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**Hispanics and U.S. Schools:
Problems, Puzzles and Possibilities**

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Introduction

In 2003 the U.S. Census Bureau announced that Hispanics surpassed blacks as the largest U.S. minority group. If this historic milestone is prologue to the future, its social significance is an unfolding, yet uncertain narrative, with the main chapters being scripted in the schools. That fertility, not immigration, currently drives Hispanic population growth has two important implications for U.S. schools and the future contours of educational stratification. First, the youthful age structure of Hispanics will keep demand for education high. Second, four decades of mass migration from Latin America set in motion an unprecedented generational transition that will define the contours of social inequality, depending greatly on the educational attainments of the swelling second generation. In this essay I argue that the success of U.S. schools in closing achievement gaps will determine not only the pace of Hispanic social mobility, but also whether the nation garners a productivity boost by harnessing the Hispanic demographic dividend.

To make my case I first provide a thumbnail sketch of recent educational trends, spotlighting higher education because of its importance for labor market success in a postindustrial economy. In the interest of parsimony, I do not dwell on differences among Hispanic national origin groups; instead I emphasize comparisons by nativity because these are particularly salient for understanding

contemporary and future contours of Hispanic educational inequality (Tienda and Mitchell, 2006). After discussing three puzzles and elaborating future research needs to address each, the final section elaborates the potential economic significance of the Hispanic generational transition.

Problems in the Pipeline

In a recent report issued by the Educational Testing Service (Tienda, 2009), I showed that Hispanics have made remarkable educational gains since 1980, even as disparities between them and other demographic groups widened. In fact, most of Hispanics' educational progress has occurred at the secondary level, and particularly among the foreign born. For example, the 22 percent-point gap in 1980 high school graduation rates between U.S.-born Hispanics and whites was reduced by more than half over the next 25 years, mainly due to the larger share of Hispanics earning high school diplomas. Less progress was made among the foreign born, however. Roughly 50 percent of foreign-born Hispanics aged 25 to 34 held high school diplomas in 2006, compared with 83 percent of U.S.-born Hispanics, 86 percent of blacks, and 94 percent of non-Hispanic whites (Tienda, 2009). The apparent stagnation of Hispanics' average high school graduation rate is largely due to the downward pull from the influx of low-skill immigrants from Latin America during the 1980s and 1990s, including many young adults who never attended U.S. schools.

Trends in Hispanics' postsecondary attainment are more worrisome because persisting gaps are not confined to the foreign born. Table 1 shows the widening

college enrollment gap over the past quarter century, a period when the wage returns to higher education rose appreciably. In 1980, 30 percent of Hispanic high school graduates ages 18-24 enrolled in college, compared with 28 percent of black and 32 percent of white high school diploma recipients. By 2006, Hispanic college enrollment rates rose to 36 percent, compared with 39 and 44 percent, respectively, for blacks and whites. Thus, not only did African Americans surpass Hispanics in their college enrollment, but their enrollment gap vis-à-vis whites also grew from two to eight percentage points (Tienda, 2009).

Table 1 about Here

Conditional on college enrollment, Hispanic postsecondary graduation rates also rose over the last 25 years or so, but less than the rate for whites. Thus, even as Hispanic college graduation rates reach an historic high, gaps between them and majority whites remained unchanged for the native born and widened for the foreign born. In 2006, white adults ages 25-34 were almost twice as likely as comparably aged U.S.-born Hispanics, and over three times as likely as foreign-born Hispanics, to receive a baccalaureate degree. If the arrival of unskilled immigrants from Latin America is largely responsible for the widening attainment gap between foreign-born Hispanics and non-Hispanic whites, it cannot account for the persisting disparities for the U.S. born.

The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (2005) aptly summarized Hispanics' educational pipeline. Of every 100 ninth graders, 53 graduate from high school within four years, and only 27 attend college immediately after high school. Of the original cohort, 10 graduate within six years of beginning

college. Among a comparable cohort of 100 non-Hispanic white students, more than twice as many earn college degrees. Among the most salient factors that researchers invoke to explain Hispanics' low attainment levels are low parental education and their lack of fluency in English, but many researchers also point to their disproportionate representation in ethnically segregated, under-resourced schools (Swail, et al., 2003; Schneider, et al., 2006). Each of these circumstances raises an important puzzle that warrants further investigation.

Persisting Puzzles: Legacies of Segregation or Institutionalized Discrimination?

The landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision, which struck down racist Jim Crow laws, is widely celebrated for eliminating *de jure*, if not *de facto* school segregation. The decision's applicability to Hispanics, and Mexicans in particular, was unclear because their racial status was ambiguous from a legal standpoint (Aguirre, 2005). In fact, *Méndez v. Westminster School District* (1947), not *Brown*, was the first federal case to rule that separate schools are not equal. At that time California state law sanctioned segregation by requiring Native Americans, Japanese, Chinese and Mongolians to attend separate public schools, but made no mention of Mexicans. By claiming that Mexicans are white, local authorities throughout California systematically denied them equal protection under the law by routinely invoking language barriers and low cognitive ability to justify their relegation to separate and distinctly inferior schools (Aguirre, 2005; Foley, 2005). Similar practices of "blind" segregation were prevalent in Texas, where officials

used language, surname and physical appearance as race proxies to assign white and Mexican children to schools of differing quality (Foley, 2005).

Although less notorious than *Brown*, *Hernández v. Texas* (1954) outlawed the “blind” segregation practices used by public officials to exclude Mexicans from jury duty and to deny them civil rights. By the mid 1950s, the majority of Texas Mexicans were U.S. born, yet language barriers were used to justify their systematic exclusion from civic offices and to reinforce school and job segregation. Whether coincidental or not, *Hernández* was argued immediately after *Brown*, and the decision was filed just before *Brown* in the U.S. Supreme Court Reporter volume (Olivas, 2005). Its profound sociological significance is its explicit acknowledgement that race is a social construction based on perceptions, beliefs, and prejudices. In designating Mexicans as “a class apart” that warranted access to equal protection, the *Hernández* decision also broadened the interpretation of the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

Méndez and *Hernández* originated in the two states with the largest Hispanic populations, both in the 1950s when Hispanics comprised less than four percent of U.S. residents and today, when their population share surpasses 15 percent. Moreover, *Méndez* appears to have played a pivotal role in the eventual success of the *Brown* litigation (Aguirre, 2005). Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren was governor of California when the *Méndez* decision was rendered, which apparently sensitized him to the egregious inequities endured by minority groups under his watch. Among the most striking parallels between the *Méndez* and *Brown* decisions signaled by Aguirre (2005) are references about: (1) the civic benefits of ethnic co-

mingling (*Méndez*) versus claims that exposure to diverse cultural values is a compelling state interest (*Brown*); (2) how segregation limits exposure to English (*Méndez*) versus that it retards mental development (*Brown*); (3) how segregation fosters antagonism and suggests inferiority (*Méndez*), subsequently reformulated to acknowledge that segregation designated the Negro group as inferior (*Brown*); and (5) that separate schools do not serve equal protection (*Méndez*) versus the explicit claim that separate facilities are inherently unequal (*Brown*).

Notwithstanding these five broad parallels between the core elements of the *Méndez* and *Brown* decisions, a major difference is the continued racial ambivalence of Mexicans, which consequently permitted, and in some instances appears to have institutionalized blind segregation well into the 21st century. That is, because language has remained a powerful instrument of social exclusion in the schools, both the *Méndez* and *Hernández* decisions are highly relevant for understanding contemporary educational inequalities between Hispanics and whites.

Three puzzles related to the circumstances that provoked the original lawsuits (language, segregation and social class) warrant further research to determine whether current inequities are legacies of past traditions or represent new, subtle forms of social exclusion. These include: the disproportionate representation of native-born children among English language learners; the rising school segregation of Hispanic students; and the weaker ability of college-educated Hispanic parents to confer status advantages to their offspring compared with white counterparts. I elaborate on each with a focus on future research opportunities.

1. *English Language Learners and Academic Achievement*

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) imposed new, if imprecise, accountability standards for schools. Title I requires English language learners to be included in state assessments of reading, language arts and math, thus initially raising new barriers for students not yet proficient in English. NCLB also requires states to administer English language proficiency tests annually to students whose first language is not English. These provisions are designed to generate benchmarks for assessing progress both in English proficiency and academic subjects.

In principle, school accountability for educational progress is a positive development; however, NCLB initially worked to the disadvantage of schools that serve large numbers of limited English proficient students. Separate reporting of testing results for limited English proficiency (LEP) students not only focused a spotlight on their achievement gaps, but also increased the number of schools that failed to meet yearly progress benchmarks.

