



Challenges and Solutions to Closing the Achievement Gap

Voices of Students, Teachers, and Parents in Northern New Mexico

July, 2010

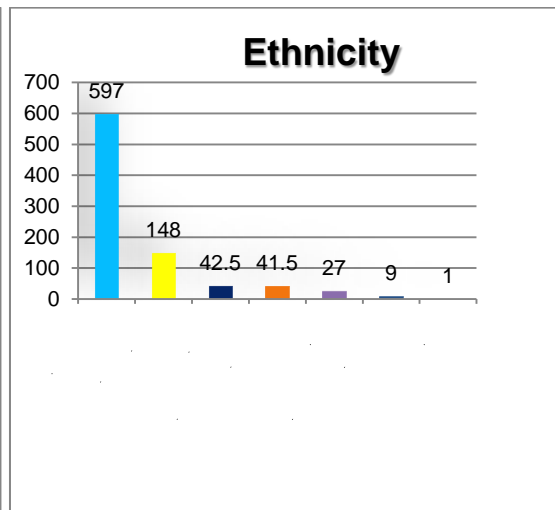
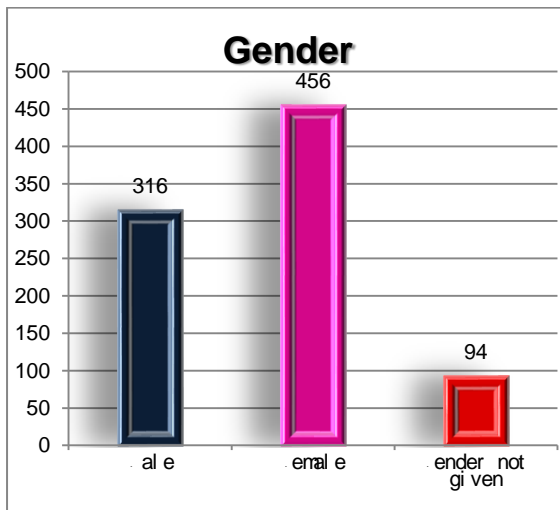
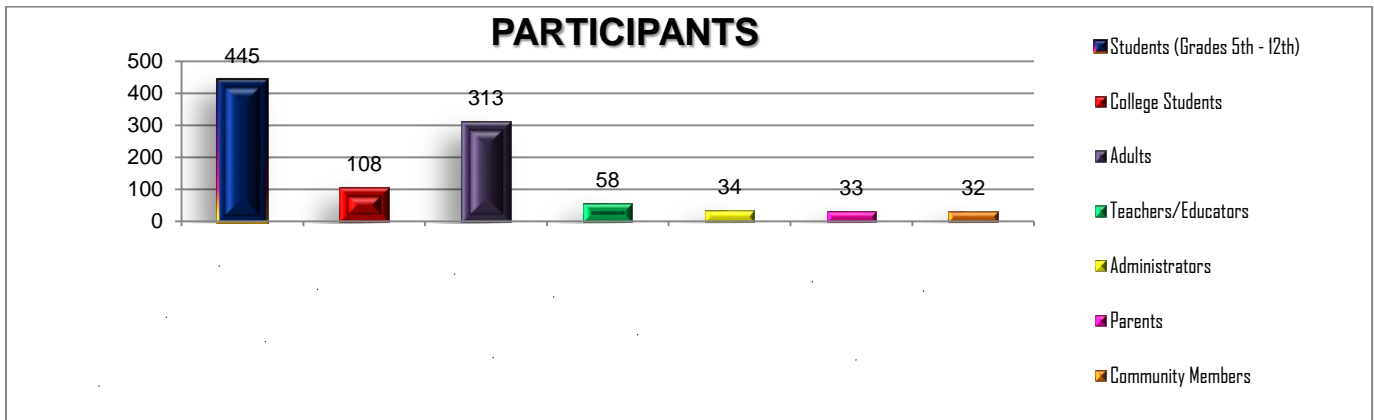
By the ENLACE/GEAR UP student leaders
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Why is there an Achievement Gap? What are the root causes that contribute to this gap in achievement between ethnic and socio-economic sub groups? What is getting in the way of academic success for certain groups of students? What solutions and educational policies are needed to address this issue? ENLACE and GEAR UP student leaders have spent the past year leading a community action research project in an effort to find answers to these questions. This report is a summary of their findings and the policy recommendations they developed in an effort to address this critical and complicated issue.

