

# **A Proactive and Preemptive Approach to Raising Latino Achievement in the “New South”**

Bernadette Musetti, Paul Matthews, Michael Padilla, Elida Perez-Knapp  
The University of Georgia

## **Abstract**

Georgia is experiencing some of the nation’s most dramatic demographic changes, including the fastest growing Latino population and the lowest school completion rates for Latinos in the country. Educational institutions at all levels statewide are struggling to keep pace with meeting the needs of this changing population. This session describes the ways in which a major research university is proactively taking the lead in raising Latino achievement in the state of Georgia, through multiple programs leading to improved professional development.

## **Introduction: Educational Challenges**

Nationally, Latino K-12 educational issues have been of growing interest to educational researchers (e.g., Garcia, 2001; González, Huerta-Macias, & Tinajero, 2001; Griego Jones & Fuller, 2003; Padrón, Waxman, & Rivera, 2002; Reyes, Scribner, & Scribner, 1999; Slavin & Calderón, 2001); however, most of this research has focused primarily on parts of the country with long-established Latino communities. The education of Latinos in parts of the U.S. that have not traditionally had large Spanish speaking populations is also of growing interest and importance (e.g., Wainer, 2004). Georgia is a destination point for what some have referred to as the “new Latino diaspora” (Wortham, Murillo, & Hamann, 2002) and differs in significant ways from many other states where there have been significant Latino populations for decades (e.g., Bohon, Macpherson, & Atilés, 2005). In Georgia, for instance, over 106,000 students identified as Hispanic were served statewide in 2004 (about 14% of the total P-12 population), compared with fewer than 24,000 in 1994-95. Such drastic increases in the Latino student population mean that schools, administrators and teachers must adapt to a changing work environment in order to continue to meet their students’ educational and social needs. However, school administrators and teachers are often uncertain of how to maintain their efficacy when faced with a changing student population (e.g., Bohon, Macpherson, & Atilés, 2005; Flaxman & Passow, 1995; Stodolsky & Grossman, 2000). Educators across the state, and indeed the region (e.g., Wainer, 2004) are struggling to meet the needs of this population, which includes needs related to language, interrupted formal schooling, literacy, cultural expectations, poverty, and other factors that teachers may not feel prepared for.

Recently, some researchers have concluded “the immediate future looks dim for Georgia’s Latinos” (Bohon et al., 2005, p. 56), since “[e]ducators in Southern school districts are not prepared to address the changes in their student population” (Wainer,

2004, p. 12), and Georgia is “missing an historic opportunity to create a public education system that can break the national cycle of disappointing Hispanic academic achievement scores and high dropout rates” (Wainer, 2004, p. 35). However, there are in fact systematic efforts in place to help ameliorate these dire predictions, which can both serve as a counterpoint to balance some of these concerns, and a potential model for other states facing similar demographic shifts. In this paper, we focus on a constellation of university-based professional development initiatives helping prepare teachers and schools to work more effectively with Latino students and families.

### CLASE: Weaving Strands and Planting Seeds

During the past three years, multiple efforts from the College of Education at the University of Georgia have focused on teacher professional development and district/school level change to meet the educational needs of Latinos. With initial grant funding from a private foundation headquartered in Georgia, the university established in January 2003 a Center for Latino Achievement and Success in Education (CLASE), with three full-time staff, numerous graduate assistants, and collaboration from other university faculty and staff. CLASE serves as the catalyst for many of the Latino-oriented P-12 professional development initiatives underway across the state, including team-based training, coursework, international experiences, state-wide conferences, and special projects with individual schools and systems.

#### Team-Based Professional Development

Annually, teams of 6-12 teachers, administrators and other school and community stakeholders apply to work with CLASE; this team-based model encourages thinking across content areas and provides a critical mass to sustain the reform efforts at the particular school or district. After initial site visits, needs/resource assessments and focus groups with each team, CLASE conducts annual week long residential conferences centered on Latino education; the first two years included some 24 teams from numerous districts statewide, comprising more than 200 teachers from 18 school systems.

The conferences combine speakers, workshops, and facilitated team time, resulting in context specific plans of action for each school for improving the academic and social climate for Latino students and families. Top educational researchers and practitioners from across the country present and offer invaluable assistance to teams as they prepare their respective action plans for more effectively working with Latino students. Implementation of the plans is facilitated by university partners throughout the academic year, and is supplemented with two one-day follow-up conferences. Such comprehensive, sustained, high quality professional development and technical assistance is unique in the state, especially in terms of the focus on Latino achievement.

