Preface

High school represents a critical time in young lives. During these years, students begin to explore what they want to do and be as adults and the foundation for fulfilling lives and meaningful civic participation is laid. Despite the diligent work of school leaders, educators, and advocates, on average, academic performance in high schools has remained stagnant for decades and achievement and attainment gaps persist between student groups (NCES, 2015). Camille Farrington, in her book, *Failing at School: Lessons for Redesigning Urban High Schools*, argues, "…so many students fail out of school not because of their own flawed characters or intellectual inadequacies, but because high schools were designed in a way that produces widespread failure" (pg. 3). In particular, both graduation rates and dropout rates suggest that urban high schools are not designed to support Latino students who are the least likely to graduate and most likely to dropout of school.

Although the recent trend in graduation rate data is positive and there are fewer "dropout factories," urban high schools still struggle to provide students, and particularly Latino students, with the strong foothold they need to move successfully to postsecondary education and employment (America's Promise Alliance, 2015; Bromberg & Theokas, 2016). We understand high schools that serve students in low-income, urban communities face real challenges, but these public institutions are critically important if we want to change the patterns in the data and the trajectory of young peoples' lives. Excellent high schools can provide sturdy safety nets that reduce the likelihood that Latino students drop out of school, achieve at low levels, and perpetuate cycles of poverty. And, they can also be the force that propels students towards futures they might not have even imagined. As one high student told us,

> One of the teachers that really, really helped me changed who I used to be and become the way I am right now is Mr. Basil. He's always seeing something in me that I guess I never saw in myself. I really appreciate that because I was really rude to him. I had the worst attitude when I was a freshman and a sophomore. Now, I'm going to college... If I had changed schools when I wanted to, I wouldn't be who I am right now.

Or, as another student told us,

> I feel like this high school has prepared me for college and for the outside world. I feel like if I didn't come here, I mean, I'd be completely lost for college. I probably wouldn't have gone to college or anything.

In this book, we profile four excellent high schools that have helped Latino youth (as well as youth from other demographic groups) achieve impressive academic results, as well as strong engagement in co-curricular and extra-curricular areas that broaden student interests and experiences for their future success. Educators in these schools have put structures and supports in place to ensure all students, regardless of race/ethnicity, class, economics, and language background are well prepared upon graduation for a wide variety of postsecondary options. They are not just graduating more students or selecting some students for rigorous learning opportunities; they are providing all students access to a challenging curriculum and caring relationships that help students realize their potential. In particular, we selected these four high schools based on their belief in and success with Latino students who are defying long-standing patterns of low achievement and student disengagement as documented by Gandara and Contreras (2010) and coined the Latino Education Crisis.

The national data are sobering. Too many Latino children in the American school system enter behind and most never catch up. Beginning in pre-school and continuing through high school, Latino students underachieve academically, leading to increasing gaps in postsecondary education and the lowest earnings among all racial/ethnic groups (Carnevale & Fasules, 2017; Education Trust West, 2017; Gandara & Contreas, 2009; Gandara, 2010). This is despite the fact that Latino families have a strong work ethic, an intense desire to succeed, an understanding of the value and utility of education, and a trust and belief in the quality of the American school system (Hill & Torres, 2010; Lopez, 2001; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995). Unfortunately, Latino parents often lack the knowledge and experience in U.S. schools and colleges to guide their children toward postsecondary education and productive careers. For example, U.S. census data shows that more than 40 percent of Latina mothers do not have a high school diploma; and only about 10 percent of Latina mothers have a college degree or higher (Gandara, 2010). Schools are therefore essential; they can offer what parents and communities cannot and fill the gap so that Latino students can achieve their goals. To that point, research has shown school benefits poor children more than middle-class children (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olsen, 1997; Coleman, 1966). Further, Gandara (2010) asserts, "Under the right conditions, schools could conceivably close the gaps for Latino children, but the schools that serve most Latino students today have not met those conditions." (p.26). These four urban high schools have. The educators in the four featured schools have confronted these challenges with the belief that ensuring the success of Latino students is of utmost importance. These educators are determined to breakdown barriers and build the bridge to their students' and families' dreams and aspirations.

This book presents what we learned from leaders, faculty, staff, students and parents in these high schools and means to provide practical, useful information that can help other educators ensure the success of their Latino students. We set out to understand the leadership and culture that provided the foundation of excellence and equity in each of these schools and the practices, systems, and policies they employed to help each and every student reach their goals. We also endeavored to identify and describe in detail the common characteristics found across all four schools. Our data do not support assumptions of causal impact, but we hope they highlight to other educators the more important factors to consider when redesigning their own schools. In sum, we see the story of these four urban high schools as compelling evidence that these learning outcomes are possible in far more schools and light the path forward for educators striving to do this work in their own schools.

The criteria used to identify the four schools we studied are described in detail in the America's Best Urban School application on the National Center for Urban School Transformation's website (www.ncust.com), but generally, each school demonstrated multiple evidences of success (e.g., state assessment outcomes, graduation rates, average daily attendance, discipline data, English language proficiency, and course taking patterns) for their students overall. Additionally, assessment data affirmed that every racial/ethnic and socioeconomic group served at each school performed at levels above the average for all students in the state. In particular, on state academic assessments, Latino students at the selected schools, outperformed state averages for all students in their states. As well, the schools served predominantly low-income, urban communities and did not use selective admissions requirements. In other words, each school served urban Latino students, yet achieved multiple evidences of outstanding results. Initially, each school participated in a full-day visit from a team of experienced educators.

