

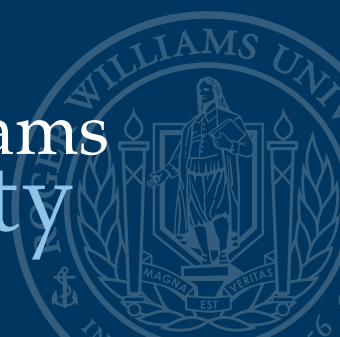


# Latino Students in Rhode Island: A Review of Local and National Performances

*A report of the Latino Policy Institute at Roger Williams University*

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# Executive Summary

## Latino Student Achievement in Rhode Island: Addressing Equity Challenges and the ELL Crisis

Latinos currently make up 16.7% of the United States population, and they are the fastest growing ethnic group in the nation. In fact, over the past decade Latinos have accounted for over half of the United States' population growth, with the number of Latinos rising at four times the rate of the rest of the country. Rhode Island, meanwhile, proportionally has the 13<sup>th</sup> largest Latino population in the US, and in Rhode Island Latinos are actually responsible for all of the state's population growth between 2000 and 2010. Yet along with this burgeoning prominence of Latinos both locally and nationally comes reason for concern regarding Latinos' economic and educational status. As a group, Latinos hold vastly less wealth than White Americans, and such economic disparities tend to be more pronounced Rhode Island, where Latino families also have household earnings that are at least 26% lower than the national Latino average. Overall, if we believe that it is in the nation's best interest for such an emerging population to be on a sound economic footing, these differences in economic outcomes are of interest to all members of our society, both locally and nationally.

Meanwhile, given the cyclical relationship between family economic conditions and the educational outcomes of youth, it is not surprising then to find educational disparities between Latino students and students from other groups both nationally and in Rhode Island. Studies show that by 8<sup>th</sup> grade, Latino students in the United States score approximately 2 to 2.5 grade levels behind White students, and as we will see below in Rhode Island these disparities are even more pronounced. Since educational outcomes are such strong predictors of later economic well-being, the academic achievement of Latinos, particularly in Rhode Island, is an urgent challenge that warrants immediate and targeted action.

This report examines the academic achievement of Latino students in Rhode Island, particularly relative to the performance of White students in the state and to Latinos in other U.S. states and jurisdictions. Several critically important findings emerged from this exploratory study:

### Summary of Key Findings

- 1. The Latino-White achievement gaps in Rhode Island are among some of the worst in the country.** In both 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade mathematics, for example, the disparities between Latino and White student achievement in Rhode Island are among the 10 largest across states.
- 2. Latino student achievement in RI also lags notably behind the national averages for Latino students.** Latinos in Rhode Island score ½ to one full grade level behind Latinos nationally on several measures, and in some cases Rhode Island ranks as low as 40<sup>th</sup> and 41<sup>st</sup> among states in Latino student performance. These same-race disparity patterns do not exist for White or Black students in Rhode Island.
- 3. Rhode Island is facing a crisis in English Language Learner education.** English Language Learners (ELLs) in Rhode Island – 75% of which are Latino – are among some of the lowest performing ELLs in the nation. On 8<sup>th</sup> grade mathematics achievement, for example, ELLs in Rhode Island are dead last among ELLs across states, and Rhode Island ranks in the bottom 10 among states in other ELL performance measures as well. ELLs in RI also face disturbingly low proficiency levels in urban districts, with 0–1% of ELL students being proficient in some districts and skill categories.
- 4. Economic differences are likely contributing to the achievement disparities between both Latino and White students in Rhode Island and also between Latino students locally and Latino students nationally.** In Rhode Island, Latino family median annual earnings are half of those of White families. Moreover, median Latino family

earnings in Rhode Island are 26% lower than the national Latino median. These vast economic differences are likely making significant contributions to the local and national achievement disparities for Rhode Island's Latino students.

**5. Urban school experiences are also likely to be contributing to the Latino achievement gaps in unique ways.** The achievement disparities between Latinos nationally and those in RI are also specific to urban districts – such differences are essentially non-existent in suburban schools, or in schools with fewer Latinos. Also, locally, Latino students in RI's high-Latino urban districts are meeting fewer proficiency targets than are White and Black students in these same school systems, despite the fact that Blacks and Latinos in RI have fairly comparable economic backgrounds. Moreover, for ELL students the RI versus national gaps seem to be concentrated among lower-income students and students in urban schools. Overall then, both Latino and ELL achievement disparities in RI seem dependent on urban school attendance in ways that transcend economic influences.

**6. Latinos are vastly underrepresented in Rhode Island's teaching and administrative forces.** Statewide, Latinos represent 1–3% of the teaching and administrative forces in RI schools, while Latinos comprise 22% of Latino students statewide.<sup>1</sup> Yet there is research suggesting that having teachers of the same race bolsters achievement and is related to students being enrolled in higher courses. This is a disparity that should be remedied as part of any comprehensive reform plan for enhancing Latino student achievement.

**7. RI's high level of first generation Latinos likely magnifies the problems with ELL education in RI.** Nationally, approximately 7.3% of all Latinos under age 18 were born outside of the United States; in Rhode Island that number is notably higher, at 11.8%. Moreover, among Latino residents of all ages, RI ranks 12<sup>th</sup> in the nation in proportion who are foreign born, at 42%. Still, the proportion of foreign-born Latino residents does not seem to be a strong predictor of ELL performance specifically. What is most likely then, is that given the performance of ELL students in Rhode Island, the higher percentage of foreign-born Latino students and parents in the state raises the ELL needs of a system that is already stretched in this area.

Based on these findings, several recommendations have been made to bolster the effects of ongoing reform efforts at the district-level, and also to improve state-level support structures for Latino and ELL students:

## Recommendations Summary

**1. Re-envision ELL programming and instruction in urban core districts, and districts with high ELL populations, for example.** In the past, Providence has repeatedly acknowledged the challenge they are having with ELL instruction, and the 2011–2012 district-commissioned evaluation by the Council of Great City Schools (CGCS) provided nearly 80 suggestions for reforms in the areas of organization, oversight, and instruction, around ELL programs at the district level. It is imperative that the new district leadership follow through on the Council's recommendations, and that the task force that was established to address these concerns continues to prioritize, design, and implement system-wide reforms.

**2. Improve ELL programming in the core urban districts through the creation of a state-wide inter-district ELL task force to leverage and centralize established best practices.** Recently, best practices regarding ELL education in urban districts have been put forth by ASCD (formerly known as the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development) and the Council of Great City Schools, and these best practices for ELL adolescents and for large urban districts suit RI's high-Latino districts well. The CGCS recommendations are based on the successful work of other comparably high-Latino districts nationwide, including San Francisco, Dallas, and New York City. Meanwhile, ASCD is a network of highly experienced and qualified leaders in education. Thus, the recommendations of both organizations, which are discussed in more detail below, will go a long way in improving the prospects of ELLs in RI.

**3. Orient the Rhode Island Department of Education more explicitly toward racial equity and ELL student performance.** The Rhode Island Department of Education should raise the profile of conceptions of equity within its organizational structure and strategic priorities, particularly as it pertains to Latino and ELL student performance. Such a reorientation should include 1) increasing the emphasis of priorities around equity, culturally relevant teaching

practices, and specific goals for students of different cultural backgrounds in RIDE's stated strategic priorities and approaches; 2) extracting ELL student services from the oversight of the Office of Student, Community, and Academic Supports, where ELL student support is grouped with support structures for students with disparate sets of needs; and 3) establishing an office that is solely focused on alleviating racial achievement disparities where they exist in relation to Rhode Island schools. Such offices already exist in other states with high-Latino achievement such as Florida and Massachusetts, and in RI this office should be charged with addressing gaps not only across groups within the state, but also gaps between Rhode Island students and students from comparable backgrounds nationally.

**4. Increase the number of teachers and administrators with social backgrounds similar to Latino students.**

Given the high percentage of Latinos in some of the core city schools (e.g. over 60% in Providence and over 70% in Central Falls), the percentage of Latino teachers and principals serving the students in the state (1–3%) are astonishingly low. Hiring teachers and administrators of Latino heritage and Spanish fluency are thus a priority in Rhode Island, and such human capital needs must signal a call to arms to our local teacher training programs, which may need to be more proactive in recruiting and developing the teachers of tomorrow with backgrounds similar to those of our core urban students. It may also mean, however, raising the profile of alternative certification programs, which have in some cases been shown to increase the number of minority teachers entering the teaching force.

**5. Create professional development initiatives that utilize the great work of local schools that are currently succeeding with urban Latino and ELL populations.** There are several local schools that are producing commendable results with Latino and ELL populations in both the core urban municipal and charter districts. Thus, it would be advantageous to build on the excellence that many of our local schools are exhibiting, in efforts to share best practices in instructional leadership, as well as linguistically and culturally responsive approaches, including the use of dual language instruction. These schools are easily identified through publically available NECAP results, and this leveraging is perhaps best done through peer-led professional development for teachers and school leaders at the state or district level.

**6. Focus on developing school cultures that foster relationships and personalized educational experiences for students.** While all students thrive from personalized and encouraging relationships, research shows that encouragement and connectedness are particularly and uniquely important to the success of Black and Latino students in urban schools. Thus, our core urban schools will benefit from emphasizing school cultural elements of relationship, community, and collaborative success in the learning process for their students. Strong cultures of connectedness and achievement will propel Latino student success and narrow achievement gaps.

**7. Insure state-of-the art instruction and instructional leadership in the core urban districts, for all students, schools, and classrooms.** Ultimately, when we consider the experience of Latino students and ELLs in Rhode Island, we must closely examine the quality of the teachers they encounter, relative not only to their peers in Whiter and more affluent schools, but also relative to their peers in mainstream and/or advanced programs within the same schools. Key components of this effort are recruiting and retaining the most capable teachers to our urban districts, and also implementing professional development initiatives that have proven to be effective in promoting differentiated instruction techniques among all students.

The analysis here is descriptive in nature, and should be considered a starting point for understanding the issues described in the report. Future studies should use more inferential methods to determine more specifically how the factors described here interact to impact Latino student achievement in Rhode Island, especially with regards to economic disparities and urban school experiences. Nevertheless, the patterns presented here suggest that there are issues beyond economics that are impacting Latino student achievement in RI, and fortunately, many of these issues have been successfully addressed in schools and districts with comparable sets of challenges. Thus, the recommendations made here should also serve to ignite a collaborative effort, across all stakeholders in the future of Rhode Island. By ensuring the educational and economic success of the fastest growing group of Rhode Islanders, any investments of time, talent, or treasure into Latino student success is an investment in the future of the state.