While each of the 24 teams worked on separate action plans, several common themes have emerged. For example, almost all the teams included four elements: school climate, professional development, innovative programs, and family engagement. Initiatives to make school climate more welcoming for Latinos have included creating orientation videos in Spanish, increasing Spanish-language and bilingual signage, morning

announcements, and language use in classrooms, as well as seeking additional bilingual and bicultural staff members. Successful professional development initiatives have included offering “Spanish for Teachers” classes, taking staff on home visits and bus tours of Latino neighborhoods, cross-cultural sensitivity training for secretarial and front-office staff, and in-service faculty days with expert teachers and nationally known educational consultants. Schools and districts have also encouraged teachers to participate in international experiences, and in some cases have even adopted sister-school relationships with Mexican schools.

Many teams have also been successful in implementing new programs oriented towards Latino educational success. These include after-school Spanish literacy programs, sheltered instruction of core content courses, inclusion rather than pull-out for ESOL students, extended instructional time (before and after school and on Saturdays), enhanced career and technical education programs, newcomers’ centers, inclusive extracurricular activities, and more. Finally, teams have worked to foster more active parent engagement and involvement, through efforts such as hosting parent meetings and PTOs with child care, interpretation, and at Latino-populated apartment complexes or neighborhoods. Georgia schools have hired bilingual liaisons, host parent information sessions on topics ranging from immigration to driver’s licenses to college fairs, conduct family journaling and parent literacy programs, and are actively including Latino parents as leaders in school advisory boards, PTOs, and other venues.

Participant teams have achieved substantial success in moving their schools towards becoming welcoming environments which are appropriately meeting the needs of Latino students and families. One principal working with CLASE commented, for instance, “Our involvement in CLASE has dramatically affected our knowledge base about working with our Latino students, as well as helped us with our plan implementation. The quality of national speakers and resources that we have gained through our involvement would have been completely beyond our reach without the partnership.” Another district-level administrator noted, “Teachers and administrators are getting excited! There are changes in attitudes” due to their participation in this professional development. Participants also indicated high levels of impact of CLASE training the fall following the summer institutes; 88% said that participation in CLASE programs has had a large or medium influence on their teaching; 88% indicated a large or medium influence on their attitude; and 85% noted a large or medium influence for their preparedness for working with Latino students (n=126).

#### Multiple Initiatives to Help Teachers

In addition to its primary work with these school- and district-based teams, CLASE has also systematically worked to address other identified needs for educators of Latino students in Georgia.

#### Responding to school district needs.

Georgia’s school districts are highly disparate in terms of their educational needs and resources, and range from very small to very large districts. Recognizing these differences in specific needs and in the systems’ ability to provide solutions, CLASE has

undertaken several special projects for Georgia school systems, many of which have been funded via federal improving teacher quality grants. For instance, CLASE provided a year-long trainer of trainers model to improve text-based reading strategies for mainstream teachers with diverse students in four elementary schools in a largely Latino district. Two grant-funded projects have focused on improving ability to “shelter” mainstream content-area courses, redesigning the delivery at middle and high schools to make them accessible to students who are still acquiring English. Another project entailed working with teachers in multicultural literature groups using Latino literature, providing increased resources and knowledge of multicultural literature at school sites. CLASE staff have also provided support in helping local educational agencies across the state create and gain approval for in-house English to Speakers of Other Languages endorsement programs.

### Courses.

Based on recommendations from a task force convened by the state university system’s Board of Regents to study Latino issues and identify ways to address critical need areas, funding was allocated to offer teachers professional development in English to Speakers of Other Languages. Through this program, CLASE provided on-site and on-line versions of the three courses required for the ESOL add-on endorsement in nine cohorts across the state over a two-year period. The grant funding covered all costs for participant teachers, and some 200 in-service teachers statewide completed the 150-hour program of methods and materials, language acquisition, and cultural diversity issues to receive their ESOL endorsement. Though the funding for this program has ended, teachers can still take advantage of on-line graduate-level coursework available through one of the academic departments of the college.

