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# Briarcliff author writes guide for Hispanic parents

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American parents can be a pushy bunch, especially when it comes to their children's education. But Briarcliff Manor author Mariela Dabbah says many Latino parents don't get involved enough in the schools, ultimately standing in the way of their children's success.

In her new Spanish guide for parents, "Ayude a su Hijo a Tener Éxito en la Escuela" ("Help Your Child Be Successful in School"), Dabbah tackles the reasons some Latinos fear getting involved, and outlines the rights of every student and parent living in the United States, regardless of immigration status.

Her book follows last year's "Como Conseguir Trabajo en los Estados Unidos" ("How to Get Work in the United States").

"My purpose with my writing is trying to help Latinos crack the American code," says Dabbah, who moved to the United States from Argentina in 1988. "Part of the code is how to find jobs and work, and part of the code is understanding the education system."

In her former job as a bilingual book distributor in Ossining, Dabbah ran workshops for parents and teachers — and soon came to realize that Latino parents faced numerous obstacles.

For one, says Dabbah, Latin Americans traditionally believe the school is always right.

"They come with a lot of fears, and one of them is fear of authority in general. It's very hard to assert their rights, and they don't even know their rights many times," she says. "If you don't know the language and you don't know the system and you fear authority, that's one thing on top of the other."

Families that are in the United States illegally are often more fearful, says Dabbah. But when parents don't get involved in their children's schools, that can send the message that they don't care about their children's education.

## Resources

- "Ayude a su Hijo a Tener éxito en la Escuela (Guía Especial para Padres Latinos)" or "Help Your Child Be Successful in School (A Special Guide for Latino Parents)." Written in Spanish, by Mariela Dabbah. Sphinx Publishing ([www.SphinxLegal.com](http://www.SphinxLegal.com)); \$8.95. Available from Amazon.com, Borders and Barnes & Noble.

- "Introduccion al Sistema de Escuelas Publicas del Estado de Nueva York ("Introduction to the Public School System in New York State") is a new, bilingual revision of the 2000 booklet by Student Advocacy, a nonprofit organization. Free. Information in the booklet is also available in English and Spanish at [www.westchesterlibraries.org](http://www.westchesterlibraries.org). For information on ordering, call the Westchester County Office of Hispanic Affairs at 914-995-2476, Student Advocacy at 914-347-7039 or the Westchester Library System at 914-231-3237.

## On the Web

For a video interview (in English and Spanish) with Briarcliff author Mariela Dabbah about her school guide for Latino parents, go to [www.lohud.com/view](http://www.lohud.com/view).

In truth, they care a great deal, says George Castellanos, chairman of the Spanish department and director of Latin American studies at Manhattanville College in Purchase.

"Parents do want to get involved," he says. "They really want to know: What are the sources? How do I get involved? How do I deal with principals? What are the requirements for my kid to be able to graduate?"

Schools need to reach out, says Dabbah — and parents shouldn't be afraid to take that first step.

At Brookside School in Ossining, many parent workshops are already offered in Spanish, and PTA meetings include simultaneous translation.

"In many countries, you defer to the school. They're the professionals," says assistant principal Felix Flores. "But here, parents advocate for their children. And that's what we want all parents to do."

Dabbah says parents' immigration status should never keep them away from school.

"Schools really struggle to get those parents involved, to send the message to them that it's OK to come to school, that it's safe, that we're not going to report you," she says. For example, proof of residency for school registration doesn't mean a green card, it means a Con Ed or Verizon bill, adds Dabbah — "anything that proves you live in a certain place."

But even when Latino parents decide to become involved in their children's education, there are further challenges.

One is the Latin American concept of time.

"Keep in mind that when people here give you a deadline, they mean it," writes Dabbah. "There are no extensions or exceptions, and you can lose spots for your children if you do not fill out the information or file the papers by the time you are told. The same is true about dates for tests, appointments to see the teacher or principal, vacation days and school days."

Another challenge is the parent-teacher conference — a meeting that traditionally takes place in English.

In recent years, many schools have offered interpreters, says Dabbah, but non-English-speaking parents need to say something if they have an appointment with a teacher who doesn't speak Spanish.

"You cannot make the excuse that because you don't speak English, you can't go to these meetings," she says. "You can't just disappear and say, 'Well, I don't speak English, so it's all up to my kid.'"

For new immigrants, it's also a good idea to have a bilingual adult explain a child's report-card grades. As Dabbah reports in the book, she's heard stories of children who reassure their parents that a grade of F means "fine" — and parents who believe it. (In most Latin American countries, she says, students receive grades ranging from 1 to 10; failing usually means a grade under 4 or 5.)

The high dropout rate among Latinos, says Dabbah, is caused by multiple factors.

"They feel that they don't belong, that their culture is not valued in school. They don't feel a sense of community, they start feeling a sense of frustration and they just drop out," she says. "So it does take a village to raise a kid. You do need to have the parents involved, and for the parents to make sure, from a very early age, that they create a social group where these kids feel they belong."

With books like Dabbah's, Latino parents can learn how to help their children get ahead in the U.S., says Martha Lopez-Hanratty, director of Westchester County's Office of Hispanic Affairs. (Her office also contributed to a new, free bilingual booklet that explains students' rights within the New York State public school system.)

"I never heard of a parent saying, 'I don't want my child to succeed,' " she says. "What we need is to empower parents with information so that the child can succeed."

Flores plans to use Dabbah's guide this year in workshops aimed at Latino parents.

Castellanos believes the book will also be useful for school superintendents, teachers and guidance counselors.

"Mariela is very concerned about our community," he says. "She's right on target."

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