' households will notify the administrators of the different schools of how many homes are non-English, Spanish-speaking. From there, the school districts will be able to determine the number of Spanish copies of the documents that need to be printed. This will also account for extra incurred costs for this program, but as mentioned previously, the costs are worth the extra benefit of the families of the students understanding fully what is occurring in their children's schools. In addition, the school district will then have basic bilingual documents, such as health forms or other generalized documents, in their records that can be used for multiple years, lessening the total costs for the translation work.

The second section of this method focuses on bilingual messages. Many school districts now have messaging systems that call the homes of students in regards to important information, such as school closings, delays, or student behavior. If an important message goes out to a household that struggles with the English language, the information may be misconstrued or not understood at all, resulting in a communication breakdown between the school and the families that could result in a detrimental consequence for the student's academic success. Oral messages can be some of the more difficult messages to understand for those who are not proficient in the language, especially when the interlocutors are not face to face, allowing them to read lips or

body language. In order to include this method, the school district would need to hire an individual—an interpreter if the district has hired one, like I suggested in a previous section—that could translate the information for the message, then record it using the same equipment that the administrators would use to create the original message. It is a low cost method to ensure the families are included in all of the school’s important information. If the district has not already hired an interpreter to work in the schools, the incurred cost would still be low enough for a school district with a small budget to be able to afford. An average hourly rate for an interpreter falls around \$20 per hour, and this type of job would not take a large amount of time to complete (“Interpreter”). Considering the costs of this method of providing at home assistance for families, even smaller school districts and systems with small budgets, like many in Tennessee, bilingual paperwork and messages would provide an excellent means of creating a positive relationship between the schools and the families, resulting in a better academic performance of the students.

Bilingual paperwork and messages have already begun to be employed in some areas of Tennessee. One in particular can be seen in Knox County, where many of the district’s schools with a high Hispanic population have made the adjustments necessary to help their students’ families—similar to the idea behind the West Dallas, Texas, example—by beginning to send paperwork home to the families in Spanish in order to ensure that the families are getting all the necessary information about their children’s education (McCoy) without feeling overwhelmed by a language they do not fully understand or feeling ignored by the administration and in turn left out of their children’s education. Lonsdale Elementary in particular has made great strides in accommodating the wide variety of Latin backgrounds of its student population, aforementioned to be 48 percent. The principal has been cited saying that “...from a practical standpoint...she and her staff have to get accustomed to the Hispanic culture, and 98 percent of everything the

school send to parents is sent in both English and Spanish” (McCoy). This school system has also given attention to the Hispanic families where the members are not literate in Spanish. Many of the students at Lonsdale Elementary are Guatemalan, which in most cases means that Spanish is the second language of the students and their families¹¹, and these individuals are not always literate in their second language. The school sends information home in Spanish for those that are literate, and for those who are not, the school makes arrangements for the majority of the pertinent information to be passed along to the families via oral messages or in person (McCoy). This use of bilingual paperwork and messages demonstrates the type of dedication necessary in order to fully support the families of primary school-aged Hispanic children, and in this school district, the efforts have paid off, with the gap between Hispanic students and other racial groups closing significantly. Parental involvement has proven critical to academic success, especially in young children at the beginning of their academic careers. With a stronger academic support in the home, young Hispanics will be better equipped to build a strong educational foundation that will likely result in excelling in secondary education and continuing on to the postsecondary educational sphere. Bilingual paperwork and messages are a simple way for primary education to create a two-way, helpful relationship where the children are the main benefactors.