To help encourage the integration of Latino educational issues into coursework for pre-service teachers and others at the University, CLASE has also created two new courses. One, entitled “Issues in Latino Education,” is an overview of the important issues, themes, research, and best practices for Latino education nationally, state-wide, and locally. The second is a service-learning course that provides students academic credit for tutoring local Latino students through several established programs, and includes critical reflection of both educational and social realities lived by these students.

### International experiences.

Georgia’s educator work-force is primarily white, middle class, female, and monolingual. To enhance teacher understanding of Latino cultures and to allow them to experience what is for many their first international experience, CLASE has provided grant-funded opportunities for educators to spend two weeks in either Mexico or Costa Rica. Participants learn about language, culture, and educational systems, visit schools, interact with host educators, take part in home-stays, and create a project to implement upon their return to Georgia.

These are frequently transformational experiences for educators, leading to greater empathy and understanding of students’ needs. A participant in 2004 noted, “I have a better understanding of the language barrier that Latino children face when they don't

“speak English.” Another commented, “I am a changed person internally. This will change how I view my own life... and will subsequently make me a teacher who is grateful to have new books, hot running water, and students in a classroom with 4 computers, a TV, VCR and other resources. I hope to share this... with all of my peers.”

### Conferences.

CLASE has also identified areas of need regarding professional development for school personnel other than teachers. In 2004, CLASE held the state’s first ever bilingual family/community liaison networking and advocacy conference, providing crucial professional development for these front-line school personnel. CLASE also sponsored a conference for school counselors of Latino students. Plans are underway for follow-ups to these conferences as well as a professional development conference focusing on Latino educational issues for administrators and a conference on effective support for reading for English language learners.

### Leveraging Resources

To maximize CLASE’s impact, one strategy has been to leverage resources whenever possible. For example, one of the sites for the ESOL endorsement coursework was chosen to be the same as the initiative focusing on “sheltered” or specially designed content courses, to help maximize the impact of the training. CLASE is based within the office of educator partnerships at the College of Education, where several staff and faculty work on multiple, related initiatives. In 2005, for example, our week-long summer institute will be held in conjunction with that of another grant-funded reform initiative targeting math and science teaching, and several of the workshops and speakers will be “crossover” sessions focused on improving math and science for Latinos. CLASE also routinely networks with and supports initiatives undertaken by organizations such as MALDEF, the Atlanta-based Latin American Association, and other key players in Latino education across the state and region. Finally, CLASE’s website and list-serves help disseminate relevant information across the state to the end-users who may not have the time to seek out available resources and publications on their own.

### Planting the Seeds...

In its first two years, CLASE has worked with approximately 14 graduate students from a broad cross-section of educational backgrounds, all united by their interest in Latino education. An endowment provided to the university from a private foundation, coupled with matching university funding, allows CLASE to support 6-7 graduate students per year for the foreseeable future; these students gain valuable hands-on experience with working with educators and students across the state, implementing and evaluating educational initiatives focused on improving Latino achievement. Whether these students choose to return to K-12 classrooms or to careers in higher education, they will be well prepared to support Latino educational success and to spread their knowledge to a broader audience. An additional endowment, supplemented with state funding, is supporting the hiring of an Endowed Chair in Latino Teacher Education, providing a key faculty member to promote Latino educational issues in the College and to lead an ambitious research agenda on the educational status of Latinos in the new South.

## Conclusions

While it is true that substantial barriers to educational equity and access remain for Latinos in Georgia and in other newly-Latino parts of the country, we believe that systematic efforts to enhance teachers' and school personnel's preparation for working with Latino students and families can have both a short-term and a long-term impact on improving these students' educational outcomes. Initiatives such as CLASE, which weave together funding from private foundations, federal grants, statewide programs, and university support, help provide a proactive agent for aiding teachers and schools address needs that otherwise can seem overwhelming.

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### Author Contact Information:

Dr. Bernadette Musetti, [bernadet@uga.edu](mailto:bernadet@uga.edu), 706-542-3830

Dr. Paul Matthews, [pmatthew@uga.edu](mailto:pmatthew@uga.edu), 706-542-3368

Elida Perez-Knapp, [eknapp@uga.edu](mailto:eknapp@uga.edu), 706-542-8168

Website: [www.coe.uga.edu/clase](http://www.coe.uga.edu/clase)