

Opening Closed Doors

Idaho grapples with solutions to the high dropout rate among Hispanic students

By Kristin Tucker

When addressing the educational concerns of Hispanics in Idaho today, there are tough issues to tackle. In this FOCUS, we take a look at a few of those issues — and some of the personalities who are at the forefront of this important debate.

Teenagers like Ramon tell a familiar story. Just 10 when he left his native Mexico six years ago, now he works at an occasional odd job. But most of the time he hangs out with his friends. School is not part of the picture.

When he did find time to go to school, he found it an alien place where he didn't feel comfortable among his mostly Anglo classmates and teachers. Like hundreds of his peers, he first skipped school, then just left.

Ramon's story is repeated in practically every school district in southern Idaho, where Hispanic students are closing the door on formal education—and often on their future.

Last year Idaho schools enrolled more than 8,500 students who are classified as "migrants" under federal guidelines. And in the last 10 years, the number of students with limited English has increased 169 percent statewide. Many of them will never make it to their senior year. Exact statistics do not exist, but state officials estimate that between 40-60 percent of Idaho's Hispanic students drop out of school.

"If we don't deal with the dropout rate now, we are going to pay 10 years down the road with social problems," says BSU sociologist Richard Baker, who this fall began a study of the factors surrounding the dropout rate of Hispanic students at Nampa High School.

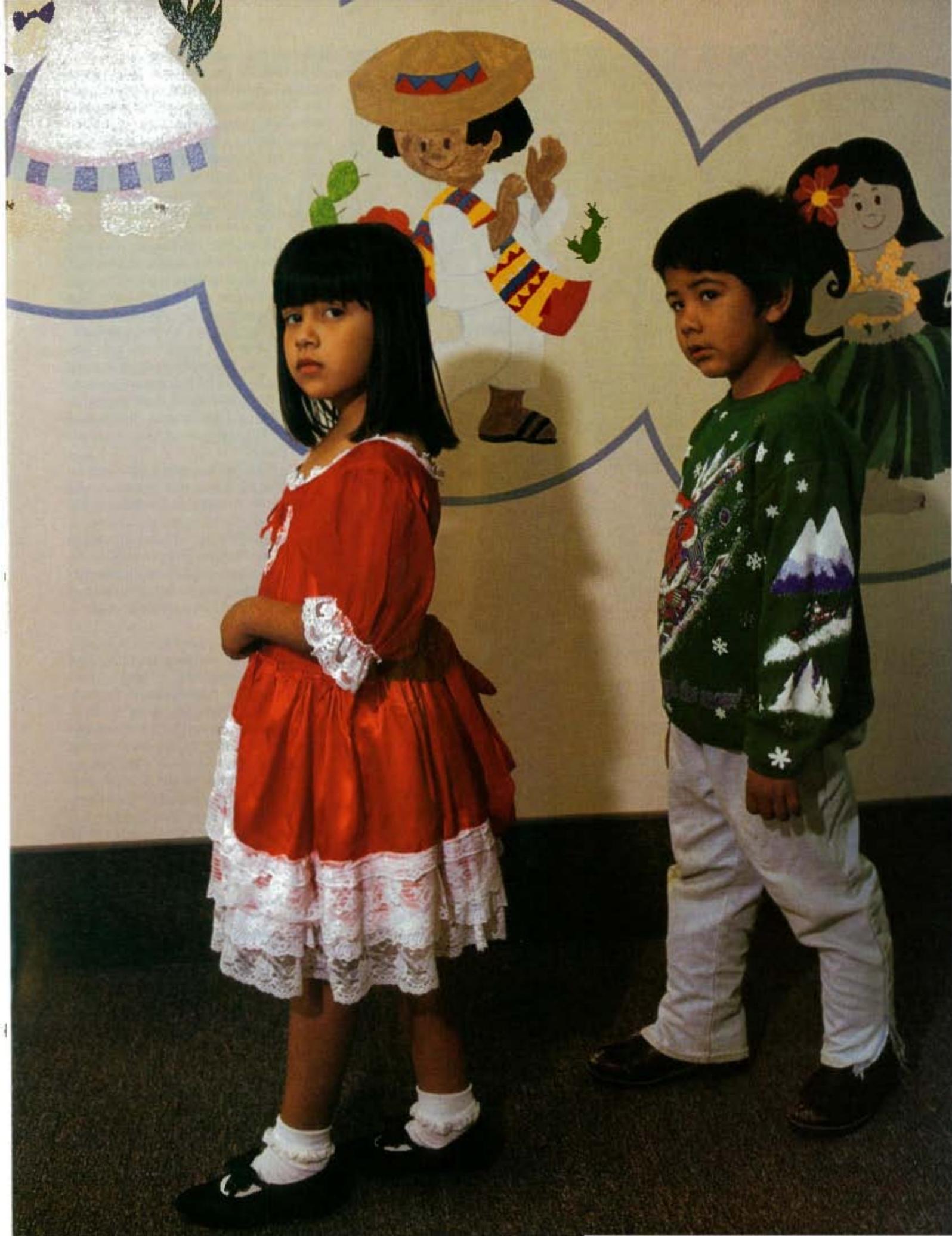
"Everybody is blaming everybody else. We don't really know who or what is responsible. There are lots of dimensions to the problem. But we do know intervention works. We have to get to these kids at an age when they can turn their lives around," says Baker, who will interview Hispanic students, administrators, teachers and parents over the next three years.