My second proposed method of providing at-home assistance for families is by means of oral interpretation. This method can be extremely useful when it comes to building the relationships between school faculty and students’ families in situations where the families are not receiving all of the information that they need from the school in written format, where the families are not proficient in Spanish or English, or where the parents feel like they have no

¹¹ Spanish is the official language of the country, but in many cases, Guatemalans speak one or more indigenous languages. The country is home to more than 28 dialects of 5 major language groups, all based in the Mayan language (“Guatemala”).

place in assisting in the education of their children while they are at school. In addition, as I mentioned previously, the Hispanic culture traditionally contributes to a very close-knit family unit that takes the children and their success seriously. In fact, many parents have chosen to bring their children to the U.S. because of the opportunity for a better education. One of the best ways to support this type of social structure is to create close bonds between the school staff and the home. If a school district is aware that it has families that are not proficient or literate in Spanish or English, it should be making arrangements for oral interpretation for the necessary information to be conveyed. In order to create a relationship between the two parties, the same interpreter should be used repeatedly, in order to build up a trust, ensuring that the parents and family members believe what the interpreter says in relation to the student's academics and the school's requirements or needs. A relationship built on trust can create a warmer, more personalized, and more relaxed atmosphere, which correlates more with a Hispanic view of interaction versus a more task-oriented, American style (Espinosa, 3). If the school has hired or has plans to hire a part-time or full-time interpreter, it is important that the administrators ensure that the interpreter can successfully interact with individuals that may speak Spanish as a weak second language and understands the importance of cultural differences and the impacts that may have on the concept of education. In the case that the school has not chosen to hire an interpreter as a faculty member, but instead hires a freelance interpreter occasionally when it is necessary, the school needs to ensure that it sends the same individual to speak with the parents on the various occasions. This allows for a relationship to build, opening a way up for the parents to feel like they are welcomed to become involved in their children's education here in the United States. For location, some parents may find it difficult to meet with an interpreter on school grounds due to their aforementioned avoidance of interfering in school matters. It is important

then to allow the parents or family decide on a location that is comfortable for them, such as a community center, church, or their home (“How to Reach”). Attention to small details such as comfortability can have a great value for families who are unsure of their place in the education of their children. This type of personal, one-on-one interaction between schools and students’ parents has the potential to contribute significantly to the success of students, because it creates an opportunity for two-way communication in a more comfortable environment, which can lead to more parental interaction as the relationship builds.

A similar but smaller scale type of relationship building like what is seen in Texas, but focusing more on interpreter-family relationships, has already proven to be successful in East Tennessee. Some of the primary schools in the Knox County School District have shown that the use of an in-school interpreter not only aids in the Hispanic children’s learning, but also creates a strong link between the children’s education and their home life. According to the principal, Lonsdale Elementary’s interpreter is not just a faculty member. The interpreter has taken the initiative to ensure that she gets to know the Hispanic population inside and outside of the school building, and she has taken the time to build relationships with the Hispanic families, especially those with language struggles. In this particular case, the interpreter acts as a resource for the family, even if the needs are not necessarily school-related (McCoy). This strong connection between the in-school interpreter and the student and his or her family correlates with the aforementioned necessity for children to receive academic support at home. Without it, students are not as inclined to be successful in the academic environment, and it does not make much difference if the student receives specialized assistance while in school or not. Elementary-aged children need familial support to succeed, which causes them to be more likely to decide to pursue a higher educational path in the future.

Employing the at-home assistance methods of bilingual paperwork and messages as well as oral interpretation creates an opportunity for school districts to better form relationships with their Hispanic families. These relationships have shown to contribute to the overall academic success of students and are of high importance for schools in Tennessee and throughout the United States that are working towards closing their academic gaps between racial demographics and enrolling more Hispanic students into postsecondary education.

5. Community Outreach

Another method I propose for improving postsecondary enrollment of Hispanic students via creating a stronger primary educational foundation is by means of community outreach. This method runs similarly to the previous section over at home assistance, but it expands further to include the wider Hispanic community. I am focusing this section of my research specifically on the form of outreach where the schools work with other organizations instead of outreach directly to the families, which would fall under the previous section, Home Assistance for Families.