The ENLACE/GEAR UP Collaborative is funded by a combination of state and federal funds aimed at increasing college awareness and readiness for low income students and students who are first from their family to pursue a college degree. Engaging Latino Communities for Education (ENLACE) is funded by the State of New Mexico through the Higher Education Department. Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) is funded by the Federal Government through the US Department of Education. The Collaborative works with students, teachers, parents, and educational leaders in an effort to increase academic success and educational expectations for all students. The Collaborative provides academic support and leadership development for students, educational resources for families on college access and financial aid, and professional development for teachers. The ENLACE/GEAR UP Collaborative is a genuine partnership between the Center of Education and Study of Diverse Populations (CESDP) at New Mexico Highlands University (NMHU), the Santa Fe Community College (SFCC), Northern New Mexico College, University of New Mexico and the local public school districts. Services are provided in the following communities in the Northeastern Region of New Mexico: Santa Fe, Española, Pojoaque, Peñasco, and Taos.

Thirty five ENLACE and GEAR UP students in Northern New Mexico have participated in a youth leadership program for the past four years. This leadership program is part of the Northern New Mexico ENLACE/GEAR UP Collaborative. During the 2009-2010 school year, these student leaders enrolled in a college level Service Leadership class at the Santa Fe Community College earning dual credit. The course provided students with intensive training in leadership and facilitation skills and included an in-depth community action research and service leadership project component. Students enrolled in this course were trained to lead focus groups in their communities. They conducted focus groups with close to 1000 students, teachers, parents, and educational leaders. The sessions began with the showing of a short youth-produced video entitled "Closing the Achievement Gap: An Educational Necessity for the Future." This documentary interviews teachers, administrators, parents, and students and explores the root causes of the Achievement Gap and potential solutions to closing that gap. The video was followed by group discussions. The discussion identified and explored the barriers to student success for youth as well as ways in which teachers, families, and the students themselves can help other students to be more successful in school.

Focus groups were led in a variety of venues including: middle and high school classrooms, at parent events, with teachers at staff meetings, and a number of statewide conferences such as Governor Richardson’s Higher Education Summit. A number of the focus groups were conducted in Spanish. Although focus groups were conducted with over 1000 people, data were collected on 866 people from across the state of New Mexico. The graphs below provide a breakdown of the participant demographics.



The purpose of these workshops was two-fold: first, to hear the perspective of students and community members about barriers to student success and strategies to close the achievement gap; second, to inspire everyone involved to be a part of the solution by striving for their best and supporting those around them. The focus group participants were asked to respond to the following questions:

- What are the main factors or challenges that are getting in the way of students being successful in school?
- What can teachers and schools do to help students be more successful in school?
- What can families do to help students be more successful in school?
- What skills and resources do you have that can help increase student success?

The data was gathered from these focus groups and is summarized in this report. Many participants gave more than one response to each question, so the number of student responses varies from question to question. GEAR UP student leaders, with the support of ENLACE and GEAR UP staff analyzed the focus group data and developed policy recommendations. The student leaders will spend their senior year (2010-2011) presenting these findings and recommendations to school, district, state, and institutional policy-making bodies in an effort to impact educational policy by providing culturally relevant, grass roots, community based solutions.

Recommendations:

1. Require guidance counselors to implement a college and career advisory component for all students. If necessary, decrease student-to-counselor ratio to allow counselors the time for academic and college advisement.
2. Increase access and funding for academic support programs such as those provided by ENLACE and GEAR UP in the following ways:
 - a. Providing afterschool tutoring using a combination of content area teachers and advanced students to provide peer to peer tutoring.
 - b. Require in-school tutoring during elective classes as an academic intervention for students who are falling behind.
 - c. Implement Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) to provide in-school tutorial support to under-achieving students who are enrolled in AP and other rigorous courses and need support to succeed in these challenging classes.
3. Increase student access to professional social workers in middle and high schools to assist students and families with personal and family issues that become barriers to student learning. Partner with existing programs and community agencies to provide this service.
4. Expand and increase support to programs such as Natural Helpers that promote peer-to-peer mentoring and training on issues affecting teens such as Rape, Teen Pregnancy, Mental Health Issues, Drug and Alcohol abuse, Domestic Violence, Suicide, and Conflict Resolution.
5. Effective Professional Development for all teachers in the following areas:
 - a. Strategies to more effectively engage students in the material and teach the material in a way that students comprehend. Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) Path Trainings in content areas is one highly recommended and effective professional development opportunity.
 - b. Implementing strategies to effectively teach to different types of learners with different learning styles.
 - c. Cultural competency and diversity training.
6. Increase student voice and input into the decision making process in the following ways:
 - a. Require a student advisory committee at each high school to provide youth input on key decisions and school policies affecting students.
 - b. Require all school administrators to host a monthly “Conversations with the Principal” meeting as an opportunity for teachers and students to share thoughts and concerns. Meetings should be run by a neutral facilitator.
7. Set up an on-line, confidential teacher evaluation for all students to complete on each teacher as a means to provide teachers and their supervisors with valuable feedback on teacher effectiveness, strengths, and areas for growth.
8. Provide students with only high quality, non-processed food options to promote nutrition. Provide sufficient amounts.
9. Implement a Teen Pregnancy Prevention and sex education curriculum, delivered in the health classes and ongoing through high school, that would increase knowledge and awareness of the risks and challenges of teen pregnancy and sexual activity. Provide information on contraception, date rape, and family planning.