# Introduction

Latinos currently make up 16.7%<sup>2</sup> of the United States population, and they are the fastest growing ethnic group in the nation.<sup>3</sup> In fact, over the past decade Latinos have accounted for over half of the United States' population growth, with the number of Latinos rising at four times the rate of the rest of the country.<sup>4</sup> This trend is part of an overall diversification of the American population: the Pew Foundation projects that by 2050, instead of being a majority White country, the United States will be a racial plurality with people of color representing over 50% of the total population.<sup>5</sup>

While the Latino population is growing faster than all other ethnic groups in the United States, there is reason for concern as to Latinos' economic status; as a group, Latinos hold vastly less wealth than White Americans. In 2010, while the median family income for White families in the country was approximately \$55,000, for Latino families that figure was just under \$38,000. More alarming are statistics on net worth: on average, White American families have 15 times the assets of Latino families – \$111,000 compared to \$7,000. Moreover, these economic issues are also particularly salient for the State of Rhode Island. Proportionally, Rhode Island has the 13<sup>th</sup> largest Latino population in the country. And in Rhode Island, not only are Latinos the fastest growing group in the state, they are also responsible for all of Rhode Island's population growth between 2000 and 2010.<sup>6</sup> Yet, Rhode Island Latino families face even more pressing economic inequities, with 2011 estimates showing that White families in Rhode Island have a median household income that is more than double that of Latino families – approximately \$60,000 compared to \$29,000. Latino families in Rhode Island also have household earnings that are approximately 26% lower than the national Latino average. Overall, if we believe that it is in the nation's best interest for such an emerging population to be on a sound economic footing, these differences in economic outcomes are of interest to all members of our society, both locally and nationally.

Meanwhile, given the cyclical relationship between family economic conditions and the educational outcomes of youth, concerns over the economic status of Latinos are exacerbated by the fact that the academic achievement gap between the rich and poor in the United States is widening.<sup>7</sup> And given their socio-economic context, it is not surprising then to find educational disparities between Latino students and students from other groups both nationally and in Rhode Island. Studies show that by 8<sup>th</sup> grade, Latino students in the United States score approximately 2 to 2.5 grade levels behind White students, and as we will see below in Rhode Island these disparities are even more pronounced. Since educational outcomes are such strong predictors of later economic well-being, the academic achievement of Latinos, particularly in Rhode Island, is an urgent challenge that warrants immediate and targeted action.

This report examines the academic achievement of Latino students in Rhode Island, particularly relative to the performance of White students in the state and to Latinos in other U.S. states and jurisdictions. The performance measures used below are generally those that lend themselves to comparing large numbers of students and student subgroups, including school attendance, school completion, and reading and math scores on skill assessments. There are two separate skills assessments used in the analysis below: the first is the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a measure that is designed in part to compare student performance across states and jurisdictions. The NAEP is particularly helpful because it is not a high-stakes test – i.e. it is not used to make student or teacher proficiency decisions. Thus, the results are generally uncorrupted by skewed or fraudulent preparation practices that can undermine the validity of high-stakes testing results.

The second skill measure comes from the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP), a testing program used by the Rhode Island Department of Education to a degree to assess both individual student academic proficiency – i.e. whether a student has adequate skills for his or her given grade level – and also the overall performances of schools and districts. NECAP results are used in this report to a) consider whether districts are meeting their federally

mandated need for annual proficiency improvement across all subgroups,<sup>8</sup> and b) to compare the performance of student subgroups across Rhode Island districts specifically. It is worth noting here that most states have their own student proficiency measures to use for performance evaluation purposes. Thus, because the NECAP was specifically designed for and implemented in just a handful of states in New England, it cannot be used to make national comparisons.<sup>9</sup>

The report proceeds as follows. After a demographic overview of Latino families and students in Rhode Island, this report discusses the potential impact that six major factors may have on Latino student performance in the state: 1) the economic conditions of these students compared to other students statewide and to Latinos nationally; 2) district-specific challenges in high-Latino Rhode Island school systems; 3) the effectiveness of English Language Learner programming in Rhode Island and in high-Latino districts specifically; 4) the average immigration generational status in Rhode Island versus nationally; 5) the potential contributions of intra-racial diversity among Latino sub-populations; and 6) the dearth of Latino teachers and administrators in Rhode Island schools.

While this study is descriptive in nature and is not meant to draw definitive causal conclusions, several key patterns did emerge that suggest important relationships regarding Latino student achievement in Rhode Island. Specifically, the findings here suggest that while Latino-White achievement gaps persist across school settings, the Rhode Island vs. national Latino achievement gap seems to be largely concentrated in urban schools. Also, of the potential contributors to these gaps, economic disadvantages and challenges with English Language Learner progress in high-Latino districts are likely playing the largest roles in perpetuating these educational disparities. Additionally, the findings here suggest that Latino subgroup performances are unlikely to be major determinants of disparities in educational outcomes, but that generational status and teacher and administrator demographics both merit some attention. The report concludes with recommendations for practice, particularly in regards to leveraging both local and state-level resources toward supporting and enhancing the ongoing reform efforts in Rhode Island's high-Latino urban districts.

## I. Latinos in Rhode Island: Demographic and Educational Backgrounds

### Demographics

As in the nation, Latinos in RI are the fastest growing ethnic group, with the population statewide nearly tripling since 1990. In 2011 the state had 134,714 Latino residents, representing 12.8% of the state's population. These proportions are much larger in the state's urban core cities like Providence and Central Falls, where Latinos represent 38% and 60% of those populations, respectively.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, both cities have recently elected Latino mayors for the first time in their respective histories. Statewide, 7% of the Rhode Island electorate is Latino, which ranks it 13<sup>th</sup> nationally among states.

*Latinos are responsible for all of the population growth in Rhode Island between 2000 and 2010.*

The demographic and political emergence of Latinos in Rhode Island has been a highly visible development for the last 20 years, and this trend may be only just beginning since the Latino population in RI is much younger than the majority of its population: 34% of Rhode Island Latinos are under age 18, as compared to 21% of state residents overall. In fact, Latinos make up 63% of the students in Providence schools<sup>11</sup> and 72% of those in Central Falls, numbers that demonstrate the current and future presence of Latinos in Rhode Island.

### Performances on Mathematics and Reading Assessments

As with national trends, Latino students in Rhode Island score at substantially lower levels than do White students on most educational measures. This is especially true in mathematics where as shown in Figure 1, on the National

*Latino students in Rhode Island lag behind Latinos in other states on Reading and Math measures by as much as a full grade level.*

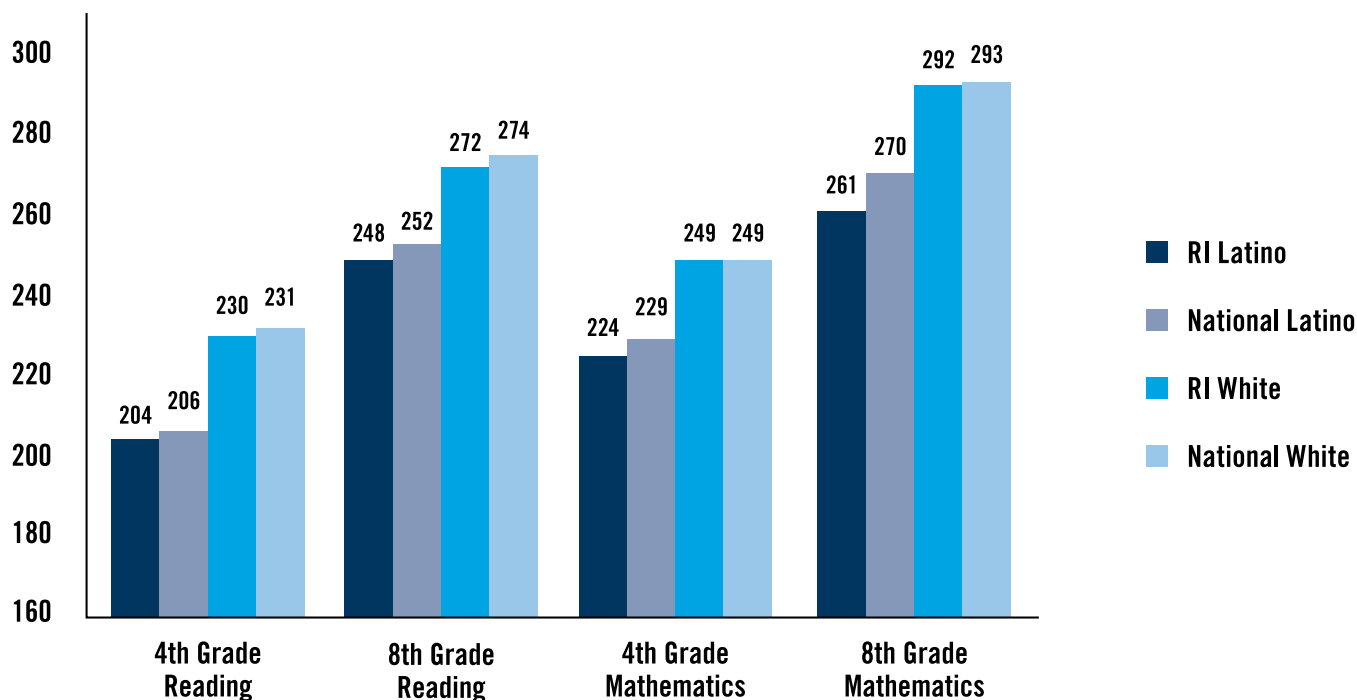
Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), Latino students in the state score between 20 and 30 points – or two to three grade levels of learning – behind their White counterparts.<sup>12</sup> The gaps in reading scores are smaller, but still amount to differences of approximately one to two grade levels. Moreover, in both 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade mathematics the Latino-White disparities in Rhode Island are actually among the ten worst in the country.<sup>13</sup>

Additionally, not only do Rhode Island Latinos lag behind White students in the state, on average they also are performing at lower levels than other Latinos nationally on reading and mathematics measures.<sup>14</sup> As also

demonstrated in Figure 1, in mathematics Latino students in Rhode Island score approximately one-half to one full grade level behind Latinos across the nation. There are substantial differences of nearly half a grade-level for 8<sup>th</sup> grade reading scores between these groups as well.

Additionally, Latinos in RI lag behind their same-race peers nationally in ways that we do not see among White and Black students. In fact, both White and Blacks in Rhode Island are in the top half of state populations in 4<sup>th</sup> grade math and reading, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade reading as well. Meanwhile, Latinos in RI rank 30<sup>th</sup>, 43<sup>rd</sup>, and 41<sup>st</sup> respectively among their same-race peers across states and jurisdictions on these measures.<sup>15, 16</sup> Taken together, these findings seem to suggest that the lower same-race outcomes for Latinos in Rhode Island are not a function of an overall lower relative performance of RI students more generally, and thus their achievement challenges may be related to something unique to Latino students' life and/or educational experiences in Rhode Island.