There exists a general presumption that the majority of LEP students are foreign born, but data indicate otherwise. A 2005 study by the Urban Institute found that 75 percent of elementary school students classified as LEP and over half of LEP students enrolled in grades 6-12 are U.S. born (Capps et al., 2005). If reports that large numbers of LEP students fail to achieve minimal academic standards implicate immigration, it does not explain why three-quarters of LEP students are U.S. born (Tienda, 2008). Because they begin their education in English, U.S.-born school children should not need special English language services, and certainly not on a prolonged basis, even if their parents are foreign born or lack fluency in English. It is puzzling, therefore, that the majority of long-term “English language learners”

(ELLs) are native-born citizens, many of whom reside in states that passed English Only Laws.

Language is frequently invoked as a reason for the underperformance of Hispanics today, just as it was in Texas and California during the 1950s, raising the possibility that blind segregation based on English proficiency operates to thwart the academic achievement of all Hispanic students, just as it did in Texas and California before the *Méndez* and *Hernández* decisions. Anneka Kindler (2002) reports that about 80 percent of state education agencies use home language surveys, teacher observation, teacher interviews, and parent information for classifying LEP students, but acknowledges that these criteria are applied inconsistently across states and even across districts *within* states. Over half of state education agencies also use student records, grades, informal assessments and referrals to classify students as limited English proficient. Some of these criteria are objective, but many are highly subjective. Using student records and “informal assessments” to classify children often results in misclassification due to unverified assumptions about the extent to which a second language is used in the home, by whom, and for what purposes. Furthermore, student records may reveal deficiencies accumulated over time due to poor instruction, not lack of English proficiency.

To address whether and in what ways blind segregation contributes to the Hispanic achievement gap, future research should first address the influence of LEP designation in producing achievement gaps, particularly for U.S.-born children who begin their scholastic instruction in English. Even more important is the need for a

longitudinal study that compares the achievement of native-born LEP students who are exposed to different English language interventions. If designation as LEP status is the contemporary version of blind segregation in a post-*Méndez* and *Hernández* world, then it is conceivable that the achievement gap has been manufactured via the remedial approach to language arts for Hispanic youth, which likely compounds their failure to master academic subjects. In addition, how students are initially classified as limited English proficient, especially those who begin their U.S. education in primary school, warrants systematic evaluation.

I hypothesize that Hispanic students who are not compelled to sit in remedial classes from first grade forward will advance academically faster than their statistical counterparts who are placed in classrooms for non-native speakers, particularly if they begin their U.S. schooling in the primary grades. Furthermore, given the legal precedents acknowledging that language segregation reproduced academic underachievement, it is also critical to investigate the complicity of schools and their administrators in generating Hispanic-white education gaps by accepting earmarked funds based on the number of students designated as limited English proficient. Addressing whether targeted funding for LEP students has become a pernicious incentive to subsidize school budgets also warrants systematic empirical investigation either to prove or refute the panoply of anecdotes about how schools hold back proficient students to qualify for Title I funds.

2. Re-segregation and Achievement

A second, puzzle, which is related to the concentration of Hispanic students in remedial English instruction programs, concerns the re-segregation of public

schools during the post-Civil Rights period. There is ample social science and legal evidence that school segregation, particularly in the context of concentrated poverty, poses formidable barriers to academic success. Therefore, the rising levels of Hispanic school segregation since school districts were allowed to end their court-ordered segregation plans bode ill for Hispanic students (Logan, Stowell, and Oakely, 2002). In 2000, for example, Hispanic students disproportionately attended segregated schools where upwards of two-thirds of students also were low income (Orfield and Lee, 2004). Nearly 40 percent of Hispanic students attend high schools where less than 60 percent of entering freshmen graduate in four years (Carnevale, 1999).

These trends raise an important question about the social forces through which segregation fosters academic (under) achievement, and in particular whether the contemporary mechanisms are similar to those prevalent during the first half of the 20th century. The re-segregation of Hispanic students is puzzling because this trend coincides with an unprecedented geographic dispersal beginning in the late 1980s and continuing through the first decade of the 21st century (Tienda and Mitchell, 2006). That recent immigrants and their families were major players in the residential dispersal provides a unique research opportunity to evaluate *the process* of school segregation and its association with academic achievement. Several research questions suggest themselves.

