

Empowering Latinas

By EVA LONGORIA, actress, producer, and activist. The Eva Longoria Foundation supports programs helping Latinas excel in school, attend college, and succeed as entrepreneurs.

I am impressed by the women I meet who have achieved great success and improved the world. From Maria Shriver to Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor, I feel honored to know them. But for every empowered woman I meet, I see many more with tremendous potential who don't have the opportunity to realize their dreams. As a ninth-generation Texan and proud Mexican American, I'm especially committed to improving outcomes for my fellow Latinas.

Latinas are incredibly entrepreneurial. The number of Latina-owned businesses has increased at eight times the rate of men-owned businesses in recent years.¹ Yet in spite of their ambition and drive, many Latinas are not achieving the American Dream. One in three of us drops out of high school,² and 25 percent of Latinas live in poverty.³ Latina unemployment is high at 9 percent,⁴ and when they are in the workforce, Latinas earn less than 60 cents for every dollar a white man earns for the same job.⁵

With more than 25 million Latinas in the United States⁶ and projections putting us at 15 percent of the total population by 2050, we must all pay attention to the fate of Latinas⁷ because the economic future of our country depends on it.⁸

The good news is that we know what works. Education is the single most powerful tool to help people pull themselves out of poverty and change their life trajectory. I founded the Eva Longoria Foundation to help more Latinas do just that.

When I learned that 80 percent of Latina high school students aspire to attend college, but only 15 percent hold college degrees, I wanted to understand why. My foundation partnered with UCLA's Civil Rights Project on a study to identify factors that would increase high school graduation and college enrollment rates for Latinas. The results were interesting but not surprising.⁹

We found that interventions such as involvement in extracurricular activities, exposure to Latino teachers and counselors, high-quality math instruction from a young age, and parent engagement all significantly impact Latinas' ultimate success, even against strong odds. Knowing that a complete overhaul of our struggling education system is not imminent, it's heartening to learn that feasible interventions like these can make a life-changing difference. I'm working on it, and I'm not alone.

To give just one example of this kind of doable change: Research shows that parent involvement plays a major role in helping kids graduate high school and attend college. So my foundation supports a nine-week parent-engagement program, which teaches parents the basics of what their kids need to make it to college. It educates them about class requirements, how and why to set up meetings with teachers and counselors, how to assist with homework, and how and when to file college applications and financial aid forms. The results: Students whose parents complete the program have a 90 percent graduation rate, compared to the 62 percent rate of Los Angeles-area

students overall. A nine-week course like this one can open up a lifetime of possibilities for these Latino families.

The good news is there are many programs like this, but they need our help. By giving our time, financial resources, and advocacy, we can contribute in some way to improving educational outcomes for Latinas.

No matter how large or small our contribution, we must do our part to help these students succeed. Together, we can create a world that doesn't need a Shriver report about "women on the brink" because women—all of our women—will have the opportunities they need to gain access to the American Dream.

ENDNOTES

¹ U.S. Census Bureau, "American FactFinder," available at http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=SBO_2007_00CSA01&prodType=table (last accessed September 2013).

² Education Week, "Trailing Behind, Moving Forward: Latino Students in U.S. Schools," June 7, 2012, available at <http://www.edweek.org/ew/toc/2012/06/07/>.

³ National Women's Law Center, "Poverty Among Women and Families, 2000-2010: Extreme Poverty Reaches Record Levels as Congress Faces Critical Choices" (2011), available at <http://www.nwlc.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/povertyamongwomenandfamilies2010final.pdf>.

⁴ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Table A-3. Employment status of the Hispanic or Latino population by sex and age," available at <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.t03.htm> (last accessed September 2013).

⁵ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Table 7. Median usual weekly earnings of full-time wage and salary workers by selected characteristics, annual averages," available at <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/wkyeng.t07.htm> (last accessed September 2013).

⁶ U.S. Census Bureau, "National Characteristics: Vintage 2011," available at <http://www.census.gov/popest/data/national/asrh/2011/tables/NC-EST2011-03.xls> (last accessed September 2013).

⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, "Facts for Features: Hispanic Heritage Month 2012: Sept. 15 — Oct. 15," Press release, August 6, 2012, available at http://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/facts_for_features_special_editions/cb12-ff19.html.

⁸ U.S. Census Bureau, "An Older and More Diverse Nation by Midcentury," Press release, August 14, 2008, available at <http://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/population/cb08-123.html>.

⁹ Patricia Gándara and others, "Making Education Work for Latinas in the U.S." (Los Angeles: Eva Longoria Foundation, 2013), available at <http://www.evalongoriafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Making-Education-Work-for-Latinas-in-the-US-by-the-Eva-Longoria-Foundation1.pdf>.