



LANDSCAPE OF HISPANIC EDUCATION

K-12 REPORT



— FREEDOM DRIVES PROGRESS —



The LIBRE Institute is a 501(c)(3) nonpartisan and nonprofit organization that provides tools and information that empower the Hispanic community to reach its full potential and build meaningful lives through our Four Pillars:

Economic Prosperity, Education, Faith, and Family.

The LIBRE Institute's reports are an educational resource that seek to provide the latest research and information available on important issues that matter to the Hispanic community.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1 out of 4 students in the U.S. is Hispanic, highlighting the need for serious exploration of challenges and potential areas of reform in education to ensure all students are able to succeed and see the benefits of educational attainment (Census 2023).
- The main challenges that Hispanics students face include lack of reliable internet connection, repercussions of COVID-19 learning loss, language barriers, lack of flexibility, and high dropout rates.
- Increasing flexibility and choice in education is a promising avenue for improvement. A poll conducted by The LIBRE Institute found that nearly 80 percent of Hispanics support School choice (The LIBRE Institute 2023).
- Policies that enable greater customization and offer students and families more options regardless of their location would break down barriers and could improve educational attainment for all students.

INTRODUCTION

Hispanics make up 19 percent of the total U.S. population and continue to become a greater and greater share of the students in U.S. schools (Census 2023). Further, the Hispanic population in the U.S. is on average younger, making them crucial to the labor force and additionally are helping drive overall U.S. population growth with the highest fertility rate of all major racial or ethnic groups in the U.S. (March of Dimes 2022). This report aims to provide a view and analysis of the current state of Hispanic education in the U.S. with a focus on K-12 through examining demographic trends, challenges, successes, and policy implications.

Most Hispanics, and by extension most Hispanic students, predominantly live in urban areas. That said, there has been movement into more suburban and rural areas over time. In many states Hispanics represent a significant proportion of the overall population. Over a quarter of the population in Florida, Nevada, Arizona, California, Texas, and New Mexico are Hispanic. These states may not be surprising given that historically these areas have had large Hispanic communities. Other areas are also seeing increases in their Hispanic population with the largest gains (in percent) found in counties in North Dakota, Georgia, Louisiana, Michigan, and Alabama (Pew 2022).

These demographic shifts further necessitate an educational system to address the evolving needs of all students, including Hispanics, in urban as well as rural areas. It is important to note, that while immigration certainly plays a factor in the Hispanic population it is not entirely responsible for Hispanic population growth. Census projections found that even in a situation of zero or low immigration the percent of the US population that is Hispanic would rise to 24 or 27 percent (respectively) by 2060. In a situation of high immigration, the percent of Hispanics as a share of U.S. population would rise to 29 percent.

Recent Census data show that currently 1 out of every 4 students in the U.S. is Hispanic (25.7 percent) and enrollment data show that 28.5 percent of all public elementary and secondary school children are Hispanic (NCES 2023). Ensuring education reform is done in a way that works for all Americans and is dynamic enough to keep up with our rapidly changing economy is crucial for students' success and the country's.

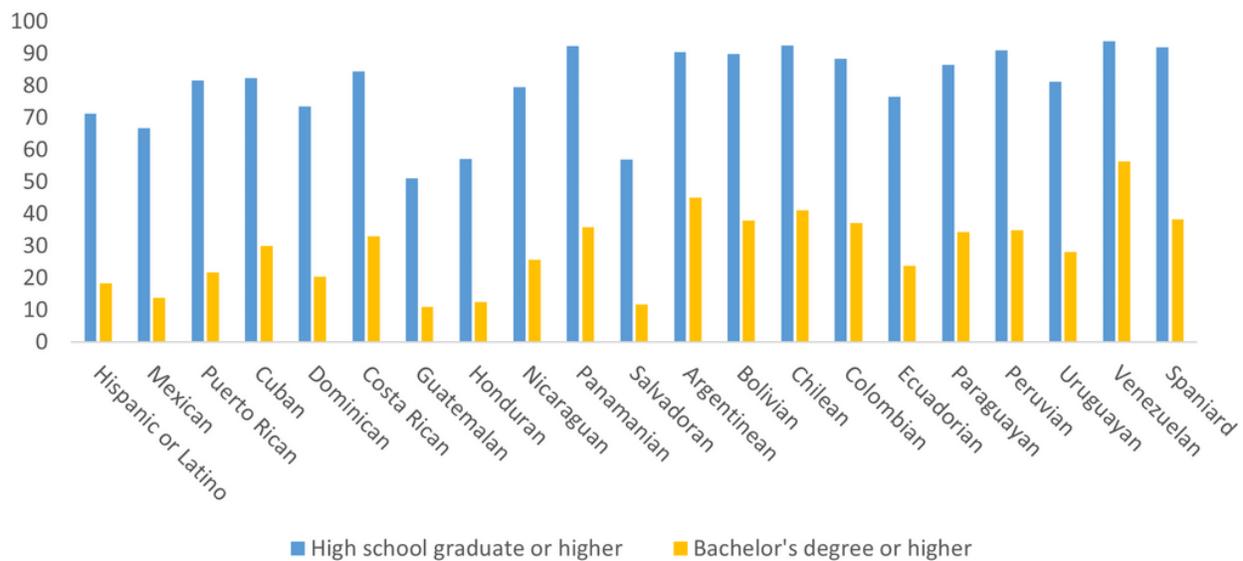
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EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

