

Education and the Latino Seventh-day Adventist Church

DEALING WITH AN INCREASINGLY multicultural society is one of the most important challenges facing the United States and other nations. How do we build communities that respect and value differences, foster interracial harmony, and provide various groups equal access to economic and educational opportunities?

A key component of this cultural challenge is the Hispanic community, which is experiencing dramatic growth. At last count, the United States had an estimated 31 million Hispanics, comprising 11.5 percent of the population. By 2005, they will be America's largest minority group, making the United States the fifth-largest Spanish-speaking country in the world. Within the North American Division of the Adventist Church, the Hispanic church is the fastest-growing sector, with 104,153 members meeting in 765 congregations.

Hispanics, however, suffer disproportionately from poverty and a widening income disparity. Although a number of factors contribute to this, the single most important influence on the social and economic condition of Hispanics is their low levels of education.

U.S. Hispanics generally enter school later, leave school earlier, and receive proportionately fewer high school diplomas and college degrees than the non-Hispanic population. For instance, the high school completion rate for Hispanics remains the lowest of any ethnic group, lagging considerably behind the 79 percent rate for the overall population. In the past decade, the high school dropout rate among Hispanics was 38 percent, compared with 16 percent for African-Americans and 13 percent for whites. As a consequence, only slightly more than half (54 percent) of Hispanic adults have a high school education. Of those Hispanic young adults who do graduate from high school, only 16 percent go on to college, and a mere seven percent complete a college degree.

This educational lag among Hispanics is also apparent in the low rates at which they earn advanced degrees. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, in 1996 only 4.1 percent of the total number of master's degrees conferred in the U.S. went to Hispanics, compared to the 82.6 percent that went to whites, 7.7 percent to African-Americans, and 5.1 percent to Asian-Americans. Similar trends exist at the Ph.D. level: Of all the doctoral degrees granted in 1996, only 3.2 percent went to Hispanics, while 83.2 percent went to whites, 5.4 percent to African-Americans, and 7.7 percent to Asian-Americans.

The AVANCE Study

But what about Adventist education and Latinos? This article reports on part of a larger study of Seventh-

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day Adventist Hispanic families in congregations across the North American Division. Sponsored by the division and a half-dozen Adventist colleges and universities, the AVANCE study (named for the Spanish word meaning "advance") was led by a research team of sociologists, psychologists, educators, and ministry professionals. Adventist Latino congregations were selected using a stratified random method and 77 eventually participated. A total of 3,306 persons (1,998 adults and 1,308 youth) completed comprehensive surveys on all aspects of family, school, and church life. Highlights relating to education are presented below.

Commitment to Christian Education

The research revealed that most Latino Adventists do not enroll their children in Adventist education, and many did not attend church schools themselves. A total of 457 parents (which included fathers and mothers from the same household) said at least one of their children was attending an Adventist school (for a total of 870 children). By contrast, 850 parents said they had at least one child in a public school (for a total of 1,862 children). Only 21 percent of the parents felt that there was an excellent chance that their children would attend an Adventist college or university. Of the 1,190 who were presently attending school at any level, only 22 percent were enrolled in an Adventist institution. Of the total sample, 58 percent had never attended an Adventist school, while 42 percent had had some Adventist education (one to four years).

Yet if given a choice, 61 percent of the youth surveyed said they would select an Adventist school over a public school, and 84 percent of adults who had or would have college-age children thought that it was quite important that their children attend an Adventist college or university. Furthermore, a majority (68 percent) of both the youth and adult respondents felt that Adventist schools provided a better education than public schools. When asked if the spiritual value of an Adventist school justified the cost, 43 percent agreed, 30 percent were not sure, and 27 percent disagreed.

Interestingly, low-aculturated Adventist Latinos (those who have not integrated into the American/Anglo culture) seemed to place a higher value on Adventist education than those who were highly acculturated. Low-aculturated Latinos were more likely to feel that church schools were better than public schools, that the spiritual value of Adventist education justified the cost, and that Adventist education was an important goal for their families.

Finance and Distance Problems

Obviously, Latino Adventists do want to attend church schools or send their children there, yet most of them patronize the public school system. Why this discrepancy? Predictably, one of the biggest reasons was financial. Of Latino Adventists with children in public schools, 77 percent felt denominational schools were simply too expensive. Sixty-

one percent of the parents with children in Adventist schools agreed that the price was too high. Most (93 percent) AVANCE respondents agreed that Christian education should be affordable for all Adventist families.