10. Partner with established programs and services through state and federal government to provide parenting classes to young parents and increase childcare support to encourage them to continue their education.
11. Maintain safe and clean facilities for students and staff to promote a positive learning environment. Have supplies available for teachers and students that are necessary for daily function, (i.e. toilet paper, paper towels, soap, copy materials, school supplies.) Replace fluorescent lighting to create an environment more conducive to learning.
12. Require all schools with a large English Language Learner (ELL) population to provide translators for all parent/teacher meetings and parent events so that parents understand the progress of their students and the systemic process of the schools. Ensure that ALL letters, fliers, and other materials that are sent home are translated into Spanish.
13. Allocate funding for a parent engagement coordinator position at each school specifically focused on increasing parent engagement and providing educational, college, and financial aid resources, and training for parents.
14. In order to adequately fund education in New Mexico, increase the percentage of the New Mexico state budget that funds education from 45% to 50-55% of the overall state budget. This is necessary to increase academic achievement for New Mexico students, and invest in the future of our state.

What are the root causes of the Achievement Gap? What are the main factors that are keeping students from succeeding in school?

Responses	Total # out of 866 people
Lack of support and encouragement – Students reported a lack of any support from family, teachers, schools, and community.	384
Quotes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Not knowing how to apply for college or how to get in because there is no role model to follow.”- 11th grade student • “Not knowing how to apply to college or get scholarships.” – 10th grade student • “If you don’t understand something and no one cares, you stop caring too.” – 11th grade student • “No one tells them they believe in them.” – 10th grade student 	
Negative peer pressure and influences – There are persistent negative influences and pressures from peers including drugs and alcohol use, gangs, ditching, and aggressive behavior.	185
Quotes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Friends are doing drugs, ditching, and joining gangs and sometimes we have no support from family.” – 11th grade student • “Some people (friends) who tell you you’re stupid and it just gets you down so you put yourself down.” – 10th grade student 	
Lack of interest in school – Students are disengaged from the learning process, bored, or aren’t finding the relevance and purpose in school.	130
Quotes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “A lot of classes are boring so students ditch.” – 10th grade student • “The work most of teachers give me is a waste of time and does not help me learn.” – 9th grade student 	
Stress at home and outside of school – many students reported financial challenges at home leading to them being forced to go work. Additionally, domestic violence and drug and alcohol abuse.	129
Quotes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “People are dropping out to help their families by going to work.” – 11th grade student • “Having family at home that are all doing drugs.” – 8th grade 	

Too many difficulties in school – Difficulties ranged from low test scores to challenging content, attendance, and a lack of understanding for the material.	81
Quotes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Kids don’t want to come to school because they feel intimidated and don’t want to be in that environment.” – 10th grade student • “Disorganized school system and it’s easy for students to get lost.” – High School Teacher 	
Teenage pregnancy – Students either drop out or struggle to find the time to balance caring for a family with the demands of school.	59
Quotes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I think getting pregnant and already having to support your child and you don’t have the time to go to school.” – 8th grade student 	
Lack of self confidence and motivation – Students stop believing in their ability to be successful and lose their motivation to try.	59
Quotes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Lack of self-esteem, makes school a difficult environment and students become withdrawn and depressed.” –Male, 18 • “They think they don’t have the potential and they don’t raise their challenges because they don’t think they can do it and they give up.” – 11th grade student • “I think a lot of people don’t believe in themselves so they drop out.” – 9th grade student 	
Bullying – Students don’t feel safe at school	38
Quotes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Getting picked on and pushed around makes you not want to go to school.” • “Many fights happen at school because students are making racist comments to other students.” • “Being teased for being too smart.” – 9th grader 	

What can the educational system, teachers, and schools do to help students be more successful in school?

