

EDUCATION NEWS

Park City schools make large strides to close the opportunity gap



by Carolyn Webber Alder

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In Park City School District's summer education program, older students visit the younger kids to help them practice reading. The program is part of the district's initiative to provide extra resources to its Latino population and close the opportunity gap.

In a glass-walled office on Park City High School's second floor, inspirational quotes in Spanish and photos of Hispanic icons like Dolores Huerta plaster the interior.

The images are visible to students passing through the hallways. It's an intentional move by the woman who works inside. She knows firsthand how important it is to see one's culture represented when walking through school halls as a teenager.

The woman sitting behind the desk is Rebeca Gonzalez, program manager of Bright Futures, an emerging program that aims to prepare Latino students for college. After graduating from the high school five years ago, she has her eyes set on closing the opportunity gap for students in Park City who, like her, are first-generation college students from low-income families.

The opportunity gap is the disparity in academic performance and access to resources between affluent students and those from underprivileged families. It's apparent in Park City School District's Latino students, who typically have lower grades, test scores and graduation rates compared to their peers. In the wealthiest



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town in the state, the gap between students graduating from Ivy League colleges and those who can't afford college is profound. PCHS scores in the 97th percentile of Utah schools based on its students' overall test scores and grades, for instance, but Latino and economically disadvantaged students fall 6 percent below average state scores.

Gonzalez is not taking on the opportunity gap in Park City School District alone. She is one of a collection of people who say it is time to find solutions to social inequalities in Park City, though she also knows better than anyone that the district has made progress toward closing the gap. Since the leadership group Latinos in Action launched at the high school 10 years ago, the Latino graduation rate has leapt from approximately 50 percent to 85 percent. Last year, the Park City Board of Education took what advocates called a significant step by removing academic fees so students have equal access to classes.

But teachers, principals and district administrators know there is still plenty of work to do to ensure every student in Park City has all they need to succeed.

Teachers in action

Social equity has been a buzzword in Park City for the last couple years, particularly after the municipal government deemed it a critical priority last spring.

Anna Williams, who teaches English and Latinos in Action at the high school, is glad to see the community-wide shift. When she first came to the school district 15 years ago, she said phrases like “social equity” and “the opportunity gap” were not heard in Park City.

She became aware of disparities among the Latino population while teaching English as a second language. She said Latino students rarely took Advanced Placement classes, and they were often unaware what the ACT exam was, let alone prepared to take it. About 30 percent of the students in her ESL classes were graduating high school, she said.

She knew she had to do something to boost the Latino graduation rate.

You create opportunities for students to excel and they will excel.

— Anna Williams, Park City High School

She heard about the nationwide program Latinos in Action, and she pitched the idea of starting a chapter at the school. Leaders dismissed her idea, but Williams was persistent. Tom VanGorder, a former associate superintendent, eventually gave Williams the go-ahead for one pilot year.

Williams started the first semester with 14 students in the class, but she ended the year with seven. The students could not maintain a high enough GPA to remain in the program, she said.

Teachers and administrators tried to coax Williams into being more lenient about

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Thieves Guild Cide... | Salt Lake City, UT

OCT
10

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OCT
10

Tablado Flamenco Dance Company presents ...
Alliance Theater a... | Salt Lake City, UT



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16

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the GPA standard, but she was adamant that the program needed to set a high enough bar that it meant something for the students who qualified. Now, there are 32 students in the program and a waiting list of teens hoping to get in. Dozens of LIA alumni have graduated from the high school and continued their education beyond.

One of the students in the first LIA cohort earned a master's degree in counseling and works at a school, and another is currently studying to take the MCAT and go to medical school, Williams said.

She said the program has been “instrumental in contributing to an equitable school” because it teaches the members that they are capable and worthy of respect and dignity.

“You create opportunities for students to excel and they will excel,” Williams said. “This is not unique to Latino students, this is for all.”

With Williams' and other teachers' efforts, Latino graduation rates rose year over year. Now, the graduation rate for Latino students is just shy of 90 percent. Since the LIA program started, all of its members have earned high school diplomas.

The program creates role models for youth in the district, too. Williams said elementary kids, both native Spanish and non-native Spanish speakers, tell her they dream of being in LIA one day. Ecker Hill Middle School and Treasure Mountain Junior High adopted their own versions of the leadership program once administrators saw how powerful it can be for Latino youth.



Latinos in Action at Park City High School allows Latino students to hold leadership positions in their school. Anna Williams, who started the program 10 years ago, says it has encouraged students to work hard in high school and beyond.

