

WASHINGTON STATE ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS AND THEIR IMPACT ON LATINO SUCCESS

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“That was my motivation to stay in school, because they (his alternative school) were so nice and really tried to help you out, like even though they see me as a struggling kid with a family and everything they try their best to help you out.”

– Junior Gonzales, alternative school student

Topic: I examined Washington alternative schools to see how well they are meeting the needs of their Latino students as compared to conventional schools. The goals of this inquiry were to find where laws and practices could be changed to better serve Latino students and to see whether conventional schools could benefit from adopting some of the practices utilized by alternative schools.

Methods: I began by looking at **previous research** on the issues Latino students face in conventional schools, alternative schools in general, and what little I could find pertaining to both topics. I then began my **case studies** of Washington State generally, and the Walla Walla school system, particularly its Opportunity Program. I conducted **interviews** of students, teachers and administrators, **personal observations** of programs and a Washington Association of Learning Alternatives conference, and **data collection and analysis** on the effectiveness of Washington alternative schools.

Findings:

- There are a number of practices, particularly the importance of **individual attention** and teacher support, which are recommended in the literature for both Latinos in conventional schools, and alternative schools. Congruent with this literature, I found that the more closely these practices were followed, the more successful the program was in helping Latino and other students. However, programs often **lacked adequate funding** to follow these recommendations.
- Although there is definitely room for improvement in Washington alternative schools’ policies and practices, they are addressing the needs of Latino students very well. Importantly, they are generally **more successful** in this than conventional schools.

Recommendations:

- Both alternative and conventional schools could benefit from more closely following the practices referred to in the findings section, as summarized in the literature review.
- At a policy level, there are a number of actions that OSPI and the legislature could take to enable educators to better serve Latino students. In particular, OSPI should **appoint a full-time staff member** dedicated to alternative school issues, and the **graduation requirements** should be changed to better accommodate the success of all students. All teachers should also be required to be trained on **cultural and economic sensitivity**. Finally, a recently eliminated alternative school **funding law** should be reinstated to facilitate alternative schools in instituting many of the recommendations made above.

Community Partners: Cindy Gregoire and Diana Erickson, Bilingual Coordinators for Walla Walla Public Schools.