Responses	Total # out of 866 people
<p>Motivate, support, and encourage students – Tell students they CAN succeed, show pride in student accomplishments, provide support, show them teachers care and serve as an advocate.</p>	289
<p>Quotes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Listen and be sympathetic to realities and problems in the lives of students.” – college student • “Don’t give up on us when we fall.” – 10th grade student • “Believe in us and show us you care.” – 6th grade student • “More help with classes for example AVID where we have tutors to help us with what we don’t understand and push us.” – 10th grade student 	
<p>Use a culturally relevant curriculum – A curriculum and learning environment that is relevant to students and validates their cultural identity.</p>	121
<p>Quotes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Diversity, culture, and pride should be incorporated in curriculum and learning.” -Marlene Ballejos, UNM Admissions Director • “Be more culturally sensitive to the beliefs of the students. Celebration of diversity of each ethnicity.” – Female, 45 • “Differentiated teaching, non-lecture based, community based learning and culturally relevant curriculum will keep students interested and engaged.” –Jason Packineau, UNM Native American Program Specialist 	
<p>Explain the material effectively and help students with problems- Show up on time and prepared, make time to meet one-on-one with students who need it.</p>	115
<p>Quotes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Explain material and lessons better.”- 9th grade student • “Explain how to do the work, encourage them to try their best.”-11th grade student • “Spend more one-on-one time with students who are struggling.” – 10th grade student • “Explain in more detail and make it interesting.” – 8th grade student 	

<p>Incorporate strategies to make learning fun and engaging – Make learning more interesting and relevant by planning hands-on activities, fieldtrips, and collaborative work groups.</p>	<p>97</p>
<p>Quotes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Make education and curriculum relevant to student’s lives. Partner with the community to take learning outside the classroom.” –Female, 44 • “More opportunities for civic engagement and service learning and community collaboration.” –Governor’s Higher Ed Summit - Male, 27 • “They can put us in groups so that we can help each other.” – 8th grade student 	
<p>Implement more intervention and academic support programs – Support programs to help students in difficult classes such as AVID, tutoring, study halls, and programs to engage effectively with families.</p>	<p>91</p>
<p>Quotes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Provide more support and resources for mentoring programs, especially peer to peer.” – Male, 61 • “ENLACE and GEAR UP should be a standardized curriculum for all.” – Male, Governor’s Higher Education Summit • “I believe providing more opportunities similar to ENLACE and GEAR UP can truly have an impact on student success.”-Male, 26 • “Provide more programs that will support and encourage students to stay in school other than sports.” - Students 	
<p>Set high expectations and challenge students – Hold students to high expectations, challenge them to strive for their best, provide a rigorous curriculum, and provide support to help them succeed.</p>	<p>58</p>
<p>Quotes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Hold students accountable for academic success, instill pride in academic success, students have to own their education.” – Female, 32 • “Children will achieve as much as they are expected to.” –Female, 24 • “Encourage students to do better and always give their best.”- 7th grade student 	
<p>Have positive attitudes – Be positive, don’t give up on students, treat them with respect, and demonstrate understanding rather than judgment.</p>	<p>50</p>
<p>Quotes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Respect us and our culture.” –Male, 14 • “Teachers should focus on us learning not what we wear or who we hang out with.”- Female, 10th grade • “Many teachers don’t like students because of their friends or the way they dress, but they shouldn’t judge them before they know them.” –Male, 8th • “All students are capable of learning, teachers need to believe this and be engaged in the process.” –Female, 27 –Educator 	

<p>Communicate effectively and often – Listen to what students and staff have to say, be clear about rules and expectations, ask students if they need help, communicate successes and concerns with parents.</p>	<p>42</p>
<p>Quotes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Communication at all levels including parents, students, instructors and administrators.” –Female, Institution Researcher • “Teachers and schools should communicate with parents in the language they understand.” –Female, 11th • “Notices and flyers should be properly translated before they are sent home so families are informed and not offended, or disrespected.” –Male, 17 • “Improve communication among teachers, parents and students.” - Parent 	
<p>Fully fund education in order to adequately meet the needs of students – Classrooms are overcrowded, there are a shortage of books, broken computers, and a lack of adequate supplies</p>	<p>51</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “All districts and schools should be funded equally, with the same cost per student allocation across the state.” –Pam Perez, NMHED Division Director • “Lack of resources and not being able to provide the same level of education and training to all students.”-Female, Institutional Researcher • “Education system needs reform. This system is not working and will not work by simply applying ‘band-aid’ solutions where we can. What is needed is educational reform and redistribution of resources.”-Female, 27 	
<p>Collaborate effectively – Have teachers and administrators come together to share best practices and problem solve issues that need to be addressed.</p>	<p>24</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Develop integrative models that bring teachers, administrators and staff together to encourage and develop comprehensive approaches rather than quick fixes.” –Female, 50 –Governor’s Higher Education Summit • “Schools and administrators can do a better job of including community leaders and parents in their student’s education. Localized learning.” –Male, 26 • “Have an open door policy for all levels of administration.” – High School teacher 	
<p>Increased support of teachers and students from administration</p>	<p>22</p>
<p>Quotes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “More support from higher level administration for both students and teachers, i.e. School Boards, Superintendents, Principals, VP, etc.”- Governor’s Higher Education Summit Participant 	

What can families do to help students to be more successful in school?

