



CASCADE POLICY INSTITUTE

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## Summary

Both nationwide and in Oregon, Latino students score far below their white classmates on standardized tests and are also much more likely to drop out before finishing school. Latino parents understand that education is one of the keys to achieving the American Dream, but our public school system is failing their children. School vouchers are an effective, empowering and democratic reform that will help Latino families achieve their dreams for their children's futures.

Word count: 590

***“School vouchers are the most effective tool to reform our school system and close the racial gap in education.”***

## Public School Monopoly Fails Latino Children

*by Joel Campos-Alvis*

I am from an extremely poor neighborhood in Peru. Most houses lacked electricity and running water. A dedicated teacher in my neighborhood, tired of government bureaucracy and recognizing the need for quality education, founded a private school. Our classes were held at the teacher's humble home. Rainwater leaked through the roof and some classrooms lacked doors and windows. Tuition was less than \$5 a month, which was waived for the many that could not afford to pay it.

In spite of these hardships, Mr. Maldonado's students have repeatedly represented Peru in the International Mathematics World Olympics, winning a total of eight medals. They have also won eight times the Best Performing High School Award at the Classical Music Festival in Lima.

With all their material advantages, schools in the United States do not serve Latino students nearly so well. According to the Oregon Department of Education, the Latino dropout rate in 2003 was 9.1%, nearly three times that of non-Hispanic white students. Dr. Abigail Thernstrom, senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute and member of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission, reported in the Spring, 2004 *Cascade Update* that, nationwide, the average Hispanic 17-year-old scores below 80 percent of his white classmates on the National Assessment for Educational Progress.

Latinos' below-average economic status is reflected in their poor access to non-public education. According to Hispanic Council for Reform and Educational Options, while 12% of non-Hispanic children nationwide attended non-public schools in 2000, only 6% of Latino children did.

These troubling statistics do not only reflect the harm done to individual, underperforming students by our failing education system. Between 1990 and 2000, Oregon has doubled the percentage of its population that is Hispanic. Oregon must reform the way it provides public education if it does not wish to

host an underclass of Latino citizens unable to improve their lot through education.

School vouchers are the most effective tool to reform our school system and close the racial gap in education. Vouchers allow talented students to attend schools that challenge them and allow underperforming students to find schools that better meet their needs. Most importantly, vouchers return control of children's educations to those who both know their needs best and are most likely to have their best interests at heart: their parents.

Fears that vouchers will segregate kids racially or shuffle disadvantaged kids off into badly performing schools are not well founded. In fact, school choice would likely lead to much greater diversity within schools. Because public schools currently draw students only from one geographic area, all-white and all-minority schools are a heartbreaking reality. And a poor child who lives in a neighborhood serviced by a bad school is simply out of luck, no matter how gifted he is. With school choice, students of every background will be able to attend the schools that serve them best.

Since I moved to Oregon ten years ago, I have heard many advocates for improved education say that the government does not spend enough money. I ask those people, Why give more money to a system that is failing, and that is failing for poor and minority children especially?

Latino parents understand that education is one of the keys to achieving the American Dream. Education cannot be improved by putting more money into the system that fails so many Latino children. Parents must be able to make the choices that are best for their own children. School vouchers are an effective, empowering and democratic reform that will help Latino families achieve their dreams for their children's futures.

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*Joel Campos-Alvis is a research intern for Cascade Policy Institute, a Portland, Oregon think tank.*

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