

Durham, N.C. -- In the red-hot debate on immigration policy in the United States, some pundits point to the poor academic performance of Hispanic students as evidence that the melting pot isn't working the way it used to. Reports based on national tests show that Hispanic students score far below non-Hispanic whites and that this achievement gap is just as large in middle school as in elementary school.

But new research we have done using data from North Carolina reveals that these reports tell only half of the story. In fact, the school careers of Hispanic students tend to be marked by steady progress, not stagnation. Instead of wringing our hands over the academic failures of Hispanic students, we should be trying to learn more about why they, and their schools, have achieved the success they have.

It is true that Hispanic students lag behind the Anglo majority in any snapshot of student performance. Based on the widely reported National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which is administered every few years to a large representative sample of American students, the Hispanic/white gap at both fourth and eighth grades is large. In both reading and math, the gaps between Hispanic and white students are nearly as large as those between blacks and whites.

Social scientists have spilled a lot of ink explaining this gap, attributing it to such things as limited English proficiency, differences in child rearing, low incomes, large class sizes, inexperienced teachers and weak engagement with school. A report issued this year by the National Research Council concluded that Hispanic students are trapped in a "self-perpetuating cycle of academic disengagement and under-achievement."

But there's more to this story than these doleful deficiencies, as our study of North Carolina math and reading test scores reveals. The state test results can be used to calculate achievement gaps for different racial and ethnic groups in the same way the NAEP scores are used for the nation, and the results look similar. In fact, the gap in North Carolina calculated in the conventional manner not only fails to shrink between third and eighth grade, it actually gets bigger.

However, our North Carolina data allowed us to look more deeply at this issue than is possible with the NAEP data. Just as a still photograph gives the viewer little sense of which way an object is moving, most previous studies of Hispanic students can tell us little about whether individual students are progressing or stagnating. By using an encrypted database that protects students' identities, we were able to chart the progress of thousands of Hispanic students, and hundreds of thousands of students overall. We recorded the test scores of each student who was in a public school in third grade and who remained in the state's public schools for six consecutive years.

When the analysis is confined to these unchanging groups of students, an entirely different picture emerges. This perspective reveals that the average Hispanic student actually makes steady progress grade by grade, in comparison to the average white student. In math, the Hispanic/white gap is reduced by a quarter between third and eighth grade, and in reading it shrinks by even more.

Furthermore, once we adjust for the lower parental education and higher poverty rates of Hispanic students, they actually outperform their Anglo counterparts by the time they reach sixth grade.

If individual Hispanic students are doing so well as they get older, why do the snapshots provided by NAEP scores -- and cited so frequently in the debate on immigration policy -- look so bad? The answer is simple. Because of steady immigration, thousands of new Hispanic students enter public schools, at many different grade levels, every year. Although our data show that these students tend to make steady progress as they get older, they usually arrive at school with a fair amount of ground to make up, and they pull down the average for all Hispanic students in the process. Thus, the achievement gap with whites as conventionally calculated looks high and persistent.

As our research shows, however, the constant influx of new students arising from immigration disguises an important fact: once in school, Hispanic students tend to acquire the language and social skills needed to progress academically. Steady progress, not stagnation, marks their elementary and middle school years.

We should remain concerned about what happens to Hispanic youth when they reach high school, for their dropout rates remain too high. But rather than despairing about how the public schools have failed Hispanic children or how the United States cannot deal with immigrants, we should be looking at what we can learn from the success of these Hispanic students in elementary and middle school and seek to replicate this experience in later grades.