Even without the data Baker's study will eventually provide, there is no shortage of analysis — or suggested solutions — to the problem.

The latest report, "Educating the Children of Idaho Farmworkers," was presented to the State Board of Education in October by the Farmworker Resource Committee.

That report said education of farmworker children "continues to be hampered" by the failure of some school districts to take ownership in the children; lack of adequate funds devoted to their educational needs; a shortage of certified teachers, books and materials for teaching English as a second language (ESL); racism; and inadequate funding to train teachers.

"Whatever your political, philosophical or religious beliefs about why children of farmworkers have come here, the thing we can agree on is that they are here and they need to be served," says Phil Bowman, a labor market analyst for the Idaho Department of Employment who presented the report to the board.



are specifically assigned as ESL teachers. Instead, most schools use teachers' assistants to help students with limited English skills, the report says.

Following the report, the state board recommended that the Legislature approve a \$3.4 million appropriation to help school districts hire more certified ESL teachers.

With federal matching funds, the board's recommendation would fund one ESL teacher for every 30 non-English-speaking students.

A similar recommendation passed the Idaho Senate last session but was never brought to a vote in the House.

Within the last five years, two state task forces have analyzed Hispanic education in Idaho. But their recommendations have yet to bring the systematic and consistent changes their authors envisioned.

A 1989-90 task force to study Hispanic youth participation in vocational education programs submitted a 40-page booklet detailing six goals (see box). The State Board of Education then commissioned its own "Task Force on Hispanic Education," which released a report in January 1991.

Conclusions of the two studies overlapped significantly: both urged school districts to hire more Hispanic staff members (bilingual and bicultural persons for administrative, teaching and other positions), make guidance and counseling programs more relevant to Hispanic students and their families, and develop "partnerships for success" between state and private agencies.

Four years later, task force participants are less than thrilled about the impact of those recommendations.

"If we take a look at the whole, the total effort, it's very limited," says Sam Byrd, special populations coordinator for the State Division of Vocational Education, who chaired the first task force and was an active participant in the second.

"The task force did a good job," reflects Eric Johnson, director of the migrant farmworker law unit of Idaho Legal Aid, which is based in Caldwell. "There just has not been a lot of implementation."

Concerned about that, in October the state board reconvened the task force so it could promote the implementation of its recommendations.

In the meantime, parent groups have become active in their push to improve the school environment and lower the dropout

rate for Hispanics. Some are even turning to the courts to make the changes they see as necessary.

In Caldwell a few years ago a group of Hispanic parents formed an organization to work with the school district to lower the

go to trial within the next year.

The case alleges discrimination in three areas: administrative and discipline practices (Hispanic students are expelled and suspended at a rate higher than Anglo kids, says Johnson); recruitment and hiring rates of Hispanic teachers and administrative staff; and failure to provide bilingual curriculum for students with limited English skills.

The issues aren't much different in Nampa than in Caldwell, according to Al Sanchez, former chairman of an Hispanic parents advisory group in Nampa that formed about four years ago at the invitation of the school trustees. Violence, discrimination and large class sizes are among the many challenges faced by Nampa students, says Sanchez.

A similar lawsuit could happen in Nampa, says Sanchez, "but Nampa didn't have parents willing to come forth."

Last year, Sanchez and the parents advisory group developed seven recommendations for reducing the dropout rate — including hiring bilingual/bicultural staff, providing more staff development and training programs, developing specialized programs for Hispanic students and promoting culturally sensitive instruction.