Unified effort

While individual teachers like Williams were promoting equity in their own classes and schools, the district itself was adapting to its growing Latino population. The district hired its first bilingual specialist about 20 years ago, said Eric Esquivel, the district's Latino community relations specialist. The bilingual specialist translated documents and interpreted for parents across the district.

The district hired more specialists over time, placing them in the elementary schools so they could translate during parent-teacher conferences. Now, there are

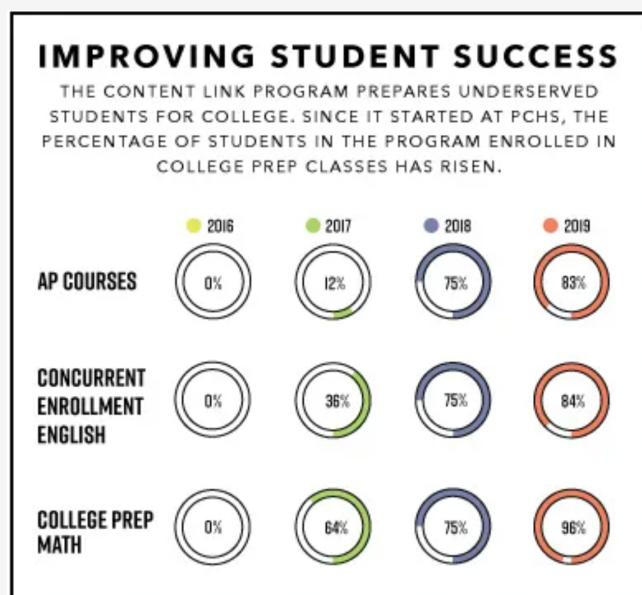
Latino outreach coordinators inside each of the schools. They help Spanish-speaking parents communicate with teachers and principals about their children's grades or important announcements.

Esquivel said including parents in their children's education is critical if the district wants to eliminate the opportunity gap. The outreach coordinators teach parents how to check their children's grades online, and Esquivel wants to implement a home visit program for educators to visit students' homes and discuss ways to improve the academic environment outside the classroom.

To reach Latino parents, the district has a Spanish-version of its district-wide texting group and Facebook page. Translators attend parent meetings so Spanish-speaking parents are aware of the opportunities available to them. At most of the schools, signs and posters are in both Spanish and English.

The district also reduced barriers at the high school by introducing fee waivers for concurrent enrollment classes, the ACT and Advanced Placement exams, which cost about \$95 per test. Last year, the Park City Board of Education decided to pay for all academic fees so students can skip the often uncomfortable fee waiver process.

Roger Arbabi, principal of the high school, said there are more students taking Advanced Placement classes and passing the tests every year. Those stats are, in part, thanks to Dream Big, a program started by Melanie Moffat that pre-teaches AP curriculum over the summer so students enter the courses with the vocabulary and skills to pass the test. It is part of the school's Content Link program, which encourages Latino students to take college preparation courses in high school.



The district also offers programs such as English language classes to adults, and it partners with the Park City Education Foundation to provide after-school and preschool programs that benefit all students, including Latinos.

Bob Edmiston, principal of McPolin Elementary School, is particularly proud of the reading intervention program at the school. Almost half of McPolin's students are Hispanic, and many of them have difficulty reading either because English is their second language or their parents do not have time to read with them at home.

Edmiston is an advocate for the expanding intervention program. Reading, he said, is a foundational skill that greatly impacts the trajectory of a student's life.

“Those students don’t have those same opportunities to come as prepared, so that’s where we have to fill that gap,” he said.

Abby McNulty, executive director of the Park City Education Foundation, says the foundation spends between \$1 million and \$1.5 million annually to fund roughly 100 programs at the district. All of them, she said, address social equity in some fashion.

Other nonprofits pitch in, too. Diego Zegarra, social equity director for the Park City Community Foundation, said the Christian Center of Park City, Holy Cross Ministries and the People’s Health Clinic aid underserved students. When students don’t have the proper gear to play a sport or appropriate clothes for the winter months, nonprofits provide them.

Women in the community create college baskets for graduating seniors, complete with bath towels and bed sheets that fit on a college mattress, Williams said. One resident provides a scholarship specifically for undocumented students. Together, all the efforts make a difference, she said.

“We are very, very explicit about making sure that every single student has an opportunity to participate equally. And I truly believe that, because I’ve seen how far we’ve come,” Williams said. “I can’t say enough about the community, and the ways in which they’ve stepped up.”

But the district still faces major hurdles as it confronts social equity, and it has little control over most of the obstacles.

The majority of Latino families are immigrants from Central and South America who came to Park City to work in the hospitality industry. They take low-paying positions, frequently working two or three jobs to afford expensive housing costs. Multiple families often cram into one apartment or home, Esquivel said.

