

Online learning struggle falls unevenly on families
By Natalie Skowlund of the Daily Courier

María Guadalupe Aguirre, a mother of three school-age daughters in the Grants Pass School District, lost her job during the pandemic. Since then, she has stayed home with her daughters as they continue to take classes online.

The 41-year-old said in Spanish that distance learning has not been easy for her family, especially at the beginning. She said that at first, her daughters had trouble connecting to the internet at their home, making it hard to attend online classes.

Over time, Aguirre's family adjusted to the new technologies, but she said that there are still times when the internet connection at home is weak.

Aguirre also said that her two younger daughters, Isabela, 12, and Kendra, 7, don't always understand how to complete their online assignments. Since she's not personally well-versed on computers, she said she is often unable to help her daughters. Consequently, some of their assignments never get submitted.

"Recently, the one having the most problems is my youngest. Our internet isn't very good, and if she doesn't know how to do something I can't help her because I don't know much about computers," Aguirre said. "And if my oldest daughter is in class, I don't want to bother her."

The Aguirre family's distance learning challenges may sound familiar to others juggling the demands of parental responsibilities and work schedules with children's at-home education needs.

But for many Hispanic families in and around Grants Pass, where parents often work low-income jobs in restaurants or as house cleaners, distance learning presents extra challenges, said Brenda Aguilera, program manager at the nonprofit Project Youth + and adviser to the MEChA (Minority Education Challenge Adversity) club at Grants Pass High School.

"Learning how to do the inbox and do the assignments and turn them in online, that alone right there is very overwhelming. Now you have students that are doing this at home, where they cannot go to a parent and say, 'Hey, can you help me?'" Aguilera said. "The parent doesn't even know either how to do that."

Numbers released by District 7 seem to agree with Aguilera's assertion, suggesting that distance learning does not fall equally on all students' shoulders.

Attendance data representing the fall term through Oct. 30 demonstrated that Hispanic students are overrepresented among students not considered "on track" for attendance in the district. While 23% of white students were considered not "on track," 28% of Hispanic students were in the district were designated the same, a disparity of five percentage points. The trend maintains with regard to students designated as "off track" for attendance: 19% of Hispanic students were marked as such, compared with 14% of white students.

Out of all students deemed not "on track," Hispanic students represented 18% despite being only 15% of the overall student body. White students, who make up 75% of the student population, were 72% of all students not "on track," reflecting a lower proportion in accordance to size.

National data has also shown that students of color and lower income students tend to fare worse with distance learning than the general population.

According to McKinsey & Company distance learning research cited in *The Economist*, if schools were to resume in-person instruction in January 2021, the average U.S. student would have already lost the equivalent of seven months of learning.

When broken down by race, the average white student would lose six months of learning. For Hispanic students, the approximation is nine months of lost learning.

Even further concerning, students from low-income families would be projected to lose an entire year's worth of learning, on average.

Kristina Murillo, a Hispanic family liaison for Grants Pass High School, said that she has noticed a decline in attendance among the Hispanic students she works with during distance learning. She said that not being able to see students face-to-face makes it hard to know why they are not attending classes, but she suspects parent work schedules and language barriers play a significant role.

"Since most [Hispanic] parents are working either one or two jobs, students are left unattended at home most of the time and they have to figure out how they're going to do their schoolwork," Murillo said.

Given many families' uncertain financial situations during the pandemic, students may be in charge of younger siblings while parents are out working or even have to work themselves to help earn income for the family, said Lesly Eslama Cruz, District 7 middle school Hispanic liaison.

For instance, Aguirre's daughter Isabela said that sometimes she is tasked with checking on her younger sister, Kendra, during distance learning.

"During breaks, me and my older sister both have to come check on my little sister to see if she's doing OK," she said.

Murillo also noted that many Hispanic parents are immigrants and do not have a high school education. That can make it difficult for them to support their children's studies during distance learning.

Paola Romo, 42, has two daughters in high school and one in elementary in District 7. She said in Spanish that distance learning has been very difficult for her daughters.

Romo said that pre-pandemic, one of her daughters received straight As in school. Since distance learning, she's fallen behind.

"It's been hard to not have contact and communication with other young people," Romo said. "[My daughters] have given up already."

Romo said that language and communication barriers pose further challenges for Hispanic parents during distance learning.