**FIGURE 1: RI vs. National comparisons of 2011 NAEP reading and math scores for Latino and White students**



### Dropouts

In addition to differences on measures of math and reading scores, compared to their White counterparts Latino students in both the state and the country are also much more likely to drop out of school before the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Nationally, while the White dropout rate in 2010 was only 5.1%, the Latino dropout rate was triple that, at 15%.<sup>17</sup> In



Rhode Island dropout rates are higher overall; the Rhode Island Department of Education reports that the state’s dropout rate for White students is 9.5%, while the rate for Latinos is 19.7%. Thus, Latinos in RI drop out of school at higher rates than both their White counterparts here and their Latino counterparts across the country.

**Absenteeism**

Absenteeism is closely tied to income and poverty. For example, the National Center for Children in Poverty reports that in kindergarten, poor children are absent at four times the rate of their counterparts from affluent families.<sup>18</sup> Given the disproportionately low income status of Latino families in Rhode Island, it is highly likely that Latino students here are at risk of higher absenteeism rates than both White students here and Latino students nationally.

In measuring absenteeism, the U.S. Department of Education considers whether in the past month students have been absent zero, 1 to 2, or 3 or more times. On this scale, the rates among Latino, Black, and White students in 8th grade are somewhat similar: 18% for Whites, 22% for Latinos, and 23% for Black students.<sup>19</sup> Researchers at Johns Hopkins University have pointed out, however, that national measures of absenteeism rates may obfuscate problems with school attendance because these measures do not capture chronic absenteeism, which is often defined as a student missing at least one-tenth of the school year (18 days).<sup>20</sup> Fortunately Rhode Island is one of only six states in the country to measure chronic absenteeism, and district-level rates are available. Table 1 illustrates that across schools in the three Rhode Island districts that educate the highest proportion of Latino students – Central Falls, Providence, and Pawtucket – a respective average of 28%, 32%, and 20% of students in each school were chronically absent in the 2010–2011 school year.<sup>21</sup> Statewide this rate is only 18%, so high-Latino districts have rates above the state average. Moreover, these numbers are particularly concerning in high school: over 35% in all three districts and over 50% in Providence and Central Falls. It is clear from these numbers that absenteeism in the core cities is a major concern for Latino students and families.

*Among White students, RI ranks 18th in the nation in 4<sup>th</sup> grade math. Yet among Latino students RI ranks 43<sup>rd</sup>.*

**TABLE 1: Average percentage of students chronically absent in districts’ schools and high schools.**

|                      | Average Chronic Absenteeism Rate |              |
|----------------------|----------------------------------|--------------|
|                      | All Schools                      | High Schools |
| <b>Central Falls</b> | 28%                              | 51%          |
| <b>Pawtucket</b>     | 20%                              | 38%          |
| <b>Providence</b>    | 32%                              | 56%          |

Overall demographic trends show us that despite steady population growth and rising political strength, the educational prospects of the state’s Latinos continue to be critically challenged, including poorer achievement outcomes, higher dropout rates, and chronic absenteeism. Given the pivotal role that Latinos will play in the future of the state, it is imperative that we understand the source of these disparities in order to develop and implement the most effective remedies possible.

## II. Potential Contributors to Achievement Disparities for Rhode Island Latinos

### Socio-economic Factors: Adult Educational Attainment and Family Income

A key consideration for understanding achievement disparities in any context is the socio-economic condition of students and families. Socio-economic status impacts student achievement in a variety of ways, ranging from the parents' ability to provide the basic needs of food, clothing and shelter to the child – needs that are typically prerequisite to high achievement – to determining the kinds of educational opportunities the child receives by way of the residential (and hence public educational), private educational, or enrichment options available to the family depending on their financial resources. Given the vast socio-economic differences between White and Latino residents in the state, it is no surprise to find analogous achievement differences between these groups. Less expected, however, are the aforementioned differences between Latinos in the state and Latinos nationally. Thus, the first task of this report was to compare the socio-economic well-being of Latinos in Rhode Island with their counterparts across the country.

Regarding educational attainment among adults, as seen in Table 2, the findings show some modest differences: nationally, 13.2% of Latinos over the age of 25 have attained the equivalent of a 4-year college degree or higher, but for Latinos in the state the figure is slightly lower, at 12.6%. Similarly, while 4.1% of Latinos over 25 years old nationally have graduate degrees, that figure is only 3.1% in Rhode Island. Overall these proportions are fairly close, but these differences favoring the national averages likely help to explain a small portion of the differences in achievement between Latino students here and across the country.

**TABLE 2: Percentage of Latinos in RI and nationally over the age of 25 with post-secondary education.**

|                                | Rhode Island Latinos | National Latinos |
|--------------------------------|----------------------|------------------|
| At least some college          | 35.0%                | 36.1%            |
| At least 4-year college degree | 12.6%                | 13.2%            |
| Graduate degree                | 3.1%                 | 4.1%             |

As is true of parental education levels, Latino families in Rhode Island seem to have fewer economic resources compared to Latino families nationally. In 2011, Latino families nationally earned on average \$39,589, but those in RI earned \$29,146, and thus Latino families in RI are earning approximately 26% less per year than their counterparts in other states. Again, economic indicators are strong predictors of achievement outcomes, so these discrepancies in family income are almost certainly contributing to differences in achievement for Rhode Island's Latino students.

Still, it is also important to note that the achievement gap between Latinos in RI and Latinos nationally is actually larger among students that are not eligible for free or reduced lunch (FRL)-a trend that does not exist among White students.<sup>22</sup> Table 3 shows that the gaps among non-FRL eligible students are in most cases at least 2 to 3 times larger than the gaps among the less economically advantaged students who are eligible for the program. Although FRL status is admittedly a crude economic measure,<sup>23</sup> these more pronounced gaps among more-resourced Latino families specifically still demand that we explore whether achievement disparities between RI Latinos and Latinos nationally are solely a function of differences in economic resources alone, or whether families with comparable resources are possibly performing differently due to other factors. Several potential factors are thus examined below.

**TABLE 3: Differences in NAEP achievement between Latinos in RI vs. national Latinos among students who are eligible and not eligible for free and reduced lunch.**

|                               | Eligible |          |     | Not Eligible |          |     |
|-------------------------------|----------|----------|-----|--------------|----------|-----|
|                               | RI       | National | Gap | RI           | National | Gap |
| 4 <sup>th</sup> Grade Math    | 222      | 226      | 4   | 229          | 240      | 11  |
| 8 <sup>th</sup> Grade Math    | 258      | 265      | 8   | 273          | 281      | 8   |
| 4 <sup>th</sup> Grade Reading | 201      | 201      | 0   | 211          | 221      | 10  |
| 8 <sup>th</sup> Grade Reading | 244      | 246      | 2   | 259          | 264      | 5   |

### Latino Student School Contexts

In examining the effect of school contextual factors on Latino student achievement, it is helpful to note that as with national trends whereby over 90% of Latinos are city dwellers,<sup>24</sup> Latinos in RI also tend to be highly concentrated in urban communities. In fact, 70% of Rhode Island’s Latinos are concentrated in just three cities: Central Falls, Pawtucket, and Providence, which respectively are home to 9%, 11%, and 52% of the state’s Latino population. Table 4 displays results for Latino students on the 2012 New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) proficiency tests in these three districts. The percentages indicate the proportion of Latino students in these districts who were proficient in 2012, and numbers that are underlined represent the district meeting its target for Latino student proficiency in that grade-level and subject category.

**TABLE 4: Latino student proficiency and progress in RI high-Latino districts.**

|                      | Schools’<br>Percent Latino | Elem<br>Reading | Elem<br>Math | MS<br>Reading | MS<br>Math | HS<br>Reading | HS<br>Math |
|----------------------|----------------------------|-----------------|--------------|---------------|------------|---------------|------------|
| <b>Central Falls</b> | 73%                        | 50%             | 40%          | 56%           | 34%        | 41%           | 9%         |
| <b>Providence</b>    | 63%                        | 44%             | 38%          | 46%           | 28%        | 56%           | 16%        |
| <b>Pawtucket</b>     | 32%                        | 57%             | 45%          | 60%           | 33%        | 58%           | 11%        |
| <b>State</b>         | 19%                        | 52%             | 43%          | 58%           | 39%        | 61%           | 16%        |

There are several important observations to be made from these data. First, these three districts are almost universally below the state averages in Latino student performance. The main exceptions are in Pawtucket, where Latino elementary school students specifically are above average, as are middle school students in reading specifically. All other comparisons, however, favor the state average, and presumably economic differences among Latino families in these core urban cities versus Latinos in other more resourced Rhode Island communities explain a good portion of these disparities in achievement outcomes relative to state averages. What is still concerning, however, is the lack of annual progress among Latino students in these districts in 2012, particularly in Providence and Central Falls, where only 4 of 12 mathematics and reading annual improvement targets were met. Thus, despite some notable recent reform efforts in these districts (efforts that have been successful in the case of some other outcomes such as dropout prevention), improvement in actual measured reading and math skills was limited in these high-Latino districts.

Also, as with the national comparisons, Black students in these districts, who in RI are very similar to Latinos in terms of income,<sup>25</sup> do not demonstrate the same level of improvement challenges that their Latino peers do. While Central Falls does not have a substantial enough Black population for this comparison, the districts of Providence and Pawtucket taken together met 7 of 12 reading and mathematics progress goals for 2011–2012, or 58% of the targets, as compared to only 39% for Latinos across the three districts. Additionally, for Black students these districts also combined to be above the state average on 5 of these 12 indicators (39%), as compared to just 17% of indicators for Latinos in these core cities. Therefore, these results suggest that while ongoing reform efforts in the core urban districts may still have a ways to go in supporting students of all races and youth from low-income families, Latino