When educational attainment in the U.S. is separated out by demographics, gaps and differences begin to appear. While some gaps remain between Hispanic educational attainment across education levels those gaps have been dramatically reduced. Across all levels of education (K-12, associates degrees, college degrees, and advanced degrees) improvements in enrollment and degree completion have occurred (Census 2023). Education is a key driver for socio-economic mobility, so offering pathways for individuals of all backgrounds to have access to the education they need is crucial.

The U.S. Hispanic population is a diverse one with significant variation in multiple areas including country of origin, immigration status, generational differences, and access to resources. Across these different metrics educational attainment significantly varies. The figure below is an example of how varied different Hispanic groups' educational experiences in the U.S. can be. The far-left column shows the educational attainment of all Hispanics in the U.S. and the other columns break out the total by country affiliation of U.S. Hispanics.

U.S. Hispanic Educational Attainment by Country of Origin (%)



Data: U.S. Census, American Community Survey 2021 5-year estimates, selected population data profiles

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Regional variations also play a crucial role, with the majority of Hispanic students concentrated in and around major metropolitan areas, but with some of the population moving into more rural areas of the country as well. Each state will have its own rules, regulations, and policy decisions that may make it more challenging or more likely to improve educational outcomes for students. Understanding these demographic and regional nuances at different levels of educational attainment is vital in designing targeted interventions and allocating resources effectively.

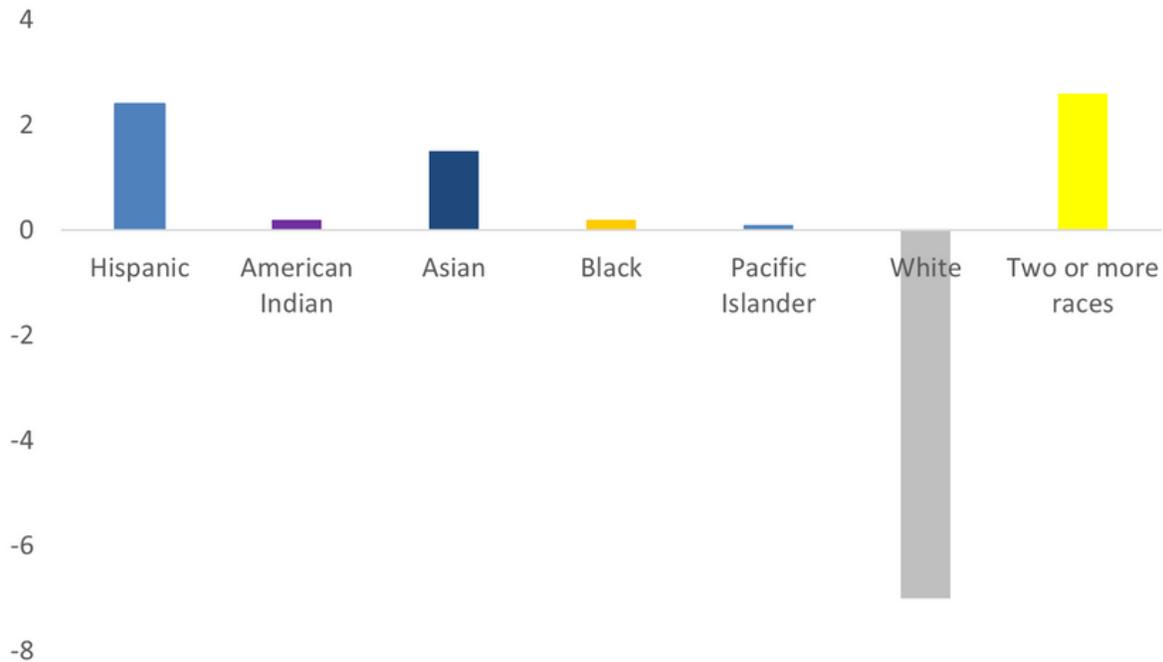
K-12 EDUCATION

The education that occurs from kindergarten through the end of high school ideally provides the crucial foundational knowledge for students to succeed regardless of whether they choose to remain in school or enter the workforce.