Our initial visit to each school was intended to validate that indeed excellent teaching and learning was occurring for all groups of students. We wanted to ensure the results we observed from the test results were not due to narrowing the curriculum and excessive test preparation. The initial visit provided opportunities to interview students, parents, teachers, support staff, school administrators, and district leaders about the culture, curriculum and instruction. Also, each initial visit provided our team of experienced educators an opportunity to observe classrooms, planning meetings, and a variety of other school activities. Each school ultimately won NCUSTs America's Best Urban School award between 2014-2017. Subsequently, the authors conducted at least one additional two-day visit to each of the four high schools to acquire additional information about the factors that influenced each school's successes with Latino students specifically. We utilized semi-structured interview and focus group protocols with various stakeholders to more deeply understand their practices and student experiences in these schools. The approach was systematic and rigorous to compare results across schools, but also to be able to triangulate results across different stakeholders within schools to ensure we captured the most important elements of the schools.

Intended Audience

This book is about high schools that have achieved excellent learning results for Latino students. We expect that this book will be useful to principals, other school level administrators, superintendents, other district level administrators, and teacher leaders (including lead teachers, department chairs, resource teachers, helping teachers, team leaders, and educators who provide support for teachers) in schools and districts that serve Latino high school students. This volume

is intended to be useful to leaders (or future leaders) who strive to influence the academic success of Latino students.

Contents of the Book

To set the context for our findings, Chapter One begins with a description of the Latino education crisis, outlining documentation of the persistent opportunity, achievement, and attainment gaps Latino youth experience. As contrast, we share some of the findings about the characteristics of highly effective urban schools and specifically practices that have proven to be successful with Latino students combatting the harsh statistics documented by researchers. These findings provided a springboard as we dove into our effort to learn specifically about high schools that helped prepare Latino students for exciting and full futures. Chapter One concludes with detailed profiles of each of the four high schools we studied (three comprehensive public high schools and one public charter high school).

Chapter Two is devoted to descriptions of leadership in the four schools. Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) reported, "Indeed, there are virtually no documented instances of troubled schools being turned around in the absence of intervention by talented leaders. Many other factors may contribute to such turnarounds, but leadership is the catalyst" (p. 5). Similarly, we found that leadership was a major catalyst to the success of Latino students in the four schools. In Chapter Two, we describe the leaders' vision and actions and in particular how they rely on other administrators, teachers, and staff to come together as a team and influence the improvement of teaching and learning to ensure student preparation for postsecondary. In the four schools, leadership responsibilities do not rest within a single individual; the school leaders rally the team around an important goal and vision for their school

and distribute leadership. Each school has a brand that is known, loved and fought for by all. Decades of research have documented the importance of school climate and culture and these schools are no different. Chapter Two illustrates the role leaders play in influencing the climate and culture of the school.

In Chapter Three, we discuss the student-centered values that guide decision-making in these schools. Of particular importance, educators in each of the four schools made many efforts to demonstrate an appreciation of the cultural and linguistic diversity of their students. The regular reinforcement of student-centered values helped each school establish an environment in which Latino students felt that they were valued by teachers, administrators, and other school personnel. Students felt like they belonged and were willing to work hard to learn important concepts and skills.

Chapters Four, Five and Six describe how leaders utilized different elements of the instructional system (e.g., the master schedule, teacher collaboration, professional development, student data) to support excellent teaching and learning and ensure student needs were met. Although described individually, the most important lesson we learned was that the systems were coherent and aligned with the school goals and vision established. Choices and decisions were always made, "in the best interest of students."

Each chapter includes a brief assessment tool. These tools were designed to help school leaders and educators assess and reflect upon their current practices, their impact on all students and Latino students in particular. The assessment tools will affirm school strengths that resemble the exemplary practices described in the chapters. As well, the assessment tools will help educators pinpoint opportunities to strengthen practices in ways that can improve the success of

all students, and particularly Latino students. The assessments were designed to assist committed educators in focusing upon and assessing the subtle nuances that may make a major difference in the success of many Latino students. We hope the questions support constructive efforts to improve practices, programs, and policies in ways that improving learning outcomes for Latino students.

In our final chapter, we bring together the practices discussed in each of the prior chapters and provide a map for educators that illustrates key markers en route to excellent results for Latino students. It is not a recipe, nor do we pretend that this work is easy, but there are key principles and practices that are worthy of attention and emulation. As well, we realize the practices described in chapters two through six are not distinct elements; they are part of a cohesive whole that influence and are influenced by one another. We hope to deepen understanding of how improvement and excellence happens by harnessing typical school processes, building coherence, maintaining focus, and intentionally seeking specific outcomes.

Conclusion

In sum, critics would have us believe that excellence and equity do not coexist in urban education. They suggest that urban schools can successfully pursue excellence for an elite few or they can pursue educational mediocrity, focused on low-level standards for all. In contrast, in major cities across the country, we have found some high schools (albeit a relatively small number) where all groups of students achieve at high levels. We believe that these schools and educators deserve our praise, celebration, and study. This book endeavors to celebrate, inspire, and provide detailed descriptions of practices, in ways that illustrate that academic excellence and readiness for college and careers can be attained for all groups of students. As Blankstein

and Noguera (2015) argued, we have found that “equity and excellence are not at odds, and that the highest level of excellence will actually be obtained *through* the pursuit of equity” (p. 5).

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