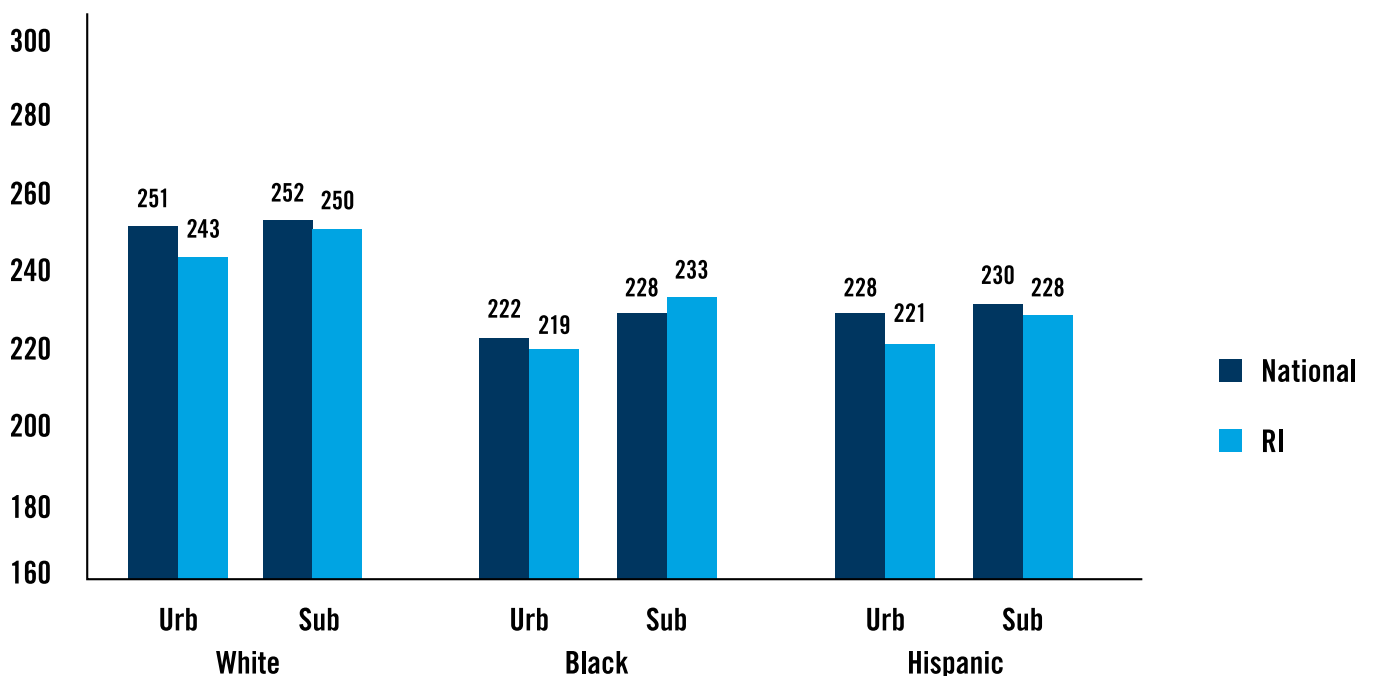
students are experiencing unique challenges to their progress in these schools according to both local and national comparisons, and also relative to Black students, a similar group economically.

Additionally, in regard to urban districts, some might argue that Rhode Island Latinos lag behind their peers nationally not only because of absolute differences in family economic resources, but specifically because these economic differences mean that Rhode Island simply has a larger proportion of low-income students in more challenging urban contexts. At the outset this explanation would seem to be somewhat unlikely since, again, 90% of all Latinos in the United States live in urban communities. Still, this analysis does assess this possibility by considering how the performance of Latino students in urban communities in RI compares to their counterparts in urban communities nationally.

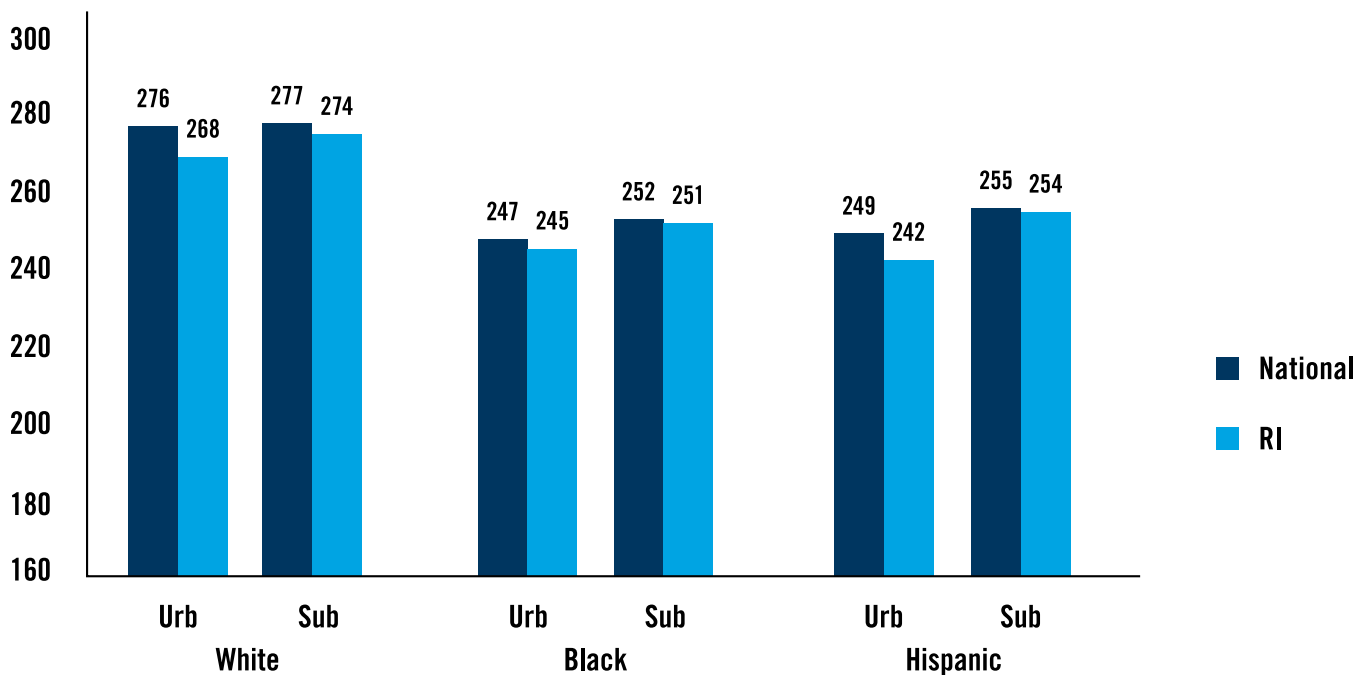
Results in Figures 2a and 2b show, however, that when compared to students attending urban schools specifically, in both 4<sup>th</sup> grade math and in 8<sup>th</sup> grade reading, White and Latino urban students in Rhode Island are significantly behind their counterparts nationally in ways that we do not see in suburban districts. There are similar trends in 8<sup>th</sup> grade math scores as well, but there the same is true for all three major racial groups. With the exception of Black students' performances, these findings may suggest that Rhode Island urban districts are less effective than other urban districts more generally. That may be the case, but for the purposes of this analysis what is most important to note is that while Latino students are found in high concentrations in urban districts in RI, their performance in these districts lags behind that of Latinos in urban districts around the country. The same is not true in the suburbs, however, nor is it true for Black students in general. These results may suggest that something specific to Latino students' experiences in Rhode Island's urban schools is negatively impacting their performance.

To test these considerations another way, the performance of Latino students in national and Rhode Island districts of various Latino concentrations were compared, under the hypothesis that if our urban districts have a problem educating Latinos, then Latinos would do more poorly in RI schools where they are more highly concentrated relative to schools with high concentrations of Latinos nationally. Results as seen in Figure 3 show that this is in fact the case: Rhode Island's Latino-heavy districts are facing struggles, even relative to high-Latino districts nationwide.

**FIGURE 2a: Comparisons of RI and national urban and suburban student 4th grade math performances by race.**

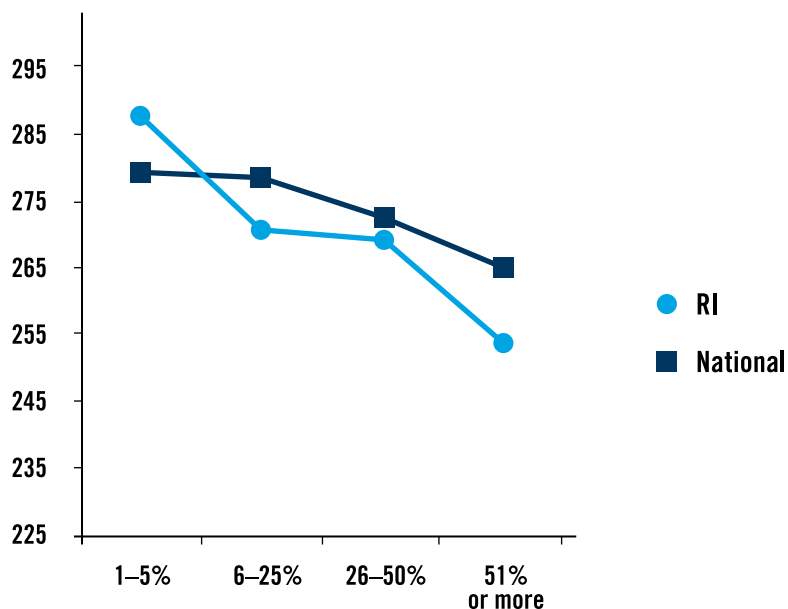


**FIGURE 2b: Comparisons of RI and national urban and suburban student 8th grade reading performances by race.**



More specifically, we can see in Figure 3 for example that in schools where Latinos themselves make up 5% or less of the population, RI Latinos actually score above the national average. In high-concentration Latino schools, however, Rhode Island’s Latino students do far worse than their national peers. In terms of measured achievement, RI Latinos in districts where they themselves are scarce score one grade-level above their national peers, but in high-Latino districts the relationship is reversed, and RI Latino students are then a grade level behind.

**FIGURE 3: Latino Student 8th Grade Math scores by school Latino-concentration.**



Overall then, the results here show that while there are economic gaps between Latinos in RI and Latinos nationally, additional findings suggest that school context factors may also be contributing to RI Latino achievement gaps. School and district contexts seem relevant because first, the achievement disparities between RI and national Latinos are larger at higher levels of socio-economic status, opening the door for something other than economics to explain at least a portion of achievement differences. Then, when comparing performances in urban districts specifically, RI Latinos tend to have lower levels of achievement than Latinos in urban districts across the nation. This is not the case, however, in suburban districts in RI. Similarly when considering how schools with high concentrations of Latinos fare

in RI versus across the nation, RI schools tend to do even worse than the national averages as the percent of Latinos in the school increases. Yet in schools with few Latinos, Latino students in RI outperform their same-race peers in similar contexts nationally. Lastly, when examining Latino student performance using local measures, Latinos in the core urban districts are showing a unique lack of progress on annual proficiency measures and relative to state averages, even when compared to their similarly disadvantaged Black counterparts in these districts. If economic factors were the sole contributors, then we would expect to see Black students progressing just as poorly in these core urban districts, but this seems to not be the case.

It should be noted that the challenges in RI's core urban districts are not going unnoticed by their respective system and school leaders. In both Central Falls and Providence, several key reform and evaluative measures have been taken to improve overall student performance. Central Falls has, for example, taken important steps to improve the parent and family engagement practices, overall school climate, and teacher evaluation practices in their school turnaround efforts. These efforts have been fruitful, with marked improvement in graduation rates (up 17% between 2010 and 2011) and a dramatic improvement in dropout rates (down from 34% to 9%).<sup>26</sup> And as we will see below, Providence has been proactive in exploring issues relevant to ELL students, a key subpopulation of Latino students. Still, taken together, the findings here are strongly suggestive of the need for targeted reforms in Rhode Island's urban schools addressing not only overall excellence, but also Latino student needs specifically. Thus, in aiding these districts' reform efforts, this analysis sought to further explore what might make the Latino students' experience unique, and the most immediate explanation is in relation to English language learning needs, an area where our high-Latino districts seem to be having particularly acute struggles.