The choice on what type of school and then which specific school to enroll a child in can have substantial effects later in life including on further educational attainment, development of hard and soft skills, and success in the labor market. In the U.S. the large majority, nearly 90 percent, of students attend a public school, while around 9 to 10 percent attend a private school (Reber & Gordon 2021). This distribution in private versus public has remained relatively flat over the last decade, but the composition within each group has changed. The benefits that come from attending one type over the other are often debated and the empirical evidence remains mixed. Comparing these two broad groups is complex given the structure of the public school system that relies on assigning students to a location based on geographic area whereas private school allows for more specific customization to the student and family but can be out of reach due to associated costs. Further within these two groups are numerous sub-categories such as public charter schools, religious schools, micro schools, magnate schools, home schooling, and vocational/technical focused schools.

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Change in Percent Distribution of Private school Students between 2010 and 2020



Data: National Center for Education Statistics, "[Characteristics of Private Schools](#)", 2021

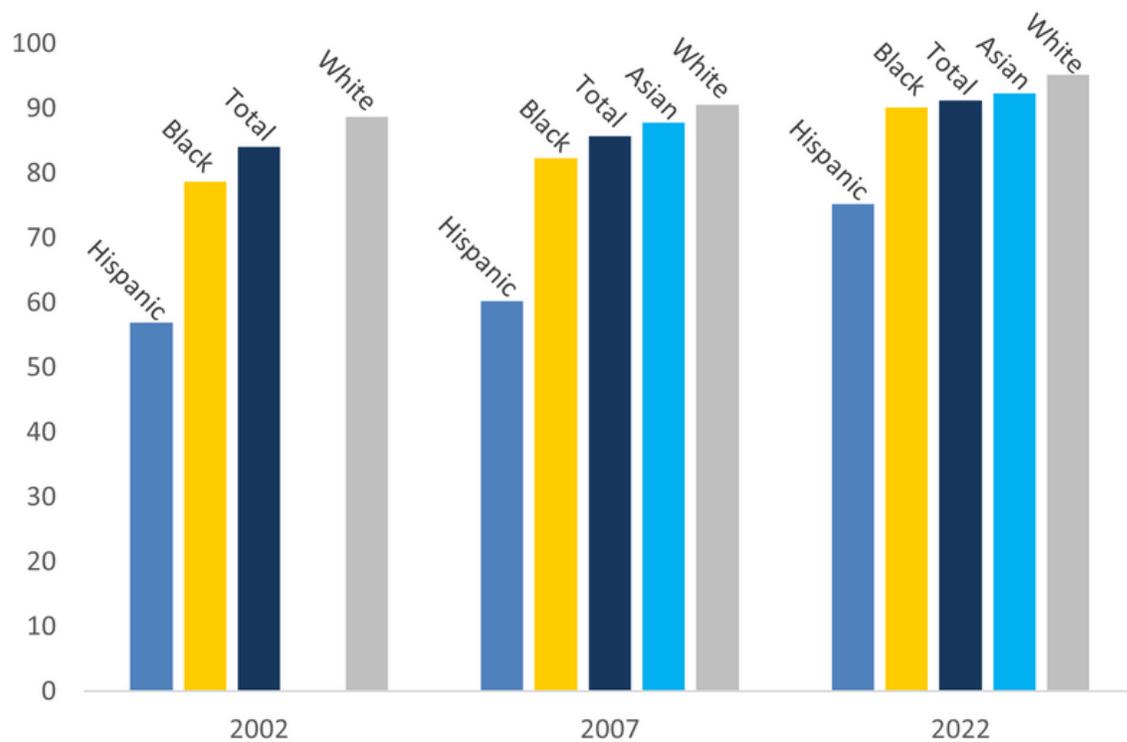
On top of these variations come the different actors that can affect the success of each school or district, most notably the federal government, state governments, and local school districts. There are also a slew of other coalitions or interest groups that can alter the quality and success of school by wielding political power. Examples include parents and families, teachers' unions, churches and community groups, as well as education focused philanthropic organizations.

All these many actors and interest groups should, in an ideal world, all work toward preparing students in such a way that they are able to graduate high school and reap the benefits that a diploma brings. Earnings, for example, show there is a clear benefit to those who finish high school. On average, high school graduates earn 40 percent more than non-graduates (BLS 2018). Many employment opportunities also require a high school diploma as a prerequisite, so not having one likely keeps individuals locked out of jobs. In general, a diploma (or equivalent GED) provides more choices such as military service, greater career opportunities, or continuing education in its many forms.