For a school district or system to adequately prepare its students for academic success and higher education, the administrators need to have a clear understanding of the makeup of their students, including those who have not enrolled yet. This is where I believe the use of community outreach would be beneficial in increasing postsecondary enrollment rates in the long run. Community outreach in the way I am intending it for this research, is the collaboration between school authorities and local organizations. With this definition, schools of any size and financial standing can afford to use this method to improve primary achievement, which leads to long run increases in postsecondary enrollment. According to a study in the *Professional School Counseling* journal, "...it is imperative that parent education and family outreach programs identify the needs of family members and students and tailor partnership programs to meet their needs" (Bryan, 224). In addition, under the No Child Left Behind Act that ended in 2015 as well as the new Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, schools that qualify are required to provide a form of family and community outreach in order to support children's academic careers as fully as possible (Bryan, 220; Every Student Succeeds Act). These examples of the need for outreach programs attests to my point that schools need to collaborate via community outreach with

outside organizations that can help prepare the schools for incoming families as well as assist the schools in connecting those families to the assistance that they need. For this method to function properly, the schools need to be located near organizations that lend themselves towards assisting with the Hispanic community. My research has shown that many organizations exist around the country that dedicate themselves to helping the Hispanic and/or refugee community. In Oregon, the government's website has a page dedicated to its Commission on Hispanic Affairs¹². An outreach organization¹³ exists in Maryland that bases its work on education. In East Tennessee, the non-profit organization Centro Hispano de East Tennessee¹⁴ focuses on assisting new families adjust to the area and works as a liaison to other organizations.

A direct benefit of these community outreach initiatives is better prepared school personnel. By simply knowing what families and students the schools that they will be receiving ahead of time, the likelihood of higher performance is increased due to the lack of lag time between enrollment and initiation of programs. Some indirect benefits include those received by the individual families and students. An article reporting on school-family-community partnerships claims that parents have shown to have better self-perceptions, stronger social networks, an increased sense of well-being and competence, as well as others (Bryan, 221). The indirect benefits for the students are the driving reason behind this method in this research. By the primary schools being better prepared for the students before their enrollment, the students will be attended to at the school's best ability as soon as they start school. This leaves little time

¹² The Commission on Hispanic Affairs website contains contact information for various organizations and individuals who can assist with the different challenges that may arise ("Commission").

¹³ The Education Based Latino Outreach is an organization that is established in Baltimore, Maryland. It provides educational programs for individuals in the community ("Home").

¹⁴ This organization provides various educational and support classes and programs for adults as well as educational class for children ("About Centro").

for the young Hispanic students to fall behind academically. They then have a stronger academic foundation than they would have had without the outreach, which they will build upon for the rest of their academic careers, leading to enrollment in postsecondary education in most cases.

A method of community outreach that has already been initiated in Tennessee can be seen in Knox County, where the schools collaborate with a local non-profit, Bridge Refugees¹⁵ (McCoy). This collaboration between the organization and the schools provides a way for the school administration to adequately prepare for the families and their children that will be moving into the area and school district. An example where this prior knowledge has the ability to help the schools prepare can be seen in the observations made by school personnel in the Knox County System. The system's supervisor of world languages and English Language Learners observed that the families that come in are composed of older children who speak little English as well as young children and kindergartners who are born in the United States and speak both languages. Knowing this type of information before the children are enrolled in the school system permits for schools to be better equipped to support the children and their needs. This, in turn, allows for the children to settle into the schools more easily, leading to the increased likelihood of excelled school performance. As I have addressed previously, this increased success in primary school performance leads to increased performance in secondary education, which then leads to a higher enrollment rate in postsecondary education. Without prior knowledge of the family composition and characteristics, there is an opportunity for a lag period between when the children are enrolling in school and when the schools are adequately prepared with the correct resources to ensure that the children succeed academically.

¹⁵ A 501(c)3 non-profit agency that provides assistance and protection to refugees entering East Tennessee. It bridges the gap between refugees and other organizations in order to help them become self-sufficient and feel safe ("About Us").