### **The Performance of Latino English Language Learners (ELLs) in Rhode Island**

In Rhode Island, 20% of Latino students are English Language Learners (ELLs) – the broad designation given to students who are acquiring English in some capacity as a part of their formal education. Also, since approximately 75% of all ELLs in Rhode Island public schools are Latino, low performances from this group are sure to adversely affect Latino students overall.

*Rhode Island's ELL Crisis:  
RI is last among states in 8th  
grade ELL math achievement,  
and overall RI's ELL students  
have some of the lowest  
performances in the nation.*

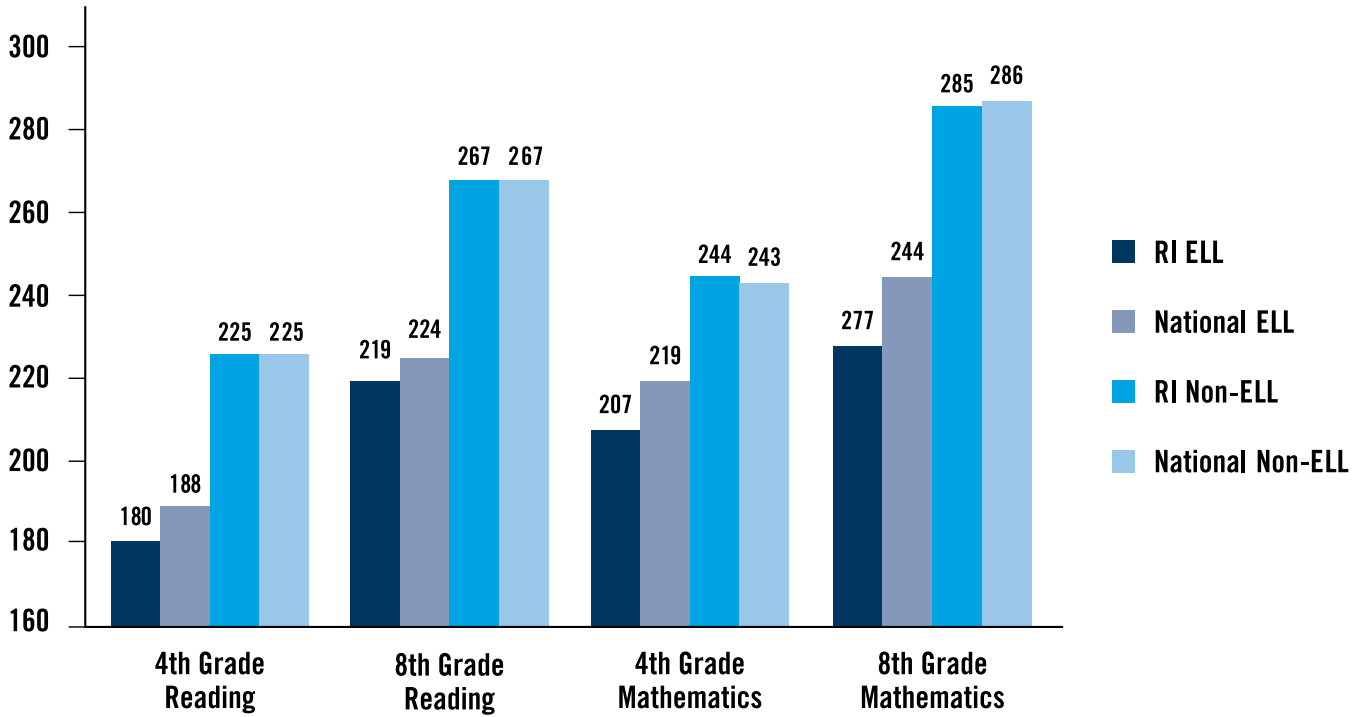
An analysis of national performance data suggests that ELL education in Rhode Island is facing a crisis – ELLs in Rhode Island have some of the lowest scores in the country, and also face some of the nation's largest achievement gaps. As we can see in Figure 4, Rhode Island ELL students have scores that are 12 points (1.2 grade levels) lower than Latinos nationally in 4<sup>th</sup> grade mathematics achievement, and in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade their math scores are 17 points (1.7 grade levels) behind their national counterparts.

The findings for reading are also displayed in Figure 4, and although less severe, they are still problematic. Overall, Rhode Island ranks

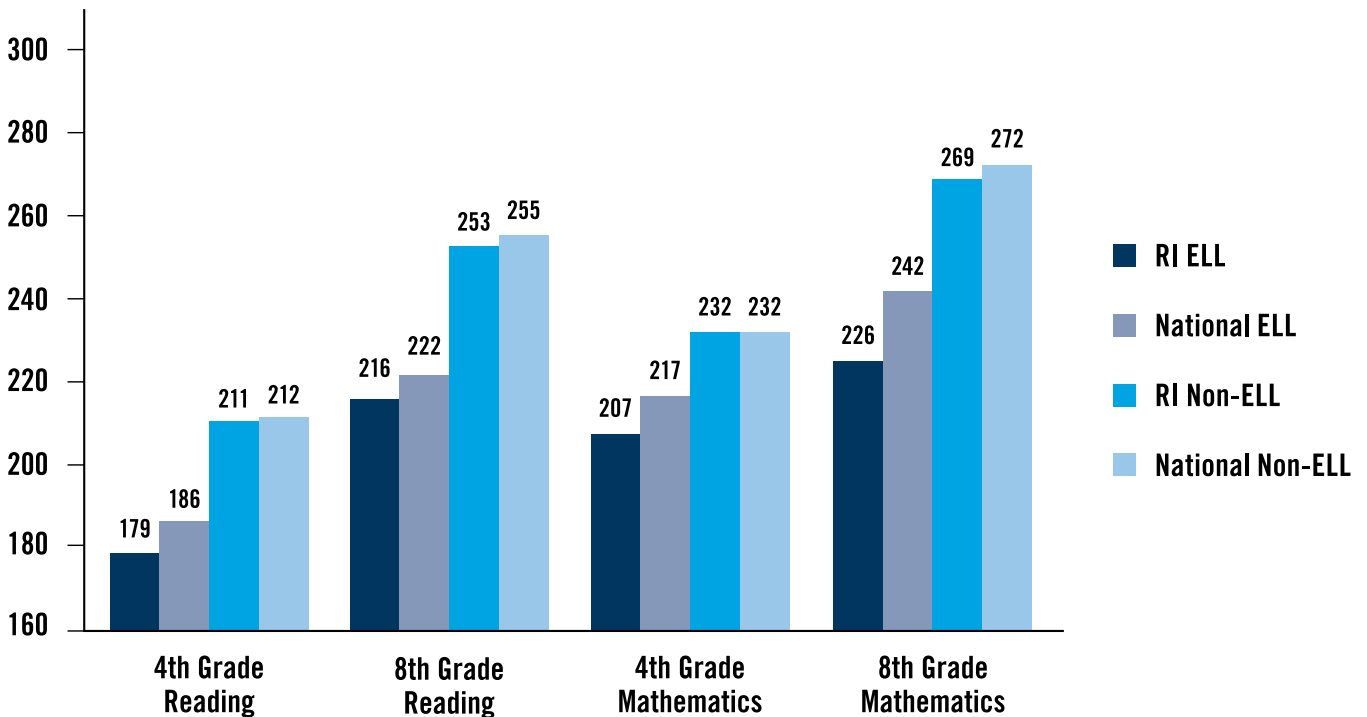
43 of 47 reporting jurisdictions on ELL 4<sup>th</sup> grade mathematics achievement, and it ranks dead last in the country in 8<sup>th</sup> grade mathematics achievement for ELL students among all reporting states and jurisdictions. Regionally in 8<sup>th</sup> grade mathematics, ELLs in RI are on average two grade levels behind their counterparts in Massachusetts, and approximately one grade level behind their peers in Connecticut and New York. Meanwhile, we can also see in Figure 4 that there are essentially no differences in Non-ELL scores in RI versus the national averages.

It is possible that this stark underperformance of ELLs in RI is a product of their economic positioning rather than the quality of education they are receiving. To test this premise, comparisons were made between ELL students in the state and the nation who are eligible for free or reduced lunch (FRL) (an indicator of lower socio-economic status), and specifically of ELL students in urban districts. As seen in Figure 5, the results show that FRL-eligible ELLs in the state perform less well than their counterparts with similar economic disadvantage, while non-FRL-eligible ELL students in the state and nation scored similarly.

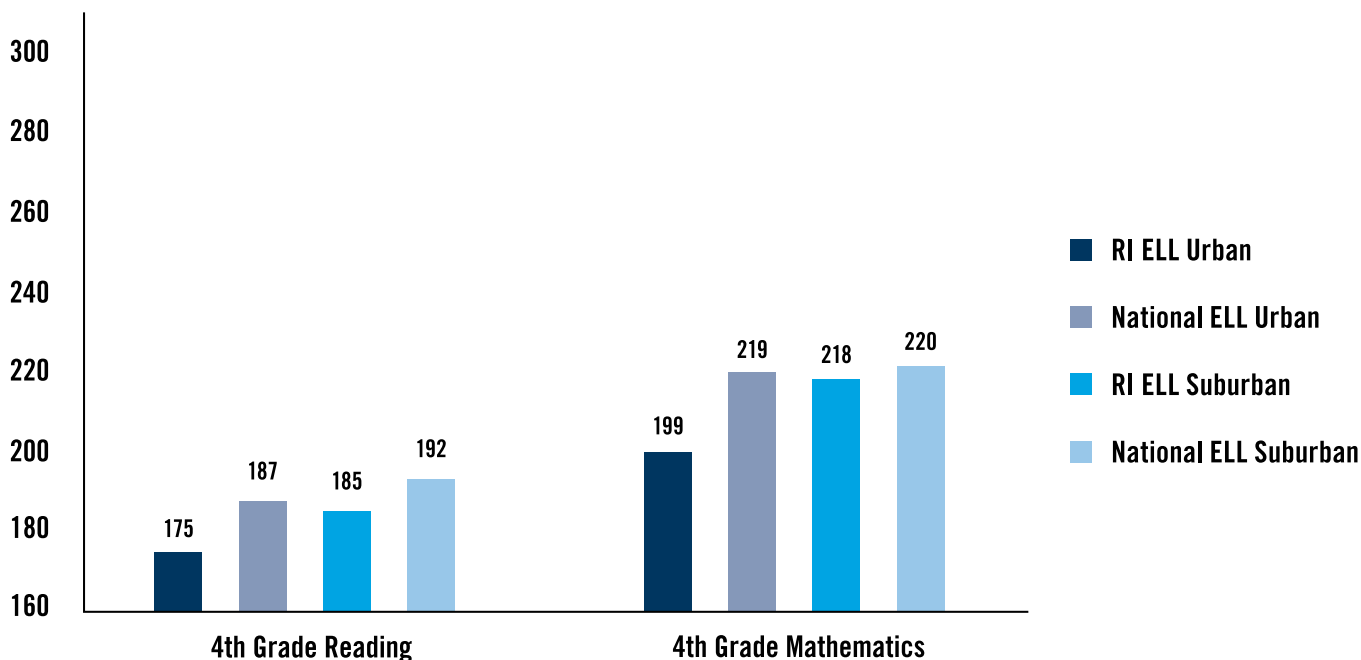
**FIGURE 4: Comparison of ELL and non-ELL student achievement in Rhode Island and nationally.**