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When it comes to Hispanic educational attainment improvement in high school graduation rates have occurred. In 1996 nearly 60 percent of Hispanics between the ages of 25 and 29 in the U.S. had a high school diploma. According to recent Census data that number has jumped to 88.5 percent (Census 2023). Out of all major racial/ethnic census groups Hispanics see large gains in educational attainment particularly over the past 10 years.

Percent of People over 25 Who have Completed at Least 4 Years of High School



White category indicates white non-Hispanic. Data on Asian high school educational attainment was not available for 2002; Data: Census, American Community Survey 2021 5-year estimates

As shown, Hispanics have seen large gains in educational attainment over time and this trend is likely to continue. These gains have closed the gap, but Hispanics are still trailing behind other groups. Some of this, closing of the gap, could be due to more Hispanics rising out of poverty. From 2010 to 2021 (most recent data), Hispanics saw the largest fall (compared to other racial/ethnic groups) in percentage of children under age 18 in families living in poverty (NCES 2023).

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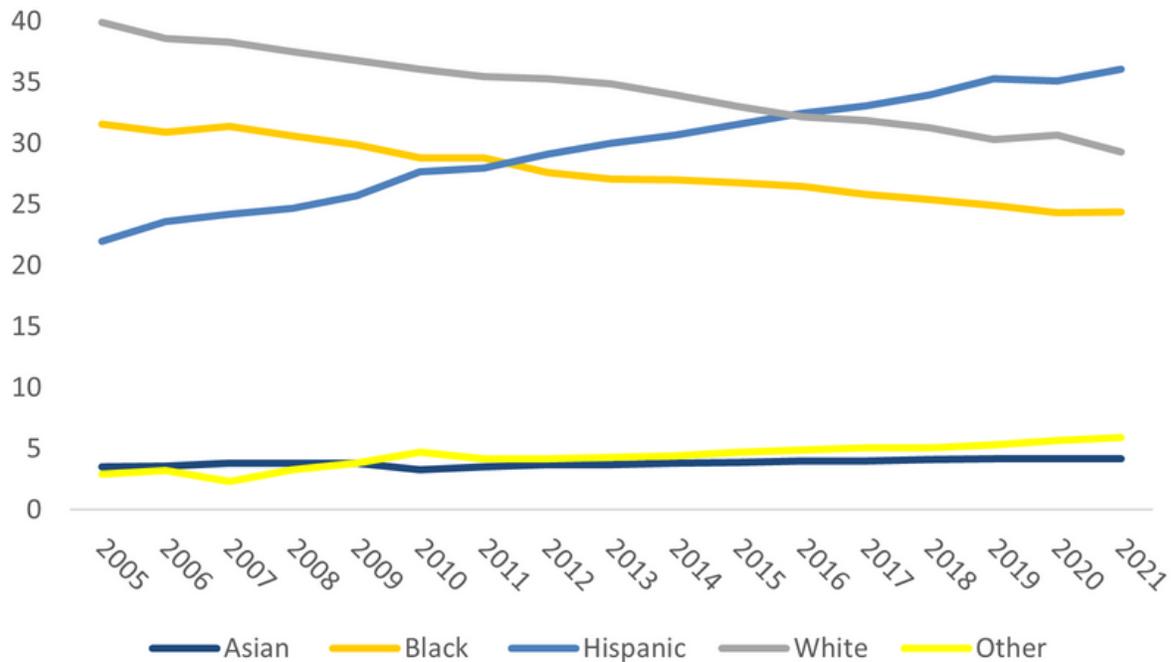
Changes in access to greater financial resources as well as changes to state laws that increase access to private schools likely led to changes in the composition of public and private schools. While it is not guaranteed that students will always be better off in a private school environment there will certainly be cases where that is the best learning environment for certain students. Private schools will typically have smaller class sizes allowing for more individualized attention and by extension a greater likelihood of customization to each student's needs. This goes hand in hand with the ability to customize learning and allow for greater flexibility for students and families.

There have also been changes within the public school category as well. Out of the students that fall under the "attend public school" group, just over 7 percent are enrolled in a public charter school. Charter schools offer some of the benefits of both public and private schools in that they are not cost prohibitive, but have a more flexible and customizable nature than public schools, and attending charters is not limited by where students are zoned to attend. Since the 2005 to 2006 school year not only have the number of charter schools increased, but the enrollment in charter schools have more than tripled. As is the case with most educational opportunities, the use of charters varies by state. Arizona for example boasts the highest percentage of students enrolled in charters, coming out around 20 percent (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools 2023).