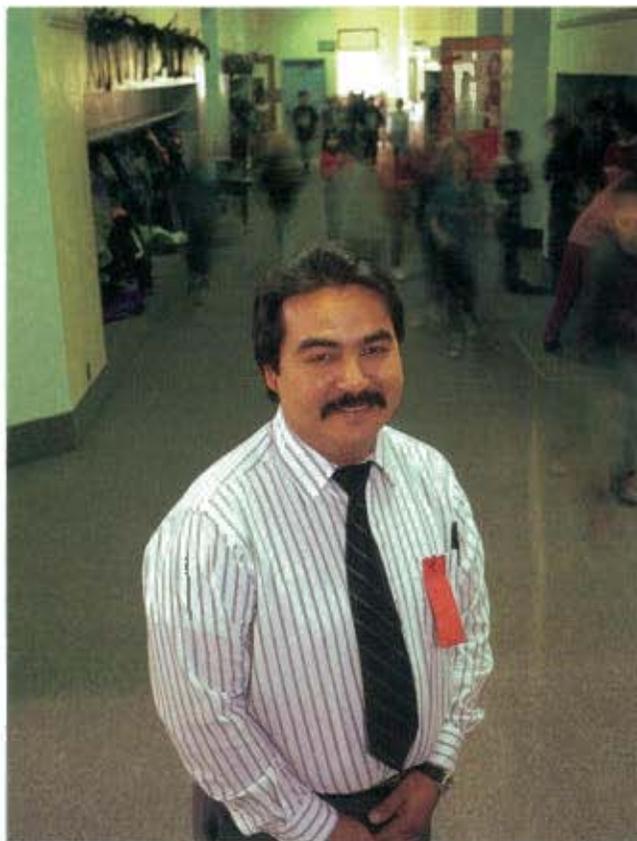
In 1990, 25 Glens Ferry kindergarten students participated in "Two Way Immersion," a bilingual program that presented half the day's lessons in English, the other half in Spanish. Although the program was

renewable for four years, the district opted to scrap it after just one. At the time, an estimated 25 percent of the district's students were Hispanic; that has risen to about 30 percent today.

Cancellation of that program was one of the issues of a complaint filed against the school district, alleging discrimination against Hispanic students on the basis of national origin. The complaint also alleged failure to provide students with limited English skills (LEP, or limited-English-proficient) an equal opportunity to effectively participate in educational programs.

An investigation by the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights in Seattle revealed inconsistencies and inadequacies in staffing, testing and services. The settlement required specific procedures for identifying limited-English-skills students and placing them in appropriate programs and for monitoring student progress and program effectiveness.

The Farmworker Resource Committee report said "attitudes and awareness continue to change, if slowly." Schools, the re-



Despite his school's rough surroundings, Principal Jesus deLeon wants Van Buren Elementary to be a "bright star."

dropout rate and resolve other school-related problems.

When initial efforts proved unsuccessful, they turned to Idaho Legal Aid for help with a lawsuit that gave teeth to their complaints. The case is now in the discovery (research and investigation) phase and is expected to

Idaho Hispanic Population

1980: 36,615 (3.9% total Idaho population)
 1990: 52,927 (5.3% total Idaho population)
 In 1990, 67.8% of Idaho's minority population was Hispanic; 4.1% was black, 11.6% Asian or Pacific Islander, 15.9% American Indian, Eskimo or Aleut.

Change in population, 1980-1990
 Hispanic origin (of any race): 44.5% increase

Percentage of Idaho's Hispanic population that is
 Mexican: 81.6% (43,213)
 Cuban: .3% (164)
 Puerto Rican: 1.3% (665)
 Other Hispanic: 16.8% (8,885)

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port continued, have improved programs for farmworker children, but most rely solely on federal funding, rather than using those funds to augment state programs.

One of the most successful federally funded services is the home-school coordinator program that hires paraprofessionals to be liaisons between parents and the schools. Fifty school districts participate in the program that keeps parents involved in their children's education.

"I think many districts have made a sincere attempt to address the issues, but they are spread so thin financially that they can't provide the support they would like," says Jerry Evans, Idaho superintendent of schools.

Programs to serve these populations are very expensive, and faculty are difficult to recruit. "Progress has been slow and parents are frustrated. From the state level, we will provide all the support we can, but the ultimate question comes down to funding, not the will to provide these programs," Evans says.