First, how does segregation of Hispanic students differ in the traditional and nontraditional destinations? Second, is the association between segregation and academic performance similar in the new and traditional destinations and if not,

how does it differ? Third, to what extent is segregation the product of covert mechanisms, such as those used in California and Texas during the pre-Civil Rights period, and what role does language play in academic tracking of Hispanic students in schools that are unaccustomed to serving ethnically distinct populations?

As the *Méndez* and *Hernández* decisions revealed, blind segregation is an effective social exclusion mechanism; moreover, it is often more difficult to combat than overt discrimination. Therefore, future research should consider not only differences in the assignment of Hispanic students across schools to evaluate how segregation promotes underachievement, but also *within* schools via academic tracking and assignment to remedial language arts courses. Finally, determining whether and how Hispanics may be differentially impacted by the charter school movement and the proliferation of voucher programs warrants further investigation to determine whether these developments aggravate or attenuate unequal participation of Hispanics in underperforming schools.

3. Unequal Mobility or Institutionalized Discrimination?

Most research about the Hispanic-white achievement addresses the K-12 experience, but given the growing importance of postsecondary education for labor market success, there is rising research interest in postsecondary outcomes. Most studies of college gaps, whether focused on enrollment, persistence or completion, emphasize differences in family background as core explanatory factors. This body of evidence presumes that if Hispanic parents' educational attainment was comparable to that of whites, their postsecondary achievement gaps would be

nonexistent. An implicit assumption is that the *rate of mobility* is uniform between Hispanic and white parents of similar education.

Using four longitudinal surveys, Alon and her colleagues (2010) show that parental educational attainment explains only part of the Hispanic-white college enrollment gap, and that college-educated Hispanic parents are handicapped in their ability to confer status advantages to their offspring. Moreover, this handicap is not limited to the foreign born. The authors were unable to explain why this should be so, but given the broad implications of their result for the mobility prospects of the fastest growing population segment, their claim warrants further verification and explanation of the underlying mechanisms.

Several tenable hypotheses should be subjected to empirical scrutiny. First, it is conceivable that college-educated Hispanic parents have lower stocks of social capital, either because they attended less selective universities with weak alumni networks, or because they received their education abroad. Second, as a process, college orientation begins well before high school, and admissibility to a selective postsecondary institution hinges on the sequencing of key courses in math and science in the middle grades as well as preparation for the PSAT and SAT examinations. It is plausible that the lower educational transmission rates of college-educated Hispanic parents reflect their lack of knowledge about these core antecedents of postsecondary admission. Furthermore, if the offspring of Hispanic college-educated parents attend high schools that have lower college-going traditions compared with college-educated white parents, this may also contribute to the unequal ability of Hispanic parents to transmit their status advantage to their

children. A third possibility is that admissions officers discriminate against Hispanic students who allegedly have the class advantages of their parents in favor of low-income students who are eligible for federal financial aid. Adjudicating among these alternative hypotheses is likely to generate more policy-relevant evidence compared with past studies showing that Hispanic parents average less education than all other demographic groups except, perhaps, Native Americans.

Promise and Possibility: Why Everyone Should Care

Despite improvements in educational levels, recent trends are worrisome because they occur in the context of widening disparities at the postsecondary level. Demography is not destiny, but the burgeoning Hispanic school-age population represents a formidable risk for the nation if the achievement gap is allowed to continue down its current path. Because the majority of the Hispanic second generation currently is enrolled in school, as a group it offers the nation a unique opportunity to reap a demographic dividend—that is, a productivity boost enabled by a youthful age structure (Tienda, 2006). At a time of rising global competition with both developed and developing nations (especially China and India, but also Brazil), the United States can ill afford to underinvest in human capital.

That Hispanics are coming of age in an aging society further underscores the urgency of closing Hispanic-white educational achievement gaps, which is the responsibility of the education system. As the predominantly white baby boom generation approaches retirement, it is in the national interest to educate the students who will replace them in the labor market. Schools will play a major part in determining not only the shape of ethnic stratification, but also whether the nation

will retain its economic status on the world stage. Finally, it bears emphasizing that future research in educational stratification will be better served by asking what new insights about how schools operate and about intergenerational transmission processes emerge from studying Hispanics, rather than confining themselves to conventional questions about how Hispanics differ from other groups.

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Table 1. College Enrollment Rates of High School Graduates Ages 19-24 by Race and Hispanic Origin, 1980-2006

	1980	1990	2000	2006
White	32	40	44	47
Black	28	33	39	42
Hispanic	30	29	36	36

Source: 2007 Digest of Education Statistics, Table 195