Charter schools, on average, serve more student of color than a tradition district school (70 percent; 53 percent respectively) and a higher proportion of students who qualify for free and reduced-price lunch.

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Charter School Racial/Ethnic Breakdown by Year (%)



Data: National Alliance for Public Charter Schools 2023

As shown in the figure above, Hispanics, more than any other major group, are making use of charter schools. From 2005 to 2021 the percent of Hispanics in charter schools has grown by nearly 15 percentage points reaching 36.1 percent in 2021. This figure is higher than the estimated 28.5 percent of Hispanics in the traditional public school system. Further studies have shown that the learning growth of Hispanics in charter schools is greater than in their district public school (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools 2023). Supporting the growth of charter schools means supporting the educational option that serves the largest proportion of Hispanic students.

Despite promising improvements in educational attainment across all levels and the still unrealized potential improvements that can come about through the charter school system, disparities remain. This highlights the need for ongoing efforts to identify and address root causes. Initiatives that focus on mentorship, tutoring, language support, and college or career readiness can contribute to further improvements.

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Socioeconomic Factors

One of the largest determinants of educational success and attainment lies in household wealth. Income or wealth disparities significantly impact educational opportunities for students, with lower-income families facing challenges such as limited access to quality schools, tutoring, and extracurricular activities. Addressing what can be done to provide high quality education regardless of income differences is a central challenge of the current educational system that if solved could deliver higher educational attainment and all the benefits that follow to millions of students and families. Limited economic resources can impede learning in that they limit choices but also make it more difficult to access support both material as well as social. Education materials like technology, textbooks, and tutoring will understandably place a greater financial strain on a low-income family versus a high income one, but beyond this there are social related supports that may not be as readily available.

The role of parental involvement in education is crucial for positively influencing academic performance, motivation, and future career choices. Similarly, a strong supportive community can also have positive effects on educational attainment. The role of social capital in education should not be ignored. Both of these factors, parental involvement and high social capital, may be more difficult in lower-income families in large part because of financial stressors. Lower-income parents can and do advocate for their children's needs but being able to do things like help with homework, provide reliable transportation to extracurriculars, or cultivate relationships to secure educational or career opportunities outside the classroom will be far more challenging when balancing what could be multiple jobs and other obligations.

Community Involvement

Where parents may have difficulty, the community can fill in gaps. This can take the form of mentorship from other adults, library programs, and community organizations meeting needs. At both the national and local level there are coalitions that support students as well as parents. Collaborative efforts between schools and community organizations can provide additional resources.

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Community engagement initiatives that involve the many actors invested in and working toward students' educational success such as local leaders, parents, schools, and businesses, contribute to a more supportive and robust educational environment.

CHALLENGES

COVID-19 and Remote Learning

The most recent and significant challenge to the U.S. education system was the rapid and necessary transition to remote schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic. Over this period of time, preexisting problems and disparities in resources were even more stark and ultimately led to significant learning loss for students. In an attempt to quantify that loss, studies find varying impacts. One study focused on students around the world found that when in-person classes ended students lost around 35 percent of learning that would occur during a normal school year (CNN 2023). Another focused solely on U.S. schools found that by the spring of 2022 the average student had fallen behind in math by an estimated year and half worth of learning and around a third of a year in reading (McKinsey 2021). The consequences of COVID-19 disproportionately affected Hispanics and Black students with much of the decline being concentrated among these groups as well as lower income communities with fewer resources (Julian Samora Research Institute 2021).

All students faced significant challenges in adapting to COVID era education, but as schooling moved remote, reliable internet connection became a must. Unfortunately, a report done by the Pew Research Center found that Hispanics are less likely to have access to home broadband or a desktop or laptop computer than other groups in the U.S (Pew 2021).

As technology becomes an increasingly important tool inside and outside the classroom increasing access to broadband among low-income and rural communities should be addressed. Not only will reliable internet connection allow K-12 students to make use of remote learning resources, but also serves as a powerful tool for continuing education for nontraditional students and can aid in upskilling.

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Rather than doing so through massive unfocused funding packages that inefficiently distribute resources, ensuring that there is a clear understanding of where resources are needed and how to best allocate them based on specific needs will bring about improvements.

Language Barriers

English language proficiency is unsurprisingly a key determinant of academic success for students in the U.S. For Hispanics, many of whom speak Spanish at home, educational attainment has likely been hindered by language barriers. Not only is it understandably difficult for students to fully grasp new material in a language they aren't proficient in, but even for students who are, they may have family members who are unable to fully engage and provide academic support outside of the classroom. Fortunately, proficiency for the community has improved likely due to availability of resources and greater and greater numbers of Hispanics being U.S. born.