**FIGURE 5: Comparison of free or reduced lunch-eligible students in Rhode Island vs. nationally by ELL status.**



**FIGURE 6: Comparison of ELLs and non-ELLs by urban school status in Rhode Island and nationally.**



Because low-income Latino students tend to be concentrated in urban districts, the findings in Figure 5 may be speaking to the aforementioned challenges in the RI urban school experience as well. Figure 6 examines this possibility more directly, displaying the scores of ELLs and non-ELLs on 4<sup>th</sup> grade NAEP exams comparing those in urban districts in Rhode Island and nationally.<sup>27</sup> In it, we see that like Latinos overall, Rhode Island ELLs attending urban schools are further behind their national counterparts than are the state’s suburban ELLs. These findings clearly show that not only are low-income ELLs struggling, but ELLs in urban RI districts are struggling more broadly. Thus far, regarding ELLs, we have noted that a substantial proportion of the Latino student body in Rhode Island are learning English as a part of their formal education, and unfortunately it seems that Rhode Island is currently one of the lowest performing states in the country in educating these types of students. And although Rhode Island’s Latino population is somewhat more economically disadvantaged than Latinos nationally, even when we focus on FRL-eligible ELL students only, we see that Rhode Island’s ELL students still lag behind their peers nationwide. Given that approximately 20% of Latino public school students in RI are ELLs, it seems highly likely that the poor performance of ELL students in RI relative to ELL students elsewhere is an important contributor to RI Latino achievement gaps.

Additionally, given that over 70% of Latinos in RI are concentrated in just three cities – Central Falls, Pawtucket, and Providence – it is worth examining the performance of ELLs in these high-Latino districts as we consider whether the larger disparities are at least in part rooted in students’ educational experiences. To that end, the figures in Table 5 suggest that our core urban districts are struggling mightily to educate their ELL students. Across these districts, only 3 of 18 annual proficiency targets were met in 2012 (17%),<sup>28</sup> and even within these three successes, two of the targets were under 20% for proficiency, which tells us how challenging the issues here actually are. The numbers for high school ELLs are particularly troubling, with 0% and 1% of high school ELLs being proficient in mathematics in Providence and Pawtucket respectively. Central Falls, where major high school reform initiatives have been underway since 2010, fairs slightly better, but still needs vast improvement. Finally, the state as a whole does not fare much better – at the state level Rhode Island met zero proficiency targets in math and reading for its ELL learners in 2012.



**TABLE 5: Performance of ELL students in high-Latino districts.**

|                      | Elem Reading | Elem Math | MS Reading | MS Math | HS Reading | HS Math |
|----------------------|--------------|-----------|------------|---------|------------|---------|
| <b>Central Falls</b> | 20%          | 20%       | 15%        | 6%      | 23%        | 7%      |
| <b>Providence</b>    | 28%          | 26%       | 18%        | 8%      | 13%        | 0%      |
| <b>Pawtucket</b>     | 40%          | 24%       | 35%        | 20%     | 20%        | 1%      |
| <b>State</b>         | 34%          | 29%       | 33%        | 21%     | 22%        | 5%      |

It seems clear then that when looking at both national comparisons and local performance, statewide our schools and districts are struggling to educate ELL students. And given that 75% of ELL students in the state are Latino, it is likely that this issue is having an important effect on the underperformance of this group relative to both their same race peers nationally and also their other-race peers within this state. Thus, it is critical that measures be taken to address this ELL crisis in RI schools. In the recommendations section, several approaches are suggested for both adjusting reforms at the district level and providing more targeted oversight and coordination at the state-level as well.

### Generational Status

Another important consideration is the immigration generational status of Latino students in Rhode Island. If, for example, Rhode Island has a substantially higher proportion of foreign-born Latino students, then it is conceivable that part of the achievement issue is tied to needs for language acquisition that have not been accommodated, along with issues related to the immigration experience, cultural factors, or some combination of the three. Data from the American Community Survey show that Rhode Island’s percentage of foreign-born Latino residents is in fact above the national average. Nationally, approximately 7.3% of all Latinos under age 18 were born outside of the United States; in Rhode Island that number is notably higher, at 11.8%. Moreover, among Latino residents of all ages, RI ranks 12<sup>th</sup> in the nation in proportion who are foreign born, at 42%.

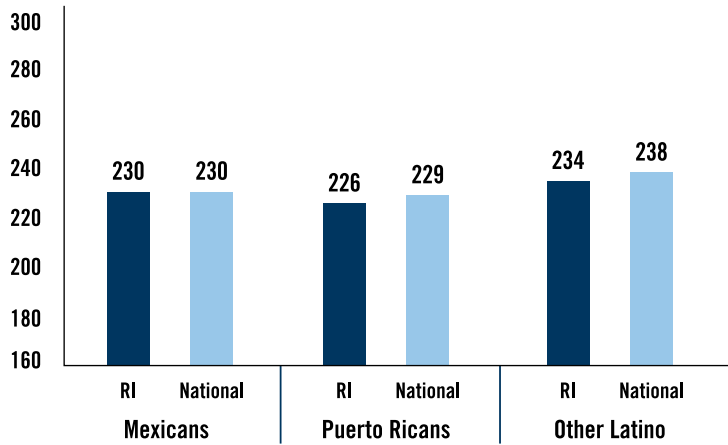
Thus, it is likely that the effects of more recent immigration has some bearing on Latino student achievement in this state, particularly with respect to ELL student needs. It is important to note, however, the proportion of foreign-born Latino residents does not seem to be a strong predictor of ELL performance specifically.<sup>29</sup> What is most likely then, is that given the performance of ELL students in Rhode Island, the higher percentage of foreign-born Latino students and parents in the state raises the ELL needs of a system that is already stretched in this area. Thus, the relatively high percentage of foreign-born Latino residents in Rhode Island is likely contributing to the Latino student disparities by exacerbating the existing ELL challenges that students in the core urban districts are facing.

### Latino Subgroup Performances

Another issue in understanding Latino student achievement is the tendency to see Latino students as a monolithic group, when in fact there are many key intra-racial differences, particularly in considering intra-racial group compositions across states. Relative to other high-Latino states, which typically have large Mexican and Mexican American populations, Rhode Island’s Latino population is unique in that it contains Dominican, Guatemalan, Puerto Rican, and Colombian enclaves, many of them established in the last 20 to 30 years.<sup>30</sup> In fact, while Dominicans and Guatemalans make up large portions of the Latino population in Rhode Island, these groups comprise only 2.8% and 2.1% of the national Latino population, respectively. If some achievement trends are specific to these groups, then we would expect to see these differences factor into Latino student achievement levels in ways that are unique to Rhode Island and other states with similar ethnic compositions within their Latino communities.

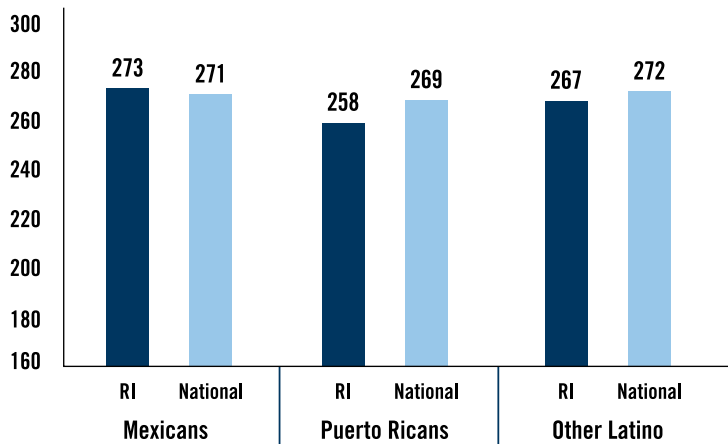
NAEP data offers some basic designations for subgroups along the following categories: Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, and Other Latino. According to these delineations, the largest group represented in Rhode Island is the group of “Other Latinos,” with Puerto Ricans second. Figures 7 and 8 display NAEP mathematics comparisons of the Rhode Island and National Latino subgroups that have significant representation in this state.

**FIGURE 6: NAEP 4th grade mathematics performance by Latino subgroup in RI and nationally.**



As seen in Figures 6 and 7, the two most highly represented groups in RI are also the highest and lowest performing groups both locally and nationally, Other Latino and Puerto Ricans, respectively. Reading outcome patterns are similar, and the fact that the most highly represented group of Latinos in RI is also the highest achieving group means it's unlikely that intra-racial group dynamics are substantially impacting the achievement disparities between local and national Latino groups. Even with the significant presence in RI of the lowest performing group, since Other Latinos comprise approximately two-thirds of the Latino population in the state, what is most likely is that the impact of intra-racial differences between the local and national groups favor Rhode Island students.

**FIGURE 7: NAEP 8th grade mathematics performance by Latino subgroup in RI and nationally.**



What is also very clear from Figures 6 and 7 is that in nearly every case for every group, Latinos nationally outperform their peers from the same subgroups in Rhode Island. The only exceptions across either reading or math outcomes is math outcomes for Mexicans, where Rhode Island Latinos of Mexican descent are tied with their national counterparts in 4<sup>th</sup> grade and have a slight edge in the 8<sup>th</sup>. Mexicans, however, comprise only 7% of all Rhode Island Latinos, and this group's exceptional performance is not indicative of the overall performance of Latino students statewide.

Overall then, a look at the performances of subgroups suggests that the intra-racial composition does not disfavor Rhode Island Latinos; rather, it may in fact bolster the local performance levels.

What we do see, however, is that Latinos in almost

every subgroup in RI consistently perform less well than their national counterparts, and the overall conclusion here is that intra-racial group composition likely makes no negative contribution to RI Latino achievement gaps.