In order to improve Hispanic postsecondary enrollment rates, a strong academic foundation needs to be created as early as possible in the children's educational careers. By using the method of community outreach, primary schools will have a better opportunity to prepare the necessary tools and programs for incoming students before they arrive and enter the system. This eliminates time that could cause the students to fall behind academically. It will also allow the schools more time to allocate resources to programs or the aforementioned assistance methods. Not rushing the process along allows for a more thorough job of preparing. Overall, the method of including community outreach is a minimal effort initiative that can have major impacts on long term postsecondary enrollment, regardless of school size and funds.

6. Conclusions

When discussing the future of education in the United States, the postsecondary level is often viewed as highly important to the future job market in addition to the global competitiveness of the country as a whole. The problem that I have examined throughout this thesis relates to the academic gap between Hispanic students and all other racial demographics concerning postsecondary enrollment in the state of Tennessee. In order to improve on this problem, I have proposed that applying my initiatives in primary education will contribute to improved higher education enrollment in the long run.

Beginning in primary school provides an excellent opportunity to start working with the Hispanic children at an early age. Starting when the children are young gives the opportunity for educators to create a strong academic foundation in the children, which is necessary for later academic success. For the ones with language struggles, studies have shown that learning new languages is easier when the learners are younger, and the difficulty increases with age. The high number of school age children in Tennessee's Hispanic population also attests to the importance of focusing on this segment of the demographic instead of adolescents and young adults.

The first proposed method revolved around the school environment, providing ways for school personnel to aid Hispanic children in the learning process by providing extra support. The methods of using English as a Second Language programs and in-school interpreters focus more heavily on Hispanic students who have difficulties with the English language. However, the method of school districts and systems using test scores to monitor the lagging demographics is applicable for all Hispanic students, whether they are proficient in English or not. The second proposed method focused on the home and the ways that schools can build relationships with the families. Hispanic family dynamics have the potential to differ from that of traditional American

family dynamics. Therefore, school personnel need to take special interest in building relationships with their Hispanic students' families, especially when language barriers exist. The viable methods here include bilingual messages and paperwork for parents as well as oral interpretation in the cases where the previous is not sufficient. This extra attention to students' home lives has a large impact on school performance, and in turn is crucial for strengthening the student's educational foundation. The third method focused on the schools collaborating with outside organizations in a way to gain advance knowledge of new families moving into the areas. This advance information gives way to a better academic environment for the children, leading to a stronger academic career.

Successful initiatives of all the methods I have proposed can be seen across the country as well as in Tennessee. Specifically, the Knox County system testifies to the applicability of including in-school assistance, at-home assistance, and community outreach in order to better create a strong academic foundation. Moreover, the variance in the school systems that use modifications of the aforementioned methods confirms the idea that the schools do not need to be wealthy or large to collect the benefits of using these types of initiatives to aid their students.

Although the solutions pursued in this paper will improve enrollment rates, there is still the issue existing beyond this research pertaining to graduation rates. Enrollment does not equal attainment, and for full benefit, graduation rates will also need to increase over time. However, I believe that if the methods that I have proposed are properly implemented, the Hispanic students will not only be more prone to enrolling in postsecondary education, but also more likely to excel due to the improved preparation. This in turn causes graduation rates to increase, thereby achieving the goal to have a better educated society in order to better compete globally.

Tennessee has already begun to put effort into helping Hispanics into the postsecondary sphere in

the form of an online database—Avancemos Juntos—provided by a local community college that centers on providing resources and other information related to higher education (“Welcome”). Enrollment is only half the problem that exists in the academic gap, but with the proper preparation and educational foundation, methods such as the ones I have examined can indirectly improve graduation rates.

Although the disparity in Tennessee’s Hispanic enrollment rates in postsecondary education appears to be ever-widening, there are methods of increasing them by means of strengthening the students’ academic foundations in primary education. The three methods described here can be applied to any sized school system, and the efforts to achieve them have the potential to pay off greatly for our society in the long run.

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