Another problem is geographical. Of those parents with children in public schools, 50 percent said that the nearest Adventist school was too far away. Also, parents with no Adventist education were more likely to send their children to public schools (68 percent), contrasted with those who had received some Adventist education. Since most Latino Adventists have not had any Adventist education, they are more likely to send their children to public schools and thus perpetuate this trend.

What factors would encourage Latino parents to send their children to Adventist schools? AVANCE respondents said the following were important or extremely important:

1. A school that meets the special needs of their children (91 percent);
2. A good discipline program (91 percent);
3. Quality of the educational program (90 percent);
4. High-quality teachers (88 percent);
5. Location of the school (82 percent);
6. Affordable cost (78 percent); and
7. Religious emphasis of the school (71 percent).

The denomination needs to address each of these issues in order to increase the percentage of Latino students enrolled in the Adventist educational system.

Latinos In Adventist Higher Education

The move from a manufacturing to a service-based economy has made higher education more essential than ever in preparing young people for the job market. In general, Adventists have adapted well to these changes, and have a higher educational level than the national average. AVANCE reveals that we have not done nearly as well with our Hispanic members.

Those Latinos with some Adventist education are six times more likely to have a graduate-school degree than those who have never attended Adventist schools. More than half (52 percent) of those with graduate degrees have been Adventists since their childhood. However, only a small minority of Latino Adventists have earned a college diploma (15 percent) or a postgraduate degree (6 percent). More than half of the Latino Adventists surveyed had only a high school diploma or some college credits. The solution would appear to be to find ways for Latino youth to attend Adventist schools.

Hispanic Adventist youth want the opportunities that higher education will bring. A total of 72 percent said they desired at least a four-year college education. When asked how far they thought their parents wanted them to go, 83 percent indicated at least a college education and 37 percent a postgraduate degree. Parents mirrored these aspirations: Seventy-seven percent wanted their children to get at least a

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Picture Removed

four-year college education, 36 percent a postgraduate degree.

Adventist colleges are in a position to meet this need. Through loans, scholarships, grants, and work-study programs, most students can earn their way through college. Yet Latino Adventists are not taking advantage of the opportunities offered by Adventist colleges. Overall, 35 percent of the college-age respondents were currently attending college, but of that group only 7 percent were in Adventist institutions. Yet 73 percent of the youth surveyed would attend an Adventist school if given an opportunity.

One of the problems may be that Latino church members simply do not know much about Adventist higher education. All of the North American Division's colleges and universities were rated as "unknown" by 50 percent or more of the respondents, with the exception of Andrews and Loma Linda universities. This was true even for the schools in the respondents' union conferences. It would appear that many Latino youth simply don't know that Adventist schools are an option. This is even more so for those who are low-acculturated (who make up the bulk of the Hispanic population). Quite simply, NAD colleges and universities have not made themselves known to the Latino Adventist community.

AVANCE shows that Latinos offer a largely untapped reservoir of potential students for our colleges and universities. Adventist schools need to engage in a vigorous marketing campaign aimed at the Latino/Hispanic community. They also need to promote Adventist college education as a realistic option for Latinos, making sure they are aware of the financial-aid options available to them. Both the Hispanic community and Adventist institutions will benefit. Latino Adventists will realize their goal of denomination-sponsored higher education, and Adventist schools will benefit from increased enrollment and the richness of broader cultural diversity.

Viewpoint of the Students

Media-fed perceptions about experiences at public and private schools differ widely. Public schools are seen as filled with overworked, apathetic teachers, violence in the hallways and school grounds, drug problems, and humanistic values. Adventist schools are viewed as smaller, with caring, spiritually committed staff, and a strong emphasis on Christian values and standards. How do Latino youth in both types of schools feel about their experiences? Do they mirror

these assumptions?

The AVANCE survey revealed that Adventist students in public schools were somewhat more likely to feel that discipline was fair at their school, that students had a say in how the school is run, and that teachers praise students' hard work. However, they also said that students acted as if they didn't care about learning. Students in Adventist schools were much more likely to report that there was real school spirit at their schools.

