



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The High Schools Hispanics Attend: Size and Other Key Characteristics

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Most Hispanic students are educated at public high schools that have different characteristics than the public high schools educating white or black students. Hispanic youths are much more likely than white or black youths to attend public high schools that are large, that have a high student-to-teacher ratio, and that have a substantial proportion of students who come from relatively poor families.

The characteristics of high schools matter for student performance. Careful statistical studies have found that schools with larger enrollments are associated with lower student achievement and higher dropout rates. Similarly, research has shown that lower instructional resources as expressed in higher student-to-teacher ratios are also associated with lower school performance. Moreover, the effects of these structural characteristics on achievement appear to be greater in schools with higher concentrations of low socioeconomic status students.

Understanding structural factors such as size, school resources and school processes is important for both policy and research reasons. Much of the research on the achievement gap between Hispanics and whites has focused on the characteristics of the students—factors such as family income, nativity and parents' level of education and ability to speak English. While all of these factors are important, they do not produce a complete picture. Student characteristics alone do not explain the entire achievement gap. Examining the context of learning—most broadly the characteristics of schools—is also essential. Moreover, educators and educational policymakers have vastly more influence over the characteristics of their schools than the characteristics of their students.

In order to explore the potential role of educational context in student performance, the Pew Hispanic Center tabulated some of the basic characteristics of public high schools of Hispanic students and other students at the national level and state level. This assessment is based on a U.S. Department of Education survey that collects data on every public high school in the country and the students who attend them. The most recent publicly available data are for the 2002-03 school year.

Some of the major findings in this report include:

- Latinos are much more likely than whites or blacks to attend the nation's largest public high schools. Ten percent of public high schools have an enrollment of at least 1,838 students each. More than 56 percent of Hispanics attend these large public high schools, in comparison with 32 percent of blacks and 26 percent of whites.
- One quarter of the nation's public high schools have more than 45 percent of their students eligible for free or reduced-price school lunches. Three hundred of these schools are also among the largest with an enrollment of 1,838 students or more. Almost 25 percent of Hispanic students attend these 300 high schools, in comparison with 8 percent of black students and 1 percent of white students.
- Hispanics are more likely to be at high schools with lesser instructional resources. Nearly 37 percent of Hispanics are educated at public high schools with a student/teacher ratio greater than 22 to 1, in comparison with 14 percent of blacks and 13 percent of whites. The average student/teacher ratio in public high schools is 16 to 1 and only 10 percent of schools have more than 22 students for each teacher.

- Among students at central city high schools, Hispanic students are nearly twice as likely as black students to be at a high school with more than 1,838 students.
- High schools in seven states educate nearly 80 percent of Hispanic youth. These seven states with large Hispanic high school enrollment have larger public high schools, on average, than the rest of the nation.
- In the states with large Hispanic high school enrollment, Hispanics are more likely than either whites or blacks to attend large and relatively more disadvantaged high schools. In California, nearly 40 percent of Hispanics attend large, relatively disadvantaged high schools, in comparison with 8 percent of whites and 30 percent of blacks.