

By Patricia Gándara

**Abstract:** *Enabling communities to reap the benefits of the U.S.-Mexico commercial relationship requires creating viable pathways to a successful adulthood for binational youth. In California, we are failing to provide educational opportunities to Latinos, who now make up over half of the K-12 student population. And accelerated return migration has resulted in unprecedented waves of young people leaving California classrooms for Mexico, where they struggle to access education. These young people are especially well-suited to participate in the cross-border economy facilitated by NAFTA. But educational and workforce development policies must be made central to the current renegotiation if we are to create the human capital needed to sustain and grow our economies.*

Nothing is more essential to North American competitiveness than the education of our youth and hence the skill level of the workforce. It is therefore extraordinary that so little is mentioned about this topic in the discussions on NAFTA. Both the present well-being and the future of the U.S. and Mexico are highly dependent on how well we educate *the students we share*.

As of 2014, about 7.5 million children living in the United States were the children of Mexican immigrants.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the best data available tells us that there are at least half a million U.S.-born citizen children of Mexican parents currently living and trying to integrate into Mexican schools, often without sufficient literacy in Spanish to do so successfully.<sup>14</sup> This number is known to be an underestimate because it does not include youth of high school or college age, where some of the greatest obstacles to accessing schooling occur.

Taken together, there are millions of students that the two nations share and they are receiving an inadequate education on both sides of the border. To the extent that these young people fail to acquire an education that prepares

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<sup>13</sup> Child trends. 2014. *Immigrant Children: Indicators of Child and Youth Well-Being*.

[https://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/110\\_Immigrant\\_Children.pdf](https://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/110_Immigrant_Children.pdf), Appendix 1.

<sup>14</sup> Jacobo-Suárez, Mónica. 2017. "Migración de retorno y políticas de reintegración al sistema educativo mexicano." In J. Durand, C. Heredia and J. Shiavon, eds., *Perspectivas Migratorias IV*. Tijuana/Mexico City: COLEF-CIDE.

them to participate meaningfully in the economy of the nation in which they reside, innovation is stymied, productivity is held back, and economies falter. In parts of the United States where Mexican immigrant children are concentrated, such as the Los Angeles to San Diego corridor in Southern California, the average education level of the population is actually declining, as the mostly white and better-educated generation disappears and the new generation, largely of Mexican origin, takes its place.

American schools are relatively effective at teaching basic English literacy to immigrant children, yet Mexican-origin children fare poorly in U.S. schools by any measure. Barely a quarter (26 percent) of Latino<sup>15</sup> students reach proficiency in math in fourth grade compared with half (51 percent) of white students and two-thirds (65 percent) of Asian-American students, and the gaps increase as the students move up grades.<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately, proficiency in math for Mexican-origin students in early grades is a powerful predictor of later educational attainment.<sup>17</sup>

In 2006 only 61% of Latinos in the U.S. were graduating from high school with their classmates, and yet by 2016 this had climbed to 76%, an astounding increase that suggests sound educational policies can have a rapid and dramatic effect. Yet it bears mentioning that still one-quarter is not graduating. A similar increase in college graduation has not occurred, and Latinos remain the least likely of all groups to gain a college degree. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 2015 only 16% of Latinos had earned a BA or higher by age 29, as compared with 66% of Asians and 44% of non-Hispanic Whites. As a result, Latinos face significant barriers to entry in the higher-skilled workforce.

In STEM fields that support innovation, only 9 percent of college degrees go to Latinos, although they comprise nearly one-fourth of the college age population in the U.S.<sup>18</sup> The shortage of college degrees conferred to Latino

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<sup>15</sup> Most data sources combine all Spanish-speaking groups under one category, referred to variously as Hispanic or Latino; however, this is a reasonable proxy for Mexican origin as at least two-thirds of Latinos or Hispanics originate from Mexico.

<sup>16</sup> National Assessment of Educational Progress. 2016. "The Nation's Report Card." National Center for Education Statistics. U.S. Department of Education.

<sup>17</sup> Crosnoe, Robert. 2006. *Mexican Roots, American Schools: Helping Mexican Immigrant Children Succeed*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

<sup>18</sup> Excelencia in Education. 2013. *Finding your Workforce: Latinos in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM)*. <http://www.edexcelencia.org/sites/default/files/FindingYourWorkforce-STEM-2015.pdf>.

students hits especially hard in California, where more than half of all high school graduates are Latino (and about 85% are of Mexican origin<sup>19</sup>). The Public Policy Institute of California projects that California will be 1.1 million college degrees short to fill the anticipated workforce needs for 2030, with tremendous negative implications for the tax revenues and the economic strength of the state.<sup>20</sup> The shortfall in college degrees obviously has profound personal consequences as households see incomes stagnate.

In Baja California there are an estimated 50,000 U.S.-born youth who have recently arrived in Mexico from the U.S.,<sup>21</sup> and will probably seek to return at some point. However, more than half of young people in the region will abandon school before completing the equivalent of a high school education, and very few will go on to college.<sup>22</sup> Those young people who do not complete high school will neither be prepared to succeed in the U.S. or California economies nor will they be able to earn enough to achieve any social mobility in Mexico. Without at least some college, these young people will not be able to contribute to the vast potential for growth of the border economy, with dynamic industry clusters in aerospace and medical devices, among other STEM and R&D intensive industries.

It is clear that the cross-border economic relationship requires its own rules and institutions. And we must think along the same lines in terms of education and workforce development policies and programs for binational youth. Our research shows that binational high school students lack information on educational and professional pathways that will allow them to leverage their bicultural upbringing.<sup>23</sup> Their migration experience makes them ideally suited to participate in the cross-border economic activities that NAFTA enables, but it also puts them at risk of falling out of education. NAFTA agreements must reflect the importance of increasing the education level of the Mexican-origin

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<sup>19</sup> Pew Research Center, Hispanic Trends. 2014. Demographic Portrait of Hispanics in California. <http://www.pewhispanic.org/states/state/ca/>.

<sup>20</sup> Johnson, Hans, Marisol Cuellar Mejia and Sarah Bohn. 2015. *Will California Run Out of College Graduates?* San Francisco: Public Policy Institute of California. <http://www.ppic.org/publication/will-california-run-out-of-college-graduates/>.

<sup>21</sup> Jensen, Bryant, Rebeca Mejía Arauz and Rodrigo Aguilar Zepeda. 2017. "Equitable teaching for returnee children in Mexico." *Sinéctica* 48.

<sup>22</sup> Orfield, Gary and Kfir Mordechay. Forthcoming. *Education, Inequality and the Future of a Great Cross-Border Megalopolis*. Los Angeles: Civil Rights Project, UCLA.

<sup>23</sup> Floca, Melissa, Ana Barbara Mungaray-Moctezuma, Max Matus, Mariana Barragan-Torres, Alfonso Basulto, Zaira Razu Aznar and John Porten. 2017. 2016 Survey on Education and Migration in San Diego and Tijuana: 9th and 10th Graders. [Data file and code book]. La Jolla: Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies.

population on both sides of the border if the updated pact is to be effective at improving the economic conditions across North America.

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