Perhaps the biggest reported differences were Latino students' perceptions of the teachers. Almost half (49 percent) of those attending public schools found teachers cold and unfriendly, compared to 31 percent of those who were enrolled in Adventist schools. Fifty-two percent of the public school group felt put down by teachers, compared with 38 percent of the Adventist school students. Teachers in Adventist schools were perceived as friendlier and more caring and considerate than those in public schools.

Students in public school were much more likely to feel worried about being beaten up at school (45 percent) and about school violence (62 percent). Compare this with Adventist school students, with only 25 percent worried about getting beaten up and 32 percent concerned about school violence. Public school students were only slightly more worried than Adventist school students about drugs and drinking around them. Students in both systems were equally likely to worry about how they were doing in school, with 45 percent of the total sample "very much" concerned and 23 percent "quite a bit" concerned about the issue of academic performance.

AVANCE revealed that Adventist Latino students are much less likely to drop out of school than non-Adventists, regardless of the type of school. Of the whole sample, 76 percent had not dropped out. For both public and Adventist school students, financial difficulties were the number-one reason for leaving school, though a larger percentage of denominational education dropouts cited this reason (41 percent versus 28 percent). Public school students were somewhat more likely to drop out because of lack of interest, gang violence, and expulsion.

Cultural Issues

In this section, we will examine two cultural issues pertinent to Latino education today: English as a Second Language (ESL)/bilingual

programs and racism/prejudice in schools.

ESL and bilingual programs are important in promoting academic and later economic success for first-generation, Spanish-speaking students. Bilingual Latinos have the advantage of speaking two languages fluently, thus making them more attractive to prospective employers. The key, however, is ESL/bilingual programs that effectively teach English, while continuing to value Spanish.

Among the Adventist youth sampled, 55 percent had participated in a school ESL or bilingual program, while 45 percent had not. However, 59 percent of the public school students had been in language programs, contrasted with only 36 percent of Adventist school students.

Parents felt that these programs were important, too. Three-quarters of the adults surveyed agreed that Adventist schools should provide ESL/bilingual programs. Both high-acculturated and low-acculturated adults felt equally strongly that Adventist schools should provide language programs. Among parents with children in school, 67 percent said that the bilingual/ESL program was an "important" to "very important" factor in choosing the school their children attended. Latino Adventist families are looking for ESL/bilingual programs, and they are going to public schools to find them.

Another issue pertinent to Latinos is racism and prejudice. Ideally, students in Adventist schools would experience less racism than those in public schools. AVANCE supports this conclusion, but the differences are not as great as one might hope. Among public school students, 51 percent felt that teachers had higher expectations for whites than for Hispanics "sometimes" to "all of the time," while only 38 percent of Adventist school students felt this way.

Only 23 percent of the public school students and 16 percent of those in Adventist education had been "put down" for being Hispanic "sometimes" to "all of the time." Slightly higher percentages (34 percent and 23 percent) had experienced some form of prejudice or discrimination. Adventist educators need to be more intentional in teaching tolerance and respect for diversity.

Personal Religious Experience

One important difference between students enrolled in the two educational systems was in their understanding of grace. Seventy-five percent of the Latino students in public high schools disagreed that there is nothing we can do to earn salvation, compared with 63 percent of Adventist academy students. Among respondents enrolled in public colleges or universities, 53 percent disagreed with this statement, compared with 24 percent of those in Adventist colleges or universities.

Perhaps the Bible classes in Adventist schools reinforce the basic truth that salvation cannot be earned. Without this daily reminder, it could be that Latino students in public schools do not internalize this belief as readily.

AVANCE used the same scale to measure faith maturity as that employed in the widely heralded Valuegenesis study. The concept of faith as a way of life demonstrated in personal devotion to God and service to others is an important indicator of spirituality. Adventist schools

should help students develop an active, mature faith. AVANCE revealed that 78 percent of the respondents in Adventist colleges and universities had high faith maturity, compared to only 54 percent of those in public institutions.

College students in Adventist schools were also much more likely to feel a sense of loyalty to the church. Sixty-nine percent of those in Adventist schools strongly agreed that they were loyal and would remain so. Only 31 percent of Latino youth in public colleges or universities felt as strongly about loyalty.