### Teacher and Administrator Demographics

Although 22% of students in Rhode Island public schools are Latinos, and despite ranking 13th among states in its proportion of Latino residents, reports suggest that Latino teachers comprise only 1.5% of the teaching force in the state, which ranks Rhode Island 30<sup>th</sup> among states in its proportion of Latino teachers.<sup>31, 32</sup> The numbers for school principals are slightly better, although still highly disproportionate: Rhode Island ranks 16<sup>th</sup> nationally with 2.4% of its school principals being Latino. Given these disparities, and especially given the needs of English Language Learners in the state, increasing the presence of Latino, Spanish-fluent teachers and administrators in Rhode Island schools may be a beneficial point of policy.

Existing research provides some support for this approach, with studies suggesting that having teachers of the same race has positive effects both on student performance<sup>33</sup> and on rates of enrollment in higher-level courses.<sup>34</sup> Another prominent study found that among low SES students specifically, teachers of the same race tended to hold

these students' performances in higher regard,<sup>35</sup> which is important because teacher perceptions are gatekeepers for subsequent educational opportunities. Still other findings suggest that teachers from similar backgrounds could 1) serve as "cultural straddlers" who are unlikely to see urban students' self-presentations as incongruent with intelligence or achievement,<sup>36</sup> and who 2) may be perhaps more likely to use the students' funds of knowledge (i.e. the students' own cultural knowledge and experiences) as the basis of their instructional strategies.<sup>37</sup> These findings may be especially true for Latino students, where English Language Learning and transitioning from such programs to mainstream classrooms is of high importance.

Thus, an idea meriting further consideration is whether the vast racial mismatch that Latino students face in RI may be hampering their potential achievement. Although more data is needed to answer this question directly, addressing the under-representation of Latino teachers and leaders in Rhode Island schools should be a sensible component of an overall attempt to improve Latino students' educational experiences, particularly in our core urban districts that serve many low-income families and students.

### III. Recommendations

A look at the performance of Latino students in Rhode Island points us to two general conclusions. First, it is almost certain that unfavorable economic conditions are adversely affecting Latino students' performance. Latinos in RI on average earn 26% less than do Latinos nationally, and they earn half of what Whites do in the state. These discrepancies in family resources predict disparities in educational outcomes, and they are likely very important here, particularly with regards to the Latino-White achievement gap in Rhode Island. While beyond the scope of this report, economic interventions that seek to create additional and sustainable revenue for Latino families in RI should be explored and developed.

Second, despite ongoing general reform efforts, the educational experiences of Latino students in RI's high-Latino urban districts may be problematic. Across the three high Latino districts that house over 70% of all Latinos in RI – Central Falls, Pawtucket, and Providence – Latino students met annual yearly progress on only 7 of 18 mathematics and reading indicators, and were below the state average for Latinos on 15 of 18 indicators. These indicators were not as severe for Black students, and the results for ELL students are actually even worse. For example, in 2012 in Providence, the percent of ELL high school students who were proficient in Mathematics was 0%.<sup>38</sup>

Economic indicators can be powerful predictors, but we cannot and should not expect economics to produce a 0% proficiency rating for a sizable student group in our state capital's school district. The findings outlined above provide a compelling case for the fact that school-based experiences are adversely impacting the achievement of our state's Latino students, especially ELL students. Ultimately, there is reason to think that ELL Latino students in RI are not receiving either the same quality or appropriately tailored education that their peers in some other states are receiving.

These conclusions are also supported by recent research from the Council of Great City Schools (CGCS), a consortium of urban district leaders that has outlined best practices for ELL students in urban districts. Providence is in fact a member of this consortium, and to the credit of the Providence Public School Department (PPSD) a team of reviewers was invited to the district in 2011–2012 to examine ELL programming. While finding some strengths, the CGCS generally found substantial barriers to ELL achievement in Providence, making nearly 80 recommendations for improving ELL achievement in PPSD. While the other high-Latino districts have not been examined in this capacity, given their less than satisfactory ELL achievement, it is likely that there are needs for ELL educational practice improvements in those districts as well. Also, since neither Latino students nor ELLs in RI's suburban districts exhibit sweeping gaps when compared to their suburban counterparts nationally, both the ELL issues and other Latino student challenges seem to be concentrated in urban districts in Rhode Island. Any interventions, then, should begin in this context.

Despite these challenges, there is hope; both national comparisons and comparisons across local schools tell us that we can do more to support our Latino students as well as the schools and districts that educate them. It begins by identifying best practices, and fortunately these best practices in ELL education can be observed in both high performing local schools and also in high performing districts nationally. Below, recommendations for identifying and building on these existing local and national best practices and reform efforts are put forward, as well as suggestions for leveraging our understanding of local challenges and utilizing key findings from research on Latino student achievement. Together, these courses of action will help narrow the achievement gaps between Latino students in RI and their national peers, and also between Latino students and White students in RI as well.

## 1. Re-envision ELL programming and instruction in Providence, based on the existing review of the Providence district.

Perhaps the most urgent finding in this report is around the deeply troubling performance of English Language Learners in our core urban districts. To its credit, the district of Providence has repeatedly in the past acknowledged the challenge they are having with ELL instruction, and the 2011–2012 district-commissioned evaluation by the Council of Great City Schools provided nearly 80 suggestions for reforms in the areas of organization, oversight, and instruction around ELL programs at the district level.<sup>39, 40</sup> Among the numerous improvement needs in Providence that were cited by the CGCS, a few that may warrant immediate prioritization include:

- **The development of a strategic vision and long-term plan for meeting ELL needs.** Without established expectations for ELL achievement, staff members across departments may not assume responsibility for ELL student success.
- **Increased utilization of differentiated instruction, as guided by student language competencies in their native language or English.** This includes clarity and consistency across the district around how students' native languages will be leveraged in instruction.
- **Improve ELL student access to the district's general and advanced curricula.** This need may best be illustrated by the fact that there are currently no bilingual/ESL services being provided at Classical High School,<sup>41</sup> which may suggest that ELL students with high academic skill levels in their native languages are not readily accommodated in what has traditionally been the city's most competitive high school. It was also noted that too many ELLs receive watered-down versions of curricula in self-contained classrooms, and it is important to remember that a lack of English fluency is not equivalent with a lack of ability or aptitude in core academic areas.
- **Improve the quality of ELL program evaluations, as well as assessments for ELL students.** This includes the need to use Spanish language content assessments with students.
- **Improve the high rate of turnover in district leadership.** The district has had five different superintendents in the last decade, including two since the CGCS review was initiated in 2011. This type of turnover makes sustained education reform efforts in any area very challenging, and in this respect ELL programming is no different.

Overall the CGCS suggested that ELL instruction in Providence has not been well coordinated or supported in the district, and that there seems to be a need for a more strategic and more highly prioritized approach to ELL education in Providence. Again, that was a report that the district commissioned, and they should be commended for this effort. That said, because this report was commissioned by a superintendent who has since exited the district, it is thus imperative that the new district leadership follow through on the council's recommendations, and that the task force that was established to address these concerns continues to prioritize, design, and implement system-wide reforms.<sup>42</sup>

## 2. Improve ELL programming in the core urban districts through the creation of a state-wide inter-district ELL task force to leverage and centralize established best practices.

District-wide initiatives around ELL program reform are beginning to receive wider attention nationally, and best

practices have emerged that have promise for our districts. In addition to making recommendations for Providence – recommendations that can likely be adapted for other RI urban districts – the Council of Great City Schools also compiled a set of best practices from large urban districts nationwide that have made great strides in ELL programming.<sup>43</sup> The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development has also compiled a set of best practices for adolescent ELL programs.<sup>44</sup> Several of these practices seem particularly appropriate for the Rhode Island urban context, and it is in the best interest of both the Rhode Island Department of Education as well as the local urban districts to coordinate efforts to identify and implement these practices in Rhode Island on behalf of our ELL students in need of high-quality programming.

### General District-level Recommendations from CGCS:

- **Clear instructional vision and high expectations for ELLs at the district level:** Clearly articulated and communicated goals for ELL students are key, as is holding ELL students to the same expectations as other students in the district. This vision can be a part of larger, district-wide reading and literacy reform initiatives for all students.
- **Empowerment of the ELL offices:** Given the sizable proportion of ELL students in our core high-Latino districts, ELL leaders in the district should be participating in programming and reform conversations at the highest levels of district management.
- **Systematic use of student subgroup data:** In high performing districts, ELL data was used by school staff to both track student progress and plan subsequent programming adjustments. It is particularly important that the district and schools have cultures of data utilization so that the effective and timely usage of data can be ensured.
- **Cultivate key instructional capacities among teachers and administrators:** Several critically important instructional practices have emerged from the CGCS research, practices that should be vigorously pursued in high-Latino districts:
  - Explicit focus on academic language in addition to English language development
  - Professional development on differentiated instruction and second-language instruction, not just in Reading and Language Arts, but across the curriculum
  - Ensure ELL student access to highly qualified ELL personnel
  - Ensure that ELL students have access to high-level student curricula, including gifted and talented programming
  - Be sure that there is a district-level point person to oversee progress

### Adolescent ELL Recommendations from ASCD:

- **School-wide, team-based support:** Educators in a given school need to assume shared responsibility for the achievement of ELLs.
- **A dual curriculum:** Schools need to provide a curriculum that promotes both English language development as well as their general academic needs across the curriculum. ASCD explains: “A viable curriculum must include a detailed developmental sequence for learning the English language in social and academic contexts; this is in contrast to a language arts curriculum for native speakers, which primarily seeks to add academic discourse to the native language that a student brings to school.”
- **Maintain and make easily available records of individual english language learners’ linguistic and academic history and ongoing progress:** ASCD cites Lucas, Villegas, and Freedson-Gonzalez who write, “Mainstream teachers need to learn about the language and academic backgrounds of the ELLs in their classes, because without this knowledge, teachers cannot anticipate the aspects of learning that are likely to be too difficult for their ELLs to handle without instructional supports.”<sup>45</sup>

The CGCS recommendations are based on the successful work of other comparably high-Latino districts nationwide, including San Francisco, Dallas, New York City, and St. Paul. Also, ASCD is a network of highly experienced and qualified leaders in education. Thus, the recommendations of both organizations can go a long way towards improving the prospects of ELLs in RI, 75% of which are Latino.

### **3. Orient the Rhode Island Department of Education more explicitly toward racial equity and ELL student performance.**

Along with the previous recommendation on inter-district and state-level cooperation, the Rhode Island Department of Education – which is uniquely positioned to support and coordinate reforms around Latino student achievement across districts – should raise the profile of conceptions of equity within its organizational structure and strategic priorities, particularly as it pertains to Latino and ELL student performance. Such an effort may have a three-fold approach.

First, either in revisions to the current strategic plan or in the next iteration of strategic planning, priorities around equity, culturally relevant teaching practice, and specific goals for students of different cultural backgrounds should explicitly accompany the existing rhetoric around excellence for all in the state-level priorities. The analysis here suggests that the Rhode Island Department of Education's stated focus on excellence for all is not trickling down to reasonable progress in the performances of Latino and ELL students. Thus, issues of differentiation and cultural relevance need to be mission-critical at the state-level. The current strategic plan has only limited attention to equity, differentiation, and cultural relevance,<sup>46</sup> and the analysis here suggests that Latino achievement disparities will likely remain unresolved by an overall focus on excellence in the absence of explicit attention to Latino students' unique social, cultural, and educational experiences.