All Hispanics regardless of country of birth have seen increases in the percent of individuals who are proficient in English. From 2010 to 2021 proficiency increased from 65 percent to 72 percent. When split by foreign-born and U.S.- born, proficiency, over the same period, increased from 32 percent to 38 percent and 88 to 91 percent respectively (Pew 2015; Pew 2023).

Research finds initiatives that focus on English proficiency and improvement have positive effects on educational outcomes (Education Development Center 2017). Public schools are legally required to provide resources to support students who are English language learners (ELLs) and this is typically done through English as a Second Language (ESL) programs. The U.S. Department of Education created an "English Learner Toolkit" in order to provide a guide for how a school might go about providing English language educational resources and how to support ELLs. While these programs in theory would help, the reality is that the quality and success across different schools can vary significantly.

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Lack of Flexibility

The current model of education is one that offers public school education for all students but assigns each student to their public school based on location. This at times can be limiting and may even perpetuate certain inequalities with wealthier areas having more opportunities and poorer regions can get stuck in poorer schools. This does not necessarily occur because of huge disparities in funding per pupil, but rather that lower-income areas more will need to spend more on average (Reber & Gordon 2021) This means fewer resources for students from lower-income backgrounds which can manifest as more difficulty hiring teachers and overall, more difficulty in providing students the support they need to succeed inside or outside the classroom.

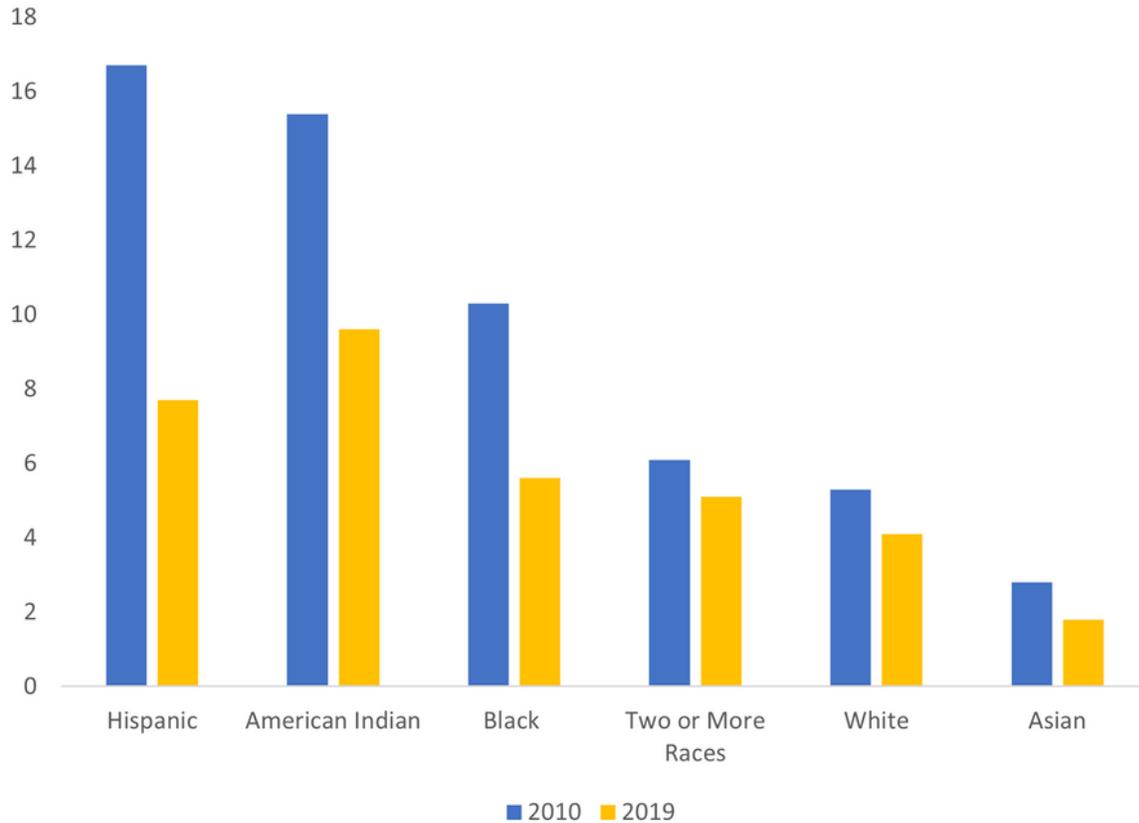
The worst thing for education is an overly rigid system that not only can't address students' needs, but also is unresponsive to societal and economic demand signals. Limiting students' choices in education limits potential. A more flexible system would be able to accommodate numerous specific needs and students including those with disabilities that may require additional support, students with unique academic interests or abilities, students with two working parents that may have difficulty with a traditional school day schedule and many more.