Responses	Total # out of 866 people
<p>Provide support and help to your child succeed – Be available for children, help them problem solve when they are having trouble, believe in them, help them with homework or find outside help if you can't, make sure they are prepared for school each day.</p>	275
<p>Quotes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Get involved in your children’s lives. Let them know you have confidence in them.” – Female, 18 • “Support your children by teaching them to be proud of who they are and where they come from.” –Educator, Female, 34 • “Tell us when you are proud of us for doing well, not just when we are doing bad.” – 10th grade student 	
<p>Push your child to be their best – Talk to children about college from an early age, encourage them to try their hardest, don’t accept bad grades, reward them when they do well, keep reminding them to strive for their dreams.</p>	180
<p>Quotes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Make us go to school, don’t let us stay home because we don’t feel like getting up. Tell kids that they need to keep their grades up.” – 10th grade student 	
<p>Get involved in your child’s education and life – Track academic progress in school, get to know teachers, participate in school activities, make sure your child is attending class every day, find out what your child is interested in.</p>	151
<p>Quotes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Become more involved. Education begins at home, at birth, not at school. Be supportive.” –Female, 27 • “Parent involvement is crucial to a student’s academic and life success.” –Female, 44 • “Read to your kids when they are little, read with your kids when they are in grade school, have them read to you, read, read, read. Make sure they have a library card, it is free.”- Tammy, 39 Academic Advisor 	

<p>Communicate with your child – Ask your child about their life, school, and how they are doing on a daily basis. Listen to them and try to understand them.</p>	<p>56</p>
<p>Quotes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Train and support parents to communicate with their children” –Male, 28 • “Families need to know what’s going on with their child and know where they are at all times and make sure they are doing their home work and talking to their teachers.” – 9th grade student 	
<p>Lead by Example – Hold yourself to the same high expectations you ask of your child. Strive for your best and take responsibility for your family’s wellbeing.</p>	<p>21</p>
<p>Quotes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Parents can enroll in Adult Basic Education Programs or GED classes while their kids are attending school and make education a family event.” – Female, 50 – Governor’s Higher Education Summit Participant • “Parents did not attend college.” – 11th grade student • “Parents or family not expecting students to go to school or graduate will mean their students won’t expect it for themselves either.” – 8th grade student 	

**What strengths and skills do you have that can ensure your success
and the success of others in school?**

Responses	Total # out of 866 people
Effective Student Study Skills- Responses shared include asking questions in class, staying focused, taking good notes in class, staying organized, showing up prepared, building relationships with teachers, listening in class, and completing all assigned work.	310
Quotes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I think good note taking helps keep me on the ball and makes sure we get everything down.” – 10th grade student • “I study with other people to make sure I understand.” – 11th grade student • “I always have a good breakfast and come to school.” – 8th grade student 	
Positive personal qualities that promote success– Qualities shared included responsibility, determination, motivation and other qualities that promote resiliency.	242
Quotes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I try hard, I don’t give up.” – 11th grade student • “I hang out with good influences instead of bad ones.” – 7th grade student • “Wake up happy and get into your work and ask to be challenged.” – 8th grade student 	
Having future goals – Students expressed having educational and life goals such as going to college and having a career.	89
Quotes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I am reassured that being successful in school is going to bring better opportunities in life.” – 11th grade student • “I have a strong desire to achieve my academic goals.” – 9th grade 	
Support from family, school, and/or community – Programs such as AVID, GEAR UP, and ENLACE were cited as providing valuable support to students.	40
Quotes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I have AVID as a supportive family.” – 10th grade student • “The strength I have are my parents. They make sure I do what I need to do the right way and they have made me who I am today.” – 9th grade student 	

Strong academic skills – Students expressed natural ability in particular content areas including math, English, science, history, communication, and writing.	36
Quotes: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• “I am good at biology, science, and lots of math. I will succeed by going to college and getting an education.” – 8th grade student	