Second, an equity focus may also specifically include extracting ELL student services from the oversight of the Office of Student, Community, and Academic Supports, where ELL student needs are grouped with those of students experiencing delinquency and/or homelessness, special education students, and students who are more generally economically disadvantaged. These disparate groups of students require very unique supports, and as such, ELL students may be more effectively served by an increase in state-level concentrated attention to their specific linguistic and cultural needs.

Third, and similarly, given the rising profile of Latino students in Rhode Island, RIDE should consider establishing an office that is solely focused on alleviating racial achievement disparities where they exist in relation to Rhode Island schools. Such offices already exist in other states with relatively high Latino achievement such as Florida and Massachusetts, and in RI such an office should be charged with addressing gaps not only across groups within the state, but also gaps between Rhode Island students and students from comparable backgrounds nationally.

### **4. Increase the number of teachers and administrators with social backgrounds similar to Latino students.**

Given the high percentage of Latinos in some of the core city schools (e.g. over 60% in Providence and over 70% in Central Falls), the percentage of Latino teachers and principals serving the students in the state (1–3%) are astonishingly low. Yet there is research suggesting that having teachers of the same race bolsters achievement and is related to students being enrolled in higher courses. Importantly, having more Latino teachers must also mean having more Spanish-speaking faculty who understand the social conditions of students and their families. Urban Latino adolescents need teachers and administrators who understand their personal styles and youth culture – teachers who are less likely to see their students' self-presentations as incongruent with intelligence or achievement,<sup>47</sup> and who may be more likely to use students' home culture as the basis of their instructional strategies.<sup>48</sup> Having teachers from similar backgrounds will do more to ensure that these conditions are met, and this priority will improve the learning experiences of Latino students, including ensuring that capable youth are receiving opportunities to engage in more challenging and advanced coursework. These teachers will also be tremendous assets to their colleagues from other cultural and linguistic backgrounds who are committed to improving the cultural relevance of their teaching practice.

Additionally, these human capital needs must signal a call to arms to our local teacher training programs, which may need to be more proactive in recruiting and developing the teachers of tomorrow with backgrounds similar to those of our core urban students. Certainly this imperative relies critically on the work of our traditional teacher licensure



programs, such as those at Providence College, Rhode Island College, and the University of Rhode Island. It also may mean, however raising the profile of alternative certification programs, which have in some cases been shown to increase the number of minority teachers entering the teaching force.<sup>49</sup> Any and all avenues should be considered in this fight for a more representative teaching force.

## **5. Employ professional development initiatives that utilize the great work of local schools that are currently succeeding with urban Latino and ELL populations.**

Despite the challenges that Latino and ELL students in the core urban districts are facing, there are several schools that are producing commendable results with these populations in both the core urban municipal and charter districts. Though it is beyond the scope of this report to review individual school performances, it would be advantageous to build on the excellence that many of our local schools are exhibiting, in efforts to share best practices in instructional leadership, as well as linguistically and culturally responsive approaches, including the use of dual language instruction. These schools are easily identified through publically available NECAP results, and this leveraging is perhaps best done through peer-led professional development for teachers and school leaders at the state or district level. Utilizing Rhode Island's home-grown expertise should be a high priority given the commonalities that RI's schools and districts share in serving Latino students.

## **6. Focus on developing school cultures that foster relationships and personalized educational experiences for students.**

While all students thrive from personalized and encouraging relationships, research shows that encouragement and connectedness are particularly important to the success of Black and Latino students in urban schools.<sup>50, 51</sup> In fact, while White students on average will respond to high demandingness in the absence of encouragement in academics, Black and Latino are less impacted by high demand without such warmth. Thus, our core urban schools will benefit from emphasizing school cultural elements of relationship, community, and collaborative success in the learning process for their students. Strong cultures of connectedness and achievement will propel Latino student success and narrow achievement gaps.

## **7. Ensure state-of-the art instruction and instructional leadership in the core urban districts, for all students, schools, and classrooms.**

Ultimately, nothing is more important than the effectiveness of the teacher in front of the students. When we consider the experience of Latino students and ELLs in Rhode Island, we must closely examine the quality of the teachers they encounter not only relative to their peers in Whiter and more affluent schools, but also relative to their peers in mainstream and/or advanced programs within the same schools. Key components of this effort are recruiting and retaining the most capable teachers to our urban districts, and also implementing professional development initiatives that have proven to be effective in promoting differentiated instruction techniques among all students. If we want our Latino students to succeed at high levels, we must insure that their schools and classrooms are staffed with the most capable individuals we can find.





## IV. Conclusions

Latinos are the largest racial/ethnic group in our state at 12.8% and it is growing rapidly; the Latino population has tripled statewide since 1990. Latinos in Rhode Island are a relatively young population as well, with 34% of the group under the age of 18, as compared to only 21% of Rhode Island residents statewide. Latinos are also highly represented in the state's core urban schools: 72% of Central Falls students are Latino, 63% of Providence public school students are, and the Pawtucket, Woonsocket, and Newport school districts are over 20% as well. As Latinos increase in presence, however, issues of Latino students' achievement levels become paramount to the future health of the state. Latinos in RI are scoring as many as 3 grade levels behind their White peers on some assessments, and moreover, Latinos in the state also trail their national counterparts, ranking as low as 43<sup>rd</sup> on national achievement measures.

As noted above, the causes of the Latino achievement challenges in the state are multifaceted, and the findings here cannot be considered definitively causal. Still, some eye-opening patterns have been raised by these results, and this analysis suggests that the most pressing issues seem to be twofold. First, there are significant economic gaps between Latinos in RI and their national counterparts and between Latinos and Whites in RI. Given these conditions, economic interventions that bolster the financial prospects of Latino families in RI would be an effective way to impact achievement of Latino students here, over time making them more competitive with White students locally and their same-race peers nationally.

These economic indicators, however, are likely not the only causes of disparities – particularly between local and national Latinos. First, results from NAEP show that the disparities between local and national Latinos are actually larger among students who are not eligible for free or reduced lunch. Second, when comparing results specifically among students in urban schools, Latinos in RI are behind their national counterparts on all achievement measures examined here, and the same is true when examining schools with high proportions of Latinos. Finally, the most concerning achievement gaps between RI and national cohorts are among ELL students, 75% of which in RI are Latino – Rhode Island ELL students are some of the worst-performing in the country. These differences persist even among low-income students specifically, which suggests that these results are not likely to be based strictly on economic conditions. Given all these findings, a reasonable conclusion is that school experiences are in fact impacting the Latino achievement gap between Rhode Island and national populations.

Addressing the issue of Latino achievement in Rhode Island is critical to the long-term well-being of all Rhode Island residents, as Latinos are on the rise both numerically and politically. Fortunately, emerging research and best practices have improved our ability to narrow Latino-White achievement gaps in the U.S., and these same approaches if applied more widely here in Rhode Island can help close local-national gaps as well among Latino students. Some – but certainly not all – of these recommendations are noted above, and the time is now to ensure that the coming generations of Latino Rhode Islanders are well equipped to serve and lead in the Ocean State. With thoughtful and reflective state and district leadership, attention to instructional practice, and a committed public, we can make this equity possible in our schools while also ensuring excellence for all Rhode Island students.

# Notes and References

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- <sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, demographic and economic statistics are taken from the United States Census Bureau.
- <sup>3</sup> The term Latino here is used to represent populations in national and local datasets that are designated as either Latino or Hispanic, and includes Latinos from both White and non-white backgrounds.
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- <sup>9</sup> Ideally, other richer and more nuanced performance assessments would be used in this type of analysis. These types of measures, however, do not yet demonstrate the necessary consistency across teachers, schools, and districts necessary for large-scale comparisons. Still, efforts to scale up the reliability of these measures are ongoing, and such measures should be considered for future iterations of these types of analyses as our systems for employing them reliably across contexts develop.
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- <sup>11</sup> Providence Schools. (2011). *Providence schools at a glance*. <http://www.providenceschools.org/media/115021/ppsd%20fact%20sheet%201011.pdf>
- <sup>12</sup> For NAEP scores, 10-point differences are commonly interpreted as a single grade level difference.
- <sup>13</sup> Only 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade NAEP measures are collected annually. For the 12<sup>th</sup> grade, measures are collected every 3 years, but they often reflect students' actual skills less reliably than do those collected earlier in students' academic trajectories.
- <sup>14</sup> All national comparisons of student mathematics and reading performances were conducted using the National Center for Education Statistics NAEP data explorer: <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/naepdata/>
- <sup>15</sup> Puerto Rico is not included in any of these national comparisons.
- <sup>16</sup> The only exception is 8<sup>th</sup> grade math. On that particular outcome, Latinos in RI still rank 43<sup>rd</sup> nationally, but in this category all three groups in Rhode Island are in the bottom half of states (Black and White students are 36<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> in their respective distributions).
- <sup>17</sup> National Center for Education Statistics (2012). *The condition of education: Status dropout rates*. <http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=16>
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- <sup>22</sup> These NAEP numbers are not available for non-FRL Black students in RI.
- <sup>23</sup> It is worth noting that FRL is a crude economic indicator and there is a wide economic range among families that are not eligible. Thus, it is possible that economic differences are responsible for the RI vs. National differences in achievement among non-FRL Latino families. Nevertheless, the more similar results among eligible students – and the nonexistence of a comparable economic dynamic among White students – suggested that further exploration was warranted regarding whether non-economic indicators were also important determinants to Latino achievement gaps.
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- <sup>25</sup> The Black median household income is approximately 10% higher than that of Latinos.
- <sup>26</sup> Annenberg Institute for School Reform (2013). Parent engagement in the Central Falls High School Turnaround. Retrieved from the Voices in Urban Education website:<http://vue.annenberginstitute.org/in-the-field/parent-engagement-central>
- <sup>27</sup> NAEP data cross-tabulations for 8<sup>th</sup> grade outcomes by urbanicity and ELL status are not available for Rhode Island.
- <sup>28</sup> It is worth noting that because of an accounting practice whereby they add the error term to the actual percent proficient, the Rhode Island Department of Education actually reports more targets met than the actual results seem to warrant. The statistical merits of such a practice, however, are debatable and that approach was not followed here.
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**About LPI**

The Latino Policy Institute (LPI) is committed to generating and communicating non-partisan data of Latinos in Rhode Island. The LPI will stimulate public policy discourse and enhance the public's understanding of the Rhode Island Latino experience. With this information, Latinos' social, economic and civic contributions to the state can be better documented and understood.





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