Edmiston said many parents lack the time to read with their kids or take them to the library because they are focused on getting food on the table. In the families’ homes, there are sometimes no books or any printed documents for the students to practice reading, he said.

Arbabi said Latino students account for a disproportionately high percentage of absences at the high school. Sometimes, they miss class because they are working or taking care of their younger siblings at home.

He said many students with poor attendance habits develop them in middle school. Working parents often remain unaware of their students ditching school.

Esquivel said attendance problems always spike when officials with Immigration and Customs Enforcement come to Park City, or when there are rumors of them coming. Students with parents living in the country illegally do not go to school for fear their parents will be gone when they return.

For lots of immigrant families in Park City, deportation is a serious fear, and it has become worse amid the backdrop of the Trump administration’s rhetoric about illegal immigration, Esquivel said.

“What happens in the community really impacts student learning,” Gonzalez said.

Outreach coordinators and advocates like Gonzalez serve as liaisons between the

Career coordinators and advocates like Gonzalez serve as liaisons between the families and the schools so teachers understand a family's circumstances. When they know more about a student's home life, they are better equipped to work with the student in class, Esquivel said.

"If you have an inattentive student, is it because they have a learning disability or is it because there is a social-emotional issue going on at home?" he said.

A brighter future

Gonzalez benefited from the district's efforts to lift up Latino students. She was president of LIA when she graduated from PCHS in 2014. She then went to the University of Utah, where she will graduate this spring with a degree in secondary education. She said her success would not have been possible without LIA and support from her mentors in the district.

However, her success is an exception rather than the norm. Gonzalez said her LIA peers left the high school with scholarships in hand and big plans to graduate college. But, over the years, she has seen very few make it to the finish line.

Gonzalez said many of her fellow LIA students drop out of college due to what she calls "the syndrome." She and her peers feel like outsiders in college, and they lack support systems. Most of all, she said Latinos are not well represented in the ranks of professors, the student body or among other university leaders.

"When you don't see yourself there on campus, you are like, 'Well, maybe I should go back to where I see the representation, which is the service industry,'" she said. "In the last 15 years, I only know eight students who have graduated from Park City High School who are Latino, first-generation, who have a college degree. That's so low."

During her second year in college, Gonzalez frequently knocked on Williams' door seeking advice on scholarships, finances and juggling work and school. She thought about dropping out multiple times, but watching her sister put on a cap and gown and receive her diploma a couple years prior inspired her. After reaffirming her goal to complete college, Gonzalez helped start a club focused on closing the opportunity gap, this time all the way through college.

In 2016, the district kicked off the Bright Futures program, which provides first-generation students with mentors and other resources to help them receive a post-high school degree. Gonzalez teaches students networking skills and sets them up in a cohort. They are told to use each other as a support system to answer questions and share frustrations or successes with over the following four years.

"What Bright Futures is doing to close the opportunity gap is having students have a college degree, for students who are just like myself," she said.

She said the program also educates the Latino community about the importance of a college degree, and it encourages families to get involved in the college application and preparation process. Growing up, Gonzalez did not understand the value of college. Williams, she said, was the first person to tell her she would go to college. She wants Latino parents and students to have conversations about college long before it is time to apply.

Gonzalez is set to graduate from the University of Utah in a few weeks, and she is

Gonzalez is set to graduate from the University of Utah in a few weeks, and she is inviting Bright Futures students and their families to witness it. For families who have never stepped foot on a college campus, she hopes the ceremony will open their eyes to the options their students have if they get their diplomas.

On May 31, the first cohort of 23 Bright Futures students will graduate high school while marching toward the goal of completing college. As the students receive acceptance letters for colleges and scholarships, Gonzalez is thrilled, and a little nervous, to see how they perform.

She said it will be a big learning curve as the students use their networking skills to find mentors and support one another in college. She hopes she has equipped them with the preparation and determination they need to get through, and that they then pass the skills onto the next generation.

Cris Mora, a senior, is one of the students in the first Bright Futures cohort. He plans on attending a Utah college and pursuing a career in nursing.

Mora has been a beneficiary of both Bright Futures and LIA. When he moved from Mexico to Park City as a 9-year-old, the LIA members who volunteered at the school used to read with him.

"I was kind of scared, and seeing these successful-looking high school students helping me meant the world to me," he said. "From then on, I decided I wanted to be in LIA."

