

Published: 11.14.2006

Study finds school models for educating Latinos

By Beth Duckett

THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

There may be newfound hope for "mostly Latino, mostly poor" Arizona schools that struggle with high dropout rates and low academic performance, according to a state study.

The study asks, "Why do some schools with Latino children beat the odds and others don't?"

Latinos make up more than 405,000 of the state's 1 million students. They are a growing population, but are lagging behind their academic peers.

Researchers from the Center for the Future of Arizona and Arizona State University's Morrison Institute for Public Policy examined more than 300 elementary and middle schools with high Latino populations.

They compared data from each school, including test results from English and math classes.

What they found was a strategy that may help curb a number of the state's education problems.

Despite issues with poverty and language barriers, there were 12 Arizona schools among the 331 that operated above the academic norm.

They were outperforming on all levels even though they were considered "mirror images" of their less-successful counterparts, said Lattie Coor, chief executive officer of the Center for the Future of Arizona and ASU president emeritus, during a discussion at Phoenix College last week.

Researchers studied the 12 schools in Douglas, Nogales, Phoenix, Morenci, Somerton, Superior, Tucson and Yuma. They came up with a list of six qualities that seemed to enable their success.

Now, representatives want to apply these qualities to the 319 other, less-successful schools. And with the state's fast-growing Latino population, it may be the perfect time to start.

But it will not be easy, said Coor, a proponent of the study. Officials have yet to develop a definite timetable and they're not certain how much financial support, if any, will be required.

Coor believes that it can and will be done.

"This is one of the most important pieces of business we have in this state," he said. "There are clear ways that we can see the young people in this state, whatever their background but especially Latino, succeed just as well as everyone else."

"Beat the odds"

Poverty, difficulty with English, and cultural stereotypes historically have been used to justify academic failure within the Latino community, said Alfredo Gutierrez, a Latino community leader and former state senator who

" There are clear ways that we can see the young people in this state, whatever their background but especially Latinos, succeed just as well as everyone else."

Lattie Coor, chief executive officer of the Center for the Future of Arizona

spoke at last week's session.

"People believe failure is the fault of the parents."

Coor said it's time to step up and stop making excuses.

"ZIP code is not an excuse, characteristics beyond the school are not an excuse," he said.

"We will control what we can control within the school and we know how to make it successful."

The study, called "Beat the Odds," doesn't blame the teachers and families, said Gutierrez.

It focuses on what the schools can gain instead of what they lack and zeros in on younger students instead of high schoolers.

"Times have changed, and the presence of the Hispanic community has changed," he said.

How will they do it?

Researchers called upon business guru Jim Collins to further make sense of the results. Collins' book "Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap . . . and Others Don't" takes a similar approach to the problem of unexplainable differences within organizations.

"He looked at companies that were wildly successful, and tried to figure out what made those companies so successful," said Coor.

Having ongoing assessments of each student plus a strong school principal are two of the six factors Arizona researchers found. The other four are having a clear bottom line, collaborating to find solutions, sticking with programs, and tailoring education plans. The report is online at arizonafuture.org.

"Never once on this 12-component schools did they say, 'We are a heavily Spanish-speaking population, a low-income population, a minority population,' " said Coor. "In fact, they would say quite the contrary. There (were) no excuses."

When and how officials will begin the reform is yet to be determined, said Gutierrez.

They have plans to establish a three-day leadership academy next month that will call upon principals of several of the targeted schools.

Forums also are being offered at Phoenix-area schools as a way to get the word out to parents and teachers.

Even as schools tackle bigger issues such as adequate funding and bureaucracy, they still should be able to find time to focus on the study, said Coor.

Gutierrez said he is "enthused" about the plan.

"If we can persuade parents and school districts to take this seriously and begin to focus on these kids in this manner, they will perform as well as any other children in the public school system in Arizona," he said.

" There are clear ways that we can see the young people in this state, whatever their background but especially Latinos, succeed just as well as everyone else."

Lattie Coor, chief executive officer of the Center for the Future of Arizona

All content copyright © 1999-2006 AzStarNet, Arizona Daily Star and its wire services and suppliers and may not be republished without permission. All rights reserved. Any copying, redistribution, or retransmission of any of the contents of this service without the expressed written consent of Arizona Daily Star or AzStarNet is prohibited.

