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## Dropout, failure rates linked to language

### Study compares countries of origin Spanish-speaking parents worried

Jun. 23, 2006. 05:12 AM

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EDUCATION REPORTER

Toronto teens born in the Caribbean, Central or South America and east Africa are twice as likely to drop out of school as their peers from China, Korea and Japan, new research shows.

The first study to track Toronto high school students through Ontario's new four-year curriculum also shows that students who speak Spanish, Portuguese or Somali are at higher risk than kids who speak any other of the city's most common languages.

And they are more likely to fail Grade 9 math and flunk the Grade 10 literacy test, and are less likely to apply to college or university.

"We live in an unequal society where education is supposed to be the great equalizer, so if it's not doing that, we have to figure out why," said education professor Daniel Schugurensky, adding he is the only Hispanic professor at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto.

He is one of about 20 members of the new Spanish Speaking Education Network, formed by parents and educators, that gathered this week to discuss the alarming new data about Toronto's 5,300 Spanish-speaking students. The network was created to figure out why the community's children fare so poorly, and it has called an emergency conference in September to brainstorm solutions.

For Canada's largest, most diverse school board, this is exactly the kind of detail schools need to be able to pinpoint where help is most needed, said education director Gerry Connelly.

And it is the first step in the Toronto District School Board's growing move to gather as much demographic data on students as possible — with the next step coming this fall, when the board begins gathering controversial race-based statistics on students through a voluntary student survey.

Parents in each of these communities say their children face daunting roadblocks to learning — from poverty, instability and the trauma of having lived through war, to a lack of savvy about formal education and even family breakdown — for which they need more help than they are getting.

"The gap in learning has nothing to do with any group's innate ability, and everything to do with a child's access at home to books and culture and ideas and travel — all the cultural capital that stimulates learning," Connelly said, adding the board already steers more teachers and special resources to schools in low-income neighbourhoods to help bridge the gap.

"I reject the idea that any child is trapped by their situation," said board chair Sheila Ward. "There is lots we can do to give kids a hands-up if we put a laser beam on the problem."

Spanish-speaking parents agree.

"We know students are not dropping out just because they're Latino — there's a complex mix of reasons," said Luz Bascunan, an education advocate with the Catholic Children's Aid Society of Toronto.

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"Some come from South and Central American countries that are not as affluent or where there is not as much access to formal education. Or maybe their parents' credentials are not recognized here, so they cannot work in their profession. Or sometimes they come from countries that don't encourage parents to be involved in the school system," she said.

"And remember, in the last few years schools cut back on supports to these communities. So we need a lot — more role models, more Spanish-speaking teachers, more ESL. There isn't one simple solution."

It is the same demand being made by Somali, Caribbean and Portuguese parents — more sensitivity to their children's often turbulent background, more inclusive curriculum, more teachers from their backgrounds, more outreach to help parents become comfortable with public schools.

"One 8-year-old boy from Somalia kept jumping under his desk at his school near the Toronto airport and the teacher thought he had a behaviour problem. But it turns out he fell to the ground every time he heard an airplane because he had seen his father killed in Somalia in a helicopter attack," said Somali mother Suad Aimad, co-founder of Somali Parents for Education.

The Toronto District School Board began tracking all 18,400 students entering Grade 9 in 2000, the first year after Grade 13 was abolished, in a bid to pinpoint which students struggle most with the new curriculum. Five years later, 60 per cent had graduated, 12 per cent had switched to a different school system, 7 per cent were still enrolled in high school and 21 per cent had dropped out. The emerging profile of these dropouts is largely teenaged boys living in Toronto's so-called "horseshoe of poverty." Of students born in English-speaking islands in the Caribbean who started Grade 9 in 2000, 40 per cent had dropped out by 2005. Of those born in Central or South America, 37 per cent had dropped out. Of those born in southern and western Europe, 35 per cent had dropped out, while 32 per cent of those from eastern Africa had dropped out.

In contrast, of students born in east Asia, 14 per cent had dropped out, and of children born in Canada, 23 per cent stopped going to school.

Why do students from some cultural backgrounds need more support? Why Spanish, for example?

Ryerson University early-childhood professor Judith Bernhard, who is Hispanic, suggests Spanish-speaking immigrants may have pushed their children so hard to blend into mainstream Canada that they lost the sense of cultural pride now known to be key to learning.

"We have to counter the Latino stereotypes — the gangs, the tough guys — and develop a sense of pride in their identity. And we have to start with early-childhood education," she said.

To Hispanic community worker Gaby Motta, a mother of two, Canada's public schools still steer too many Spanish-speaking students away from higher learning, something Portuguese-Canadian school trustee Maria Rodrigues believes is the same for her community.

"There's still a little discrimination in our system; teachers still don't expect as much of students who don't speak English as a first language.

"When the wave of Portuguese immigrants came to this country, most were labourers and farmers who were not educated beyond elementary school, and they didn't see not having a formal education as a bad thing," said Rodrigues, who was the first in her family to go to university.

"So we need a lot more community outreach to help Portuguese parents understand the ins and outs of the school system."

Somali mother Suad Aimad said she has seen first-hand the payoff of being involved in her children's education by showing interest in school, helping with homework, volunteering in class.

"With my oldest, I didn't understand this, but now with my younger children I do — and they're all doing excellent."



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