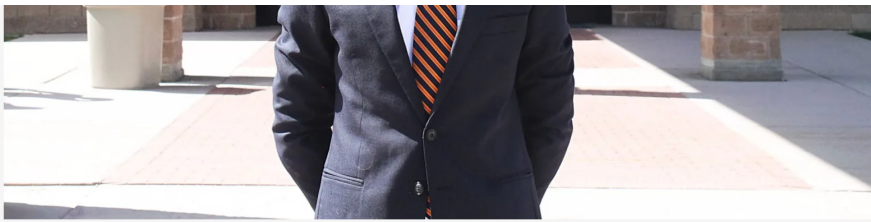
He kept his grades up in the hopes of being accepted into the program one day. Now, he is the co-president of LIA. He said the program helped him develop public speaking and presentation skills, and it boosted his overall confidence in school.

Through his involvement in Bright Futures, he said he learned about college applications and scholarship opportunities. He has also discovered a group of students who celebrate with each other when someone gets accepted into college, or cheers one another up when one gets a rejection letter.

He said he will need that support as he goes to college. His parents plan to move back to Mexico to be with all his siblings in the next year and a half. He said his family is supportive of his education, even though they do not have the knowledge to help him navigate college applications. Looking back on the last few years, he realizes how much he relied on LIA and Bright Futures to get him where he is today.

"It is creating social equity, I honestly believe that," he said. "I wouldn't have been able to figure it out all by myself, and my parents would not have been able to help."





Cris Mora, a senior at Park City High School, says programs like Latinos in Action and Bright Futures helped him succeed in his schooling and prepare for a college education.

The road ahead

Those working to level the playing field in Park City know it is an ongoing battle that will take a community effort to solve. For that reason, the municipal government hired the Park City Community Foundation to uncover the root causes of social inequalities and implement systems and programs to address them.

At the school level, Williams said more change will come as teachers and administrators continue to remove barriers between students. She said there is still an “us vs. them” sentiment at the school, and she wants teachers to combat it by acting swiftly and fairly if they hear any name-calling or hate speech in their classrooms or in the hallways.

Last year, some students called out their peers after hate speech against Latino students was posted on social media. Williams hopes to see more students sticking up for others.

She continues to push for equality of representation, too. If Latinos make up 20 percent of the district’s student population, they should also make up 20 percent of the honor roll, 20 percent of the sports teams and 20 percent of the AP and concurrent enrollment student population, she argues.

I want to create an army where students have a college degree, have the tools to be a professional and can contribute back to society.

— Rebeca Gonzalez, Bright Futures

For Gonzalez, who grew up in Park City and saw few role models that looked like her, she wants to see more Latinos in positions of power. She is proud to see that things are trending in the right direction. Her sister, Dalia Gonzalez, is the clinic coordinator for the People’s Health Clinic. Zegarra, who is leading the city’s charge for social equity, emigrated from Peru, and Max Ventura of the Christian Center has Latino roots.

One necessary change, she said, is to get more Latinos teaching in the schools.

In her graduating class from the University of Utah’s College of Education, she said she is one of just a few Latinas out of 25 graduates.

In the cohort set to graduate next year, she said the number of Latinos is even lower. Having teachers who can relate to their students and understand their experiences makes a big difference, she said.

In order to get more Latino role models in Park City, she said Latinos must shift their mindset about the opportunities available to them. They need to recognize the importance of education, especially a college education, and not let any barriers stop them.

She wants to empower Latino families to become engaged in the community and share their knowledge with others. Currently, she said, families reach out to her and Zegarra when they have concerns about housing or immigration papers. She is happy to be available, but she wants more people to step up.



"Those students don't have those same opportunities to come as prepared, so that's where we have to fill that gap." Bob Edmiston, McPolin Elementary School

"If we had an army, how much more successful would we be?" she said. "I want to create an army where students have a college degree, have the tools to be a professional and can contribute back to society."

The Board of Education and Park City Education Foundation are also looking to boost social equity as they outline their strategic and master plans. McNulty, the head of the Education Foundation, said the organization is currently deciding its own strategic plan, and the big question mark is how to sustain all of the programs in the event of an economic downturn.

She is glad to see the entire community looking into social equity, because she said everyone needs a common vision in order to incite change. But, she said, changes also need to happen at the state level. The amount of funding the state provides to the district makes it difficult for the foundation to focus on social equity when it is also providing money to pay for things like art programs at the elementary schools and band at the high school.

Those who are involved with social equity are eager to get the entire community involved, whether that means talking about issues and solutions around the dinner table or joining nonprofits and other organizations pushing for change.

But after seeing how far Park City has come in the last 15 years, teachers and nonprofit leaders are hopeful.

With the words "Sí se puede" on the wall beside her, Gonzalez beams with

confidence when she says, “Ponemos nuestro granito de arena,” a phrase meaning “We all do our part.” Together, she hopes, Parkites can make a collective difference.

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