Dropout Rates

Closely tied to the rigidity of the school system and gaps in support are dropout rates. Hispanics' dropout rates have seen the largest decline from 2010 to 2019, falling 9 percentage points, but remain high relative to other groups (NCES 2021).

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High School Dropout Rates (16 to 24 year olds)



There was no measurable difference in dropout rates for pacific islanders between the two measured years Data: [NCES](#) National Center for Education Statistics

Dropout rates among Hispanic students remain a concern. Identifying and addressing the factors contributing to disengagement, like socio-economic status and less support due to being in an area with lower social capital, is essential for improving overall retention rates.

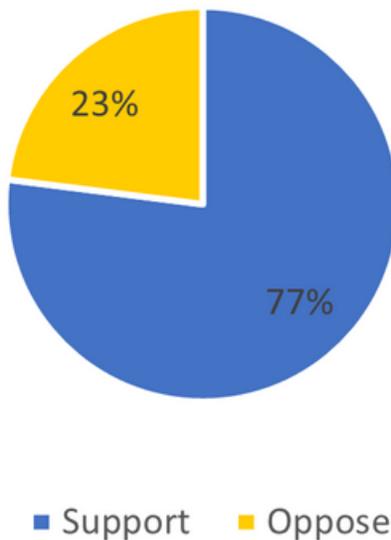
POLICY OPPORTUNITIES

Each student, like each community, will have its own unique needs and challenges they face in the current system of education. In exploring potential policy solutions, making a system that is flexible and allows room for innovation seems to not only be one that would allow for the most students to pursue the most ideal option, but is also what, when asked, the majority of parents support.

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In order to continue with the gains in Hispanic educational attainment and overall national improvement it is important to see what is working and listen to what families say they need in order to best support their students' education. When asked, the Hispanic community, more than any other major racial or ethnic group, supports expanding what are typically thought of as school choice policies such as education savings accounts (ESAs), charter schools, and open enrollment.

Do you support or oppose school choice that allows parents to send their children to any public, charter, or private school and allows state funding to follow the student?



A LIBRE Institute poll found that 77 percent of Hispanics support school choice. This data point aligns with other polling on the same topic. EdChoice polling found that Hispanics also overwhelmingly support greater choice specifically through ESAs with a 75 percent rate of support. To understand exactly how change could occur in the pursuit of educational freedom there needs to be an understanding of the available options. There is not one single policy that alone achieves the aims of educational freedom, rather it can be done through many different types of reform. Examples include open enrollment, Education Savings Accounts (ESAs), K-12 scholarship programs, and education tax credits.

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ESAs and open enrollment specifically have been gaining a lot of traction and provide a promising way forward. ESAs create a savings account that is publicly funded. Its use is restricted to educational purposes. The specifics of what are qualifying expenses vary state to state.

Open enrollment addresses the problems that come with residential assignment that can often lock students into a school that does not work for them only on the basis of their location. Open enrollment allows families within a state to choose which public school to send their child to regardless of which one they were assigned to based on ZIP code. A student who transfers from one school to another would not incur any charges.

What is often misunderstood surrounding conversations about increased choice and educational freedom is the fallacy that the goal is to eliminate or cause damage to the public school system. The true goal is quite the opposite. The failures that do exist in the public school system are not a result of having a no-cost option that is available for all the assigned students in a given area. The problems arise when it is the only option. As highlighted previously, public schools serve the majority of students in the U.S. Shouldn't that mean that these are held accountable for how they equip their students and if they fail parents should have the option to find another school?

Increasing educational freedom makes way for more customized learning environments where children's ideal learning styles, specific interests, and unique needs are all important aspects of the education they will receive. For many students that will likely mean going to their local public school. The goal of increasing educational freedom and choice is to ensure all types of education are held accountable and serving their students the best way they can. In general pursuing educational freedom means passing policies that allow families to opt for the type of education that works best for their and their child's unique situation be it a public, private, charter, magnet, religious, micro, or home schools.

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A more customizable format would be particularly beneficial to students, like Hispanics, who come from communities where they may benefit from a specialized program like an ESL course. In addition to flexibility, educational freedom also seeks increased access. Some students will never have access to certain educational or extra-curricular opportunities due to costs or even something as simple as the location of their home.

More choice can mitigate some of the challenges that come from geographic barriers and could allow students in underserved areas to access schools that better meet their needs. This is particularly relevant for students in rural or low-income communities.

While acknowledging the potential benefits, it's essential to implement new policies thoughtfully, considering flexibility, accessibility, the unique needs of a region, and using the available data and evidence of what works. Additionally, ongoing evaluation and adjustment of these policies are crucial to ensuring positive outcomes for all students.

