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## A lesson on education

By **THE JOURNAL NEWS**

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Mariela Dabbah of Briarcliff Manor is at the head of the class when it comes to helping new Latino residents navigate life in the United States. Her latest book, "Ayude a su Hijo a Tener Éxito en la Escuela" ("Help Your Child Be Successful in School"), comes on the heels of "Como Conseguir Trabajo en los Estados Unidos" ("How to Get Work in the United States"), published last year. In it, she seeks to explain the U.S. education system, the respective rights of students and parents, and the differences between the systems here and in Latin America.

Education, of course, is a big part of the foundation of the American Dream. Most parents, certainly those in the Lower Hudson region, treat this as gospel. They are likely to be involved in their child's schooling, from helping with homework to volunteering in classrooms to taking on teachers and administrators when they feel their children aren't getting the attention and services they demand.

As Dabbah explains, many immigrant families have such respect for the schools and teachers that it is anathema for them to question their authority. For the native born, of course, such is considered a birthright — especially at these (school tax) prices. In the United States, this cultural trend can work against immigrants. After all, that is why so many families come here — to make better lives for their children.

Dabbah outlines some other stumbling blocks new residents might encounter. Parents might work more than one job with long hours that make it difficult for them to participate in school functions. She stresses the importance of finding time to attend parent-teacher conferences. She notes that some parents' undocumented status may hold them back from speaking up for their children for fear of drawing attention to themselves. It shouldn't, though, since immigration status has no bearing on access to education.

She adds that inability to speak English is no excuse for a lack of parental involvement. Dabbah counsels Latino parents that they must reach out to school representatives to take advantage of accommodations available to them, such as translation services and notices sent home in Spanish.

"They come with a lot of fears, and one of them is fear of authority in general," Dabbah told staff writer Linda Lombroso, in an article last week. "It's very hard to assert their rights, and they don't even know their rights many times. 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."

It would behoove immigrant parents to familiar themselves with Dabbah's work; likewise, it makes sense for school officials to take a gander themselves. It certainly makes sense they understand both sides of the cultural divide.