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College seems out of reach to most Latinos

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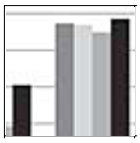

San Leandro High School senior Veronica Santana strode across the stage in a scarlet cap and gown to receive her high school diploma at a graduation ceremony earlier this month on the hillside campus of Cal State East Bay.

Come September, Veronica, 17, will join her older sister Erika at the Hayward campus overlooking San Francisco Bay and become part of the first generation of college students in her family. It's a point of pride for the girls' parents, a retired factory worker and a hair stylist, both Mexican immigrants who studied no further than middle school.

Attending college sets Veronica and her 20-year-old sister apart from most of the state's Latinos, who are expected to become a majority of California's population in another generation, according to state estimates, but who currently have the lowest levels of education of any racial or ethnic group in California.

Veronica is among just 1 in 7 California Latinos who graduated from high school after four years and completed the courses required to enroll in a four-year college, according to the California Department of Education. If she completes college, she will be among only 13 percent of U.S.-born Latinos in California with a bachelor's degree, the nonpartisan Public Policy Institute of California found.

The statistics for African Americans are similar to those of Latino students, but the societal impact is less broad. Blacks make up 8 percent of the state's public school students, while Latinos represent 48 percent.

At stake is not only the future success of these young people in a job market that increasingly requires a college degree, but the viability of the California economy. If the majority of the state's future population lacks a good education, California will have too few skilled workers to meet the needs of the information-driven economy and too few middle-class taxpayers to keep the state afloat fiscally as Baby Boomers retire.

Ensuring a highly skilled workforce is a particular concern for high-tech employers in the Bay Area.

"It's in Silicon Valley's best interest that all of our students, with a huge emphasis on Latino students, get engaged in and excited about math, science and technology at an early age," said Carl Guardino, chief executive officer of the Silicon Valley Leadership Group. "To the extent we fail, Silicon Valley fails."

Veronica benefited from the help of teachers and counselors, but her family was the key to her success, beginning with the hours her mother spent at Veronica's preschool, learning to kneel down and speak face

to face with her kids and to appreciate the ways that dress-up and Play-Doh help children learn.

Still, most Latino kids face roadblocks that keep them from making it to college -- and entering the middle-class workforce.

For immigrant children and the children of immigrants, mastering English can be a challenge (1 in 4 California students is considered an "English learner"). Their parents often have little education or savvy about how to navigate the school system, let alone money for enrichment activities such as music lessons or summer camp.

"Latino parents have very high aspirations for their children, but they don't have the information about college and financial aid," said Estela Mara Bensimon, director of the Center for Urban Education at the University of Southern California. "They don't know the difference between a two-year college and a four-year college."

More than half of Latino children live in poor neighborhoods, which tend to have low-performing schools with less experienced teachers and fewer college counselors.

At San Leandro High School, where students score in the middle range on state achievement tests, Spanish teacher May Castro serves as the adviser to the Latinos Unidos Club, of which Veronica was president. Castro takes a special interest in her immigrant students, who she says tend to stay on the periphery of school life.

"I have students who work a lot, helping their parents out or babysitting," she said. "I ask why they've been absent and they say, 'I've been helping my dad with work. I've been too tired for homework.' It's economic survival."

Senior Cesar del Toro showed up for a lunchtime Latinos Unidos meeting where Veronica announced plans to give away scholarship money the kids had raised. But del Toro, 18, had no use for college funds. He said he was happy to be graduating, which is more than his Mexican immigrant parents or his two older brothers managed.

"I have no clue what I'm going to do next," he said. "I work at a shoe store, but I think I'd like to get a job at the airport."

Bouncing between three high schools over four years, del Toro said he never received guidance on which courses to take to prepare for college.

The 2,500 students at San Leandro High School are divided among six counselors, each of whom keeps track of more than 400 students. They handle discipline and personal crises in addition to academic advising and college counseling.

Veronica's counselor, Wanda Armstrong, said she strives to see each student at least four times a year. Many, like Veronica, stop by her office just to say hello. Others, like del Toro, steer clear.

Often, said Armstrong, her days are consumed by the needs of students in serious trouble.

"Some kids are drowning. Their issues are far beyond school," she said. "All my time is spent on the crisis ones who aren't successful. Of course I know the bright kids by face, by name, but I don't really know them."

Armstrong and her colleagues are interviewing candidates for two additional counseling positions that were made possible with new state funds from a 2006 law that aims to bring the student-to-counselor ratio in line with the national average of 300 to 1.

Lounging on the sofa at her mother's hair salon after school, Veronica said Armstrong helped her stay focused on completing her basic college prep requirements but didn't push her further.

"I wanted to apply to UC Davis, but I didn't think I would make it because I didn't really take AP (advanced placement) classes," she said, but she didn't discuss the option with her counselor. "She said, 'Oh, you'll definitely make it to Cal State,' but she didn't mention UC. I wish she had."

Veronica's older sister was the one who walked her through the application process for Cal State East Bay, just as a friend who was a year ahead of her sister in school had helped her apply to college.

"The high school doesn't give you enough information about college," said Jessica Ahumada, 19, a friend of the Santana sisters who is attending a community college. "You have to go and look for it."

Veronica's father, Jose Santana, 61, instilled that ethic in his children early on.

"It doesn't matter to the teacher if you're paying attention or not; she still collects her paycheck," he told the girls in junior high school. "It's up to you to ask questions and make sure you're learning."

Although Veronica's parents didn't go far in school in Mexico, they made their children the center of their lives.

"I always felt it was more important to get home and take my kids to the park than to work overtime and earn a little more money," said Jose Santana, who bought a modest bungalow in East Oakland on his wages at a glass factory and attended all of Veronica's soccer games and varsity tournaments.

Her mother, Sarai Santana, 41, taught her kids to read and write before they entered school, giving Veronica a head start that allowed her to skip first grade.

"If you have parents who are informed, it makes it easier for you," said Veronica, whose father helped her find a full college scholarship. "If not, it's hard."

Educators wish all California children had parents as engaged in their learning as the Santanas. For kids who don't, they say, schools can help with extra support -- if they have the resources.

"There are great inequalities endemic in society, so children arrive in school with very different skills," said Patricia Gandara, director of the Education Policy Center at UCLA's Linguistic Minority Research Institute. "I would start on the first day of kindergarten to try to eliminate these differences."

Several Bay Area programs are helping underserved kids become the first in their families to go to college.

The organizations work intensively with the students and their families over several years to ensure they get a rigorous education from the public schools, supplemented by extra tutoring, mentoring and summer internships.

"We asked, 'What is it that helps privileged kids succeed and how do we replicate it?' " said Freada Kapor Klein, director of the Level Playing Field Institute in San Francisco. "It's expensive and individualized, but it's also extraordinarily costly for these students to fall through the cracks."

But extending such advantages to all of California's children will take a bigger investment of tax money, targeted wisely, said Russlynn Ali, director of Oakland's Education Trust-West, an education research and advocacy group.

"The question is not what to do -- there is plenty of research on best practices -- it's creating the civic and political will to do it," said Ali. "The face of California is going to become the face of the nation. California has a responsibility to take the lead on this."

After her graduation ceremony, Veronica's parents sought her out in the crowd.

"My dad was in tears. He said he's very proud of me because I'm going to be someone in life," she said. "I'm excited. I know my work has paid off."

Online resources

For information on the Level Playing Field Institute, go to:

www.lpfi.org

Read more about the Bay Area Youth Fund at:

www.bayfund.org

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