Because education needs are so varied student to student, district to district, and state to state, imposing blanket federal mandates are unlikely to yield overwhelmingly positive let alone consistent results for all. When it comes to innovation and effective change in education a better approach would be one that is more focused that allows states to see what works best in a way that also empowers local communities and families to make decisions around their children's education.

Recent Developments

2023 saw a wave of momentum in education reform. Across 40 states 112 bills that sought to expand educational freedom were introduced. As a result of the immense effort made over the last year 1 out of 5 students lives in a state that has at least near universal choice and 37 percent of students in the U.S. are eligible for private school choice (Washington Examiner 2023). Below shows some of the expansions of choice that occurred via policy changes in 2023.

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State	Method	Information
Arkansas	ESA	Created an ESA system that will scale up in eligibility and be universal by 2025. The LEARNS Act would cover 90 percent of “per-pupil funding”
Florida	ESA	Converted scholarship and tax credit programs to universal ESAs and also removed restriction on eligibility for other scholarship programs in Florida
Idaho	Open Enrollment	Requires school districts to create inter/intra district school access policy
Indiana	Scholarship	Expansion in a state scholarship program via a budget bill that increased eligibility making it close to universal
Iowa	ESA	Creates new ESA program specifically geared toward increasing access to private schools. This program covers the entirety of per-pupil funding and is universal
North Carolina	Scholarship	Combines ESA program and voucher program into a new universal Opportunity Scholarship program. Covers up to \$7,700 for private school expenses
Ohio	Scholarship	Made existing EdChoice Scholarship Program universal
Oklahoma	Tax Credit	Creates a universal refundable tax credit for parents who home school (\$1,000) or choose to send their children to private school (\$5,000 to \$7,500)
Utah	ESA, Scholarship	Created a universal education savings account that provides scholarships to 5,000 children in the state
West Virginia	Open enrollment	Expanded open enrollment through the creation of inter/intra district attendance zones.

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In 2023, several states made the decision to make education more accessible to students and more are likely to follow into 2024. While greater choice is ideal these policy choices surrounding education must be done carefully and in a deliberative fashion. Real educational freedom needs to be able to balance multiple needs and keep in mind constraints from families, as well as educators, districts and states. Without careful consideration, enacting a policy that is not the right fit but is pushed through just for the sake of doing something has the potential to cause harm. In searching for improvements to the U.S. education system each state needs to consider what will truly work best for its students and families.

CONCLUSION

The Hispanic population in the U.S. continues to grow rapidly and become a larger share of the total population. As a result, it is crucial that this segment of the population has the tools it needs in order to succeed especially as more and more Hispanics enter schools and the workforce. Between 2020 and 2030, the Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts that Hispanic will be responsible for 78 percent of net new workers (BLS 2021). It is within the country's best interest that we prepare Hispanics and all Americans, not only for the economy of the future, but to be productive and involved members of civil society. A strong, functioning, and nimble education system can help achieve these goals. There are unique barriers and challenges for the Hispanic community to overcome in order to meet its full potential and be an economically and academically successful force for this country. While Hispanic educational attainment has seen significant improvement across multiple levels, there is still much work to be done. According to the most recent data on high school completion (for those over 25), Hispanics are lagging 16 percentage points behind the national number.

The COVID-19 pandemic further laid bare some of the existing challenges that the community faces in the education system, largely tied to a lack of resources. The cost of textbooks, materials, and at times the transportation to and from school can cause a significant strain especially for lower-income households.

Further, as more innovative and flexible options become available with the incorporation of technology, it is a concern that communities without the requisite resources will not be able to take advantage of those learning opportunities and ultimately fall behind. Taken together this all leads to lower levels of success in the education system, frustration on the part of students and parents, and likely contributes to the high dropout rate in the Hispanic community.

Fortunately increasing a variety of different educational options is a promising way forward that not only lends students and parents the flexibility they may need in their education, but also strengthens the system as a whole. By removing unnecessary regulations, eliminating geographic constraints, and addressing high costs students can be in the educational environment that works best for them be it a traditional public school, a charter school, religious school, home school, or private school. For Hispanic students and other students of color, the benefits of more options are already being seen in places like charter schools where Hispanics students living in poverty on average see increased learning growth equivalent to 48 extra days of math and 25 extra days of reading.

The success of the next generation of U.S. students and individuals is tied to the overall success of the Hispanic population in the U.S. and vice versa. By pursuing policies and programs that increase access to resources, maximize flexibility, increase accountability for existing options, and remove barriers to different types of education all students regardless of background are more likely to succeed.

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