

# Symposium scrutinizes drop-out rate

by Janet Goode

The institutions of family, education and society at large were called upon Tuesday to come to the aid of Hispanics in conquering their ever-rising drop-out rate from elementary schools through higher education.

"... The bell tolls for THEE!" Dr. Lauro F. Cavazos, president of Texas Tech University bellowed while pointing at an audience of more than 200 at the Memorial Student Center.

Cavazos emphasized his concern over the Hispanic drop-out rate by citing this quote from British theologian and poet John Donne.

Cavazos was the first of three distinguished speakers in a panel discussion, titled "The Hispanic Dropout in Our Society," sponsored by the Committee for the Cultural Awareness of Mexican Americans.

Cavazos spoke on the importance of the family unit in forming a child's cultural esteem which, he said, is essential in a child's achievement expectations.

The second speaker, Dr. Luis Cano, a former teacher, school principal and professor of education who founded the George I. Sanchez Junior-Senior High School for dropouts, agreed that the family is an intricate part of instilling children's values. However, he stressed the role the school system takes.

The third speaker, Dr. Tatcho Mindiola, director of Mexican American studies and associate professor at the University of Houston, addressed the problem from a sociological perspective, refuting the ideas that the family or schools are at fault. He said both of these institutions are victims, but not the cause of the problem. The cause, he said, is the basic societal system in which minorities live.

Cavazos said the family is important in helping the drop-out student because a dropout mainly needs someone to care.

"We are all interdependent," he said. "To help the dropout, we need to try and understand them, listen to them, sit with them, and talk to them."

Currently, 17 percent of Anglos in Texas are not finishing high school, he said. Twenty-eight percent of blacks will not finish, followed by a "dismal" 45 percent of Hispanics, he said.

"When you think about this, it has enormous social, political and economic consequences," he said. "Americans need people who can think through serious problems and arrive at logical solutions."

"With this drop-out rate — many, many Hispanics will be at a serious disadvantage in the future."

In the United States, 16 percent of those 25 years old or older have completed only eight years of education, he said. That number rises to 41 percent for Hispanics, Cavazos said.

"If you think that the problem is difficult now," he said, "it will become dreadful if we don't address it immediately and turn it around."

Cavazos said the fundamental solution to this problem is in the hearts and the minds of the Hispanic family and the Hispanics themselves.

"People concerned about this issue need to raise awareness," he said.

"Until you raise the awareness level, people will not be able to come to solutions."

By the turn of the century, Cavazos said, the people we call "minorities" will be the majority in our school systems in this state.

And if the minorities are dropping out of school and not getting an education, Cavazos said this will also have serious political consequences.

"It goes back to our very basis of democracy," he said. "We need an informed electorate — people who can reason, who can think."

To illustrate this, Cavazos quoted Thomas Jefferson saying: "Were it left to be decided if we were to have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government — I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter. But I should mean that every man who receives these papers should be able to read."

Cavazos said that America has had tremendous immigration in the last five years, probably as great as the European immigration of the 19th century.

instilling children's values, but stressed the school system as being at fault for the drop-out rate.

He said he was speaking mostly from experience because of the his drop-out studies he did in the high-stress, inner city of Houston. He said it is important to emphasize that the problems associated with dropouts may vary when the population studied is a rural group.

The George I. Sanchez school was set up because of the failure of school districts to recognize the drop-out problem, especially with Hispanics, Cano said.

"The school was set up to eliminate the myth that dropouts don't want to go to school," he said. "Kids that drop out do want to go to school."

"When we opened the George I. Sanchez school in 1973, we recruited the first semester. After that, we have never recruited again. We have had to turn students away."

These are kids that want to go to school, but they need a support system, he said. They have lost the

Mindiola said the problem is a societal one which stems neither from the schools nor the Hispanic family unit.

"I disagree about heavy emphasis being placed on the family as being the culprit in the drop-out issue," he said.

"That is engaging in blaming the victim. If the source of the drop-out issue is found within our family or within the minds of our students, then we are absolving the broader society of any responsibility."