Those students who choose public campuses, whether out of necessity or personal preference, may find themselves in an environment that offers little opportunity for spiritual nourishment. These students face a much greater challenge in maintaining their faith and loyalty to a church that may seem far removed from their everyday experiences. On the other hand, students who attend Adventist colleges or universities remain in a spiritually rich environment, even though they may be

away from the religious influences of home. Worship with their peers, a campus church, student-missionary programs, and outreach opportunities abound at Adventist campuses, encouraging Hispanic Adventist youth to find a personal faith, as well as the vision of a church to which they can relate—a church worth their continued loyalty.

Directions for the Future

All of this suggests two directions for the future. First, Adventist colleges and universities need to recruit Latino youth. Second, Hispanic churches must reach out to Adventist students on nearby public campuses. Perhaps members could "adopt" a college student and invite him or her to church or to their homes for the Sabbath. In this way, students at public colleges would still have an Adventist environment to draw on for spiritual support and encouragement.

Students at Risk

Unfortunately, AVANCE revealed that not only are Adventist Latino youth in non-Adventist colleges or universities more likely to abandon traditional Adventist standards, but they are also more likely to engage in certain at-risk behaviors such as premarital sex, theft, drinking alcohol, smoking, and other forms of drug abuse.

Among the respondents who were enrolled in non-Adventist colleges, 56 percent had attended a party where people were drinking, while only 24 percent of those in Adventist colleges had done so. Not only that, but 26 percent of Adventist Latino students in non-Adventist institutions had drunk alcohol, and 12 percent had participated in binge drinking (consuming five or more alcoholic drinks in a row). By comparison, only 5 percent of Hispanic Adventist students at Adventist schools had drunk alcohol, and none had participated in binge drinking.

Latino students at Adventist schools were also slightly less likely to use tobacco. Only 5 percent had ever smoked or chewed tobacco, compared to 9 percent of those in non-Adventist schools.

These findings on the protection against at-risk behaviors provides some of the strongest evidence that at the college level, Adventist education makes a difference.

A majority (68 percent) of both the youth and adult respondents felt that Adventist schools provided a better education than public schools.

Summary

Does Adventist education really make a difference? The findings of the AVANCE research project suggest that it does. Latino Adventists:

- Have a positive attitude toward Adventist education. They believe it is better than public school education and consider it an important goal for their families.
- Are more likely to have a graduate or postgraduate degree if they have studied in Adventist schools.
- Would choose to attend an Adventist college or university if given the opportunity.
- Feel that teachers and staff are warmer and more caring at Adventist schools.
- Are less likely to fear violence when attending Adventist schools.
- Are less likely to drop out of an Adventist institution than a public one.
- Are more likely to understand the concept of grace—that there is nothing we can do to earn salvation—if they attend Adventist schools.

Latino Adventist youth who attend Adventist colleges or universities are:

- More mature in their faith.
- More loyal to the church.
- Less likely to wear jewelry, eat meat, drink caffeine, watch television, or break the Sabbath.
- Less likely to engage in at-risk behavior.

Adult Latinos who attended Adventist educational institutions are:

- More committed to some Adventist standards.
- More grace-centered in their understanding of the gospel.
- More likely to have professional careers with higher incomes.

Recommendations

Adventism provides a strong environment and culture that affirms the value of education. Churches in large urban settings, where most of the NAD Hispanic congregations are located, should seek to provide

denominational schools that help Adventist ethnic minorities develop their intellectual gifts and prepare them for entrance into and acquisition of a higher education. This will enable them to become civic, cultural, educational, and religious leaders in their communities.

The church's institutions, at all levels, must take seriously the opportunities inherent in the dramatic increase of the Hispanic community by doing the following:

- Make Adventist education—on every level—an affordable option for Latino Adventists by providing creative funding opportunities and encouraging churches to cooperate in sponsoring Adventist schools.
- Develop marketing strategies targeted at Latino Adventists.
- Hire qualified Latinos at all levels as teachers and educational administrators.
- Promote the development of effective bilingual/ESL programs in Adventist schools.
- Encourage pastors, churches, and families to collaborate in finding ways to increase the enrollment of Hispanic children in church schools and to emphasize the need for learning at all levels.

With such clear benefits from Adventist education, the church educational system has much for which to praise God, but it also has a much greater responsibility to ensure that all church members have an opportunity to experience these blessings. The authors hope that the AVANCE research findings presented here will aid denominational leaders and educators as they seek to provide the best Christian education possible for all the children of our church. ☞

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