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Educators outline plan to improve Hispanic graduation rate

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Jeb Bush, right, speaks during a forum on Hispanics earning college degrees held at Miami Dade College Friday. Listening is Gaston Caperton, left, president of the College Board.

President Barack Obama and others have called for the United States to dramatically increase its number of college graduates, but a report released by the College Board on Friday warns that America's Hispanic students — now the largest minority in K-12 public schools — are significantly trailing their classmates when it comes to attaining degrees. Unless that trend changes, the report states, the nation's competitiveness in the world economy will suffer.

"We know these students have the needed capabilities," said College Board President Gaston Caperton. "But they need more support, and they need more encouragement."

Caperton's remarks came at a report unveiling held at Miami Dade College's Wolfson Campus, which was followed by a roundtable discussion that included a who's-who of politicians and education leaders.

Among them: former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, State University System Chancellor Frank Brogan, two members of the Florida Legislature, and representatives from Hispanic advocacy groups such as the National Council of La Raza and Excelencia in Education.

The unveiling's location in Florida, and at Miami Dade College in particular, was no accident. MDC is nationally respected as a high-quality institution that graduates impressive numbers of Hispanic students, many of them low-income.

Florida, meanwhile, boasts the nation's third-largest Hispanic population, and has significantly outperformed other states when it comes to Hispanic degree attainment. Nationally, only about 19 percent of Hispanics aged 25 to 34 have earned an associate's degree or higher, but in Florida that number rises to 28.5 percent.

That's not to say Florida's gains have completely closed the achievement gap — the national degree attainment rate for all students is roughly 41 percent, meaning that Hispanics here are still crossing the graduation stage less frequently than young adults as a whole.

To boost Hispanic degree attainment in Florida and across the country, the College Board outlined a 10-point plan that schools and government can use to improve student achievement. Among the plan's highlights:

- Create a program of voluntary preschool education that is available to low and moderate-income families, as less than 39 percent of America's Hispanic children were enrolled in pre-K programs between 2006 and 2008. This is one area where Florida, which began offering pre-K in 2005, is ahead of other states, though critics have questioned the quality of Florida's program during its early years.
- Raise K-12 standards and requirements with an eye toward college preparation. Florida has taken several steps in this direction, such as when state leaders last year added algebra 2, biology, and chemistry or physics to the list of courses required to receive a high school diploma. The changes are being phased in over a several-year period.
- Provide more need-based grant aid to students. Here, Florida has some real catching up to do. While most states make need-based grants their top priority, the lion's share of Florida's financial aid budget in recent years has been spent on Bright Futures scholarships. While some needy students receive Bright Futures, the awards disproportionately benefit middle and upper-income families.

At the report's unveiling, former Gov. Bush said Florida has been a "leader" in awarding merit aid because of Bright Futures, but that it is time for need-based aid to get more attention.

"The worst case that you can imagine is that you do all this hard work in the K-12 system and then kids can't access quality education because they don't have the money to be able to pursue it," Bush said.

In the roundtable discussion that followed, speakers touched on a variety of proposals to increase the number of Hispanic degree-holders — from doing a better job of engaging students' parents and other family to reworking the formula used to fund Florida's community colleges and universities.

Right now, that formula focuses on enrollment, but state lawmakers and Brogan, the state university system chancellor, raised the possibility of linking university funding to the number of degrees awarded to students.

"If they come away without the brass ring, they're diminished in their ability to live the dream," Brogan said.