"When I go to speak to a [school] counselor, it's not easy because they don't know how to speak Spanish, and I don't know how to express myself as well in English," Romo said.

Romo also said that differing cultural methods of communication can inhibit communication between school staff and Hispanic parents.

For example, some Hispanic parents don't even know how to operate a computer, Romo said.

Aguilera said that schools often communicate via email, including messages in both English and Spanish, but many Hispanic parents are not familiar with email and prefer to receive phone calls.

Aguilera recalled chatting with a Hispanic parent on the subject: "One mom said, 'If the district really wants to hear our opinion and really cares, they need to call us.'"

Cruz, District 7's middle school Hispanic liaison, said that many local Hispanic families experience the digital divide. "Specifically in the Latino community, lots of parents are not tech savvy. They do not know how to use a computer or any programs that the students use for their schoolwork or their online classes," Cruz said.

Despite continued challenges, Murillo said that she has seen District 7 make a concerted effort to improve communication and relationships with Hispanic families in Grants Pass. She said that the district has emphasized inclusion and listening to student voices in recent years, which has made a difference.

Murillo herself graduated from Grants Pass High School in 2005 and remembers her experience growing up in the district with non-English speaking parents.

"I remember I would get in trouble, or something would happen at school and my mom wouldn't want to show her face because she didn't speak English really well," Murillo said. "Even though I knew most of the office personnel, she would be embarrassed or feel uncomfortable going and saying anything because of the language barrier."

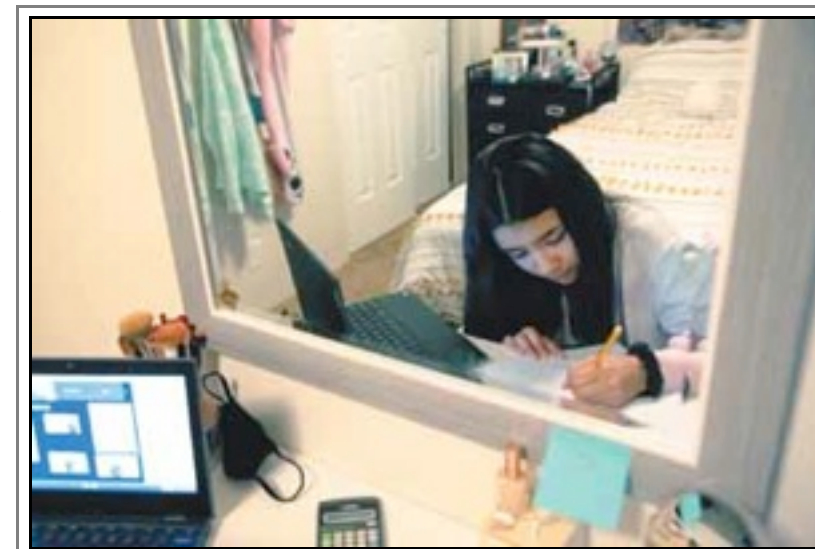
Now, Murillo said that there is more support for local Hispanic families. She said that hiring Hispanic family liaisons like herself has helped bridge the communication gap between school staff and Spanish-speaking families.

Aguilera agreed that District 7 has come a long way in incorporating diversity and inclusion practices into curriculum and administration, but she thinks that Josephine County still has a ways to go in supporting its growing Hispanic population.

"Josephine County has to start realizing that we're having more Latinos," Aguilera said. "We need to start hiring more people of color, hiring more Spanish speakers within every aspect of this community."

Though District 7 has taken steps toward inclusion, it is worth noting that an internal investigation by the district's own lawyers amid a pair of discrimination lawsuits last year found a "deficiency in cultural awareness and sensitivity" among the high school's staff and student body. The lawsuits by two campus security monitors at the high school accused administrators of tolerating racial harassment by a fellow monitor and then retaliating against them when they reported it. The lawsuits were settled out of court for a combined \$425,000.

Still, Murillo said that there is more support for local Hispanic families today than when she was a student. She said that hiring Hispanic family liaisons like herself has helped bridge the communication gap between school staff and Spanish-speaking families.



ELAYNA YUSSEN/Daily Courier

Isabela Cruz Aguirre, a seventh grader at North Middle School, works on a math assignment Thursday at a desk in her bedroom. For many Hispanic families in Grants Pass, distance learning presents extra challenges. Data shows Hispanic students are overrepresented among students not considered "on track" for attendance in District 7.