Despite the problems the task forces and parent groups have identified, there is progress in many schools.

Caldwell's Van Buren Elementary, with its colorful mural of happy children painted on the front wall, is located in a decaying area with busy streets and industry nearby. "We really have to be a bright star in this neighborhood," says Van Buren Principal Jesus deLeon.

More than 35 percent of Van Buren's 640 students are Hispanic.

"Our goal is to meet the needs of all children," says deLeon, "to make sure all children get an even break ... Twenty-six kids in a classroom require 26 different levels of instruction. Adding limited English skills to that is one more thing for teachers to deal with."

Parents see Debbie Elizondo's multicultural classroom in Marsing as an enrichment opportunity for their second graders.

That wasn't the case when Elizondo, a BSU graduate, began teaching at Marsing Elementary School 19 years ago.

Then, some parents resisted having their kids placed in a second grade classroom with a Spanish-speaking teacher.

In Wilder, where 86 percent of the students are Latino, active recruitment of Hispanic staff (13 of the 42 staff are Hispanic), small class size and support programs (including tutoring for at-risk students and an in-school "adopt-a-kid" program) have made a difference, according to Superintendent Bedford Boston.

A mentoring program that matches Wilder students with employees from the state Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ), headquartered in Boise, has become a model for other districts.

Goals of the Task Force On Hispanic Student Participation In Vocational Education Programs July 1990

- Develop "partnerships for success" between the state's departments of education and employment, Private Industry Councils, the Idaho Migrant Council and other organizations from business, industry and the community.
- Provide "school improvements" such as Hispanic role models in all staff positions.
- Revamp guidance and counseling programs to better meet the needs of Hispanic students and their families.
- Encourage active participation of parents and the community to better support education and career planning.
- Eliminate prejudice and bigotry.
- Develop community-based partnerships to identify employment opportunities, personal development resources and financial assistance.

Goals of the Task Force on Hispanic Education January 1991

- Strengthen statewide leadership to reach the task force goals.
- Provide preschool program for Hispanic children.
- Develop school improvements through cultural awareness training, tutoring programs, bilingual/Hispanic staff, interpreters for parent-teacher conferences, alternative credit programs for migrant students, other programs.
- Develop comprehensive guidance/counseling programs to better meet the needs of Hispanic students and their families.
- Encourage active participation of Hispanic community leaders, organizations, and families in education career planning.
- Eliminate prejudice and bigotry through a Cultural Awareness Training Model and other programs.
- Increase Hispanic enrollment and graduation in Idaho colleges and universities.

The brainchild of Jon Sandoval, DEQ director, the program is beginning its third year. Its goals are to motivate students to stay in school, and to "open some doors to educational and vocational opportunities that these kids would not otherwise have," Sandoval explains.

The first year, 18 DEQ employees signed up for the mentoring program. The next year, the program expanded to reach 75 Wilder students, with employees from other agencies and corporations in Ada and Canyon counties joining in.

The mentoring concept has a solid supporter in state Rep. Jesse Berain, Idaho's only Hispanic legislator. He and his wife, Maria Andrea, have mentored more than 100 young people, most of them Hispanic, and were instrumental in starting a mentoring program for Hispanic students at BSU.

"We in the Hispanic community actually need to be involved," he insists. "I think a strong mentoring program will go a long way ... When these kids return to the community they will do the same thing for others."

Berain believes local school boards should take more responsibility for hiring more bilingual teachers and taking other steps to stem the dropout rate and better reach His-

panic students.

He also believes more federal dollars should be made available to track Hispanic youth who leave school and to help local communities.

Byrd, who came to Idaho at age 9 as a Spanish-speaking farmworker, says the need for changes goes beyond the educational system. Byrd says he was surprised by the prejudice and racism heard by the task forces. "Although many of us had experienced it throughout our lives, we were surprised by how much came out," he recalls.

Changing those attitudes takes a long-term commitment to bilingual programs - and a lot more, says Byrd.

Curriculum must be relevant: classroom lessons in history, geography, literature and art must reflect the contributions of different cultures. Hispanic students need Hispanic role models and mentors. Parents need encouragement and support to be involved in their children's education.

Byrd predicts heavy growth in the Hispanic population that will force some changes. Idealistically, he says, change can only happen "when Idahoans realize these are not Hispanic issues, but issues that benefit all Idahoans." □