"We are overlooking institutional discrimination and we are overlooking attitudes of prejudice in that system."

Mindiola started his speech with an anecdote to show where the problem begins: Ronald Reagan, immediately after getting elected for his first presidential term, flew around the country attending military balls, Mindiola said.

There was one held at Texas A&M in his honor. According to the story, the president was staying at President Vandiver's home. Reagan was sitting in the living room with Nancy, when his daughter Maureen came in. She said she wanted to go to the ball but she didn't have an escort.

Reagan said, "Honey don't worry about it." Mindiola said that Reagan called the Sergeant of the Corps of Cadets and asked if they would provide a military escort for his daughter for the ball.

"Let me make myself perfectly clear," Mindiola said that Reagan stated. "Do not send a Mexican."

So that night, there was a knock at the door, and when Reagan opened it, there stood before him a sharply dressed black Lieutenant.

The Lieutenant saluted and said, "I'm here to escort your daughter to the ball."

The President took a step back and said, "I'm sorry there must be some misunderstanding."

The lieutenant saluted again and said, "No, sir! Sgt. Garcia never makes a mistake."

But the issue before us is not exactly one of prejudice, it is the drop-out rate, which is a consequence of society, Mindiola said.

Mindiola addressed the problem from a sociological perspective.

"The drop-out problem is a serious problem affecting schools in general," he said, "affecting white students, black students, Mexican American students — all of them primarily from the working class."

"When dealing with the Mexican American population, it is a difference of rates. The Mexican American drop-out rate is higher."

"In order to fully understand the problem, we have to look at the history of the Mexican American in this country. The battle of the Alamo, the war of 1848, and the institutional subordination of which was a consequence of these."

"The Mexican people were seen as an inferior people and the institutions in societies structure were set up accordingly to insure that they were indeed at a disadvantage."

Once we understand this history, he said, it is easy to understand that this drop-out rate is not a new problem.



"But there is a great difference here. The Europeans saw education as a way out," he said. "Unfortunately, I sometimes wonder if Hispanics have kept that as an imperative."

The Hispanic family is responsible for the loss of this cultural value system, he said. However, Cavazos said he believes Hispanics only need to "resurrect" these values.

In earlier days, many Spaniards founded universities here before Harvard ever opened its doors, Cavazos said.

Cavazos said the cause of the high drop-out rate is also economic.

"I have sat with youngsters in the fifth and sixth grades who ask me 'What do I tell my parents when they tell me it's time to go to work?'" he said.

"That's the kind of world those children live in — a very dismal world."

Cavazos said he worries most about the loss of human potential when a Hispanic drops out of school.

"In the numbers of dropouts, maybe one individual could have come up with a cure for cancer," he said. "One individual may have brought peace to this world or alleviated hunger."

Cavazos said the change he would make is an architectural one.

"I want to put a symbolic school bell on every steeple in America today. A bell that rings. It would say something important is about to happen — and that's the education of a child. And it's that bell that tolls for us."

Cano, the second speaker, agreed that the family is an intricate part of

family support and so they need it in the schools.

From the Sanchez experiment, Cano said he has learned of ways to help dropouts.

He said the first thing school officials or anyone wanting to start a program for dropouts can do is work hard to improve the students' reading and mathematical skills.

Improving the child's self-concept — who they are and where they come from — is also important, Cano said.

The problem is that these kids have lost their cultural heritage, he said.

And most important, Cano said, there must be programmed successes in the school.

"Many of the dropouts that I've worked with have had too many failures," he said. "We need to program successes in the school setting so these students can say, 'Hey, I can succeed.'"

Another aspect Cano mentioned is the role the parents should take.

"When a student's attendance is poor, and parents are taken to court for truancy, that parent should be required to attend a parent-training program," he said.

"I got a ticket the other day and I have to go to a driving safety course for 8 hours. Well, if they are that concerned about my driving, certainly we should be concerned about a child's truancy."

"Typically, if a parent goes to court for this, they are fined — and that isn't working."

Cano said he is firmly behind the idea that the family is the root cause but said the solution is to turn to the schools.