

New commission to look at issues affecting Worcester's Latino students

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WORCESTER – Mayor Joseph Petty on Thursday announced he had formed a new commission focused on the advancement of Latino residents, who generally fall short of their non-Latino peers in several critical educational measures in the city.

The Commission on Latino Advancement and Education will be led by co-chairmen Luis Pedraja, president of Quinsigamond Community College, and Mary Jo Marion, assistant vice president for Urban Affairs and the Latino Education Institute at Worcester State University. They have been meeting to plan the new commission since last August.

The group is the latest iteration of a commission that was originally created by former Worcester mayor Joseph O'Brien, and will revisit some of the issues raised in that first commission's report released in 2011.

“Over the last decade as our school population has become more diverse than ever, we've steadily increased our graduation rate to the highest in our city's history,” Mr. Petty said in a statement. “We need to make sure that those gains are evenly shared across our city and for all of our students.”

According to state records, however, Worcester's Latino students' four-year graduation rate of 76.6 percent a year ago was below the district average of 83.3 percent. Latino students also did worse than the district average on the MCAS last year, and also had higher suspension rates and chronic absence rates.

According to the mayor's office, Latinos in the U.S. in general tend to fare worse than non-Latino residents when it comes to educational attainment. The last U.S. Census, in 2017, for instance, showed 69 percent of Hispanic residents had a high school diploma, compared to 93 percent for non-Hispanic whites.

In Worcester, Latinos are the city's largest minority group, accounting for 20 percent of the total population and 42 percent of the public schools' population.

According to Mr. Petty's office, the new commission is to come up with strategies, aimed at early childhood education to post-graduation career training, to ensure "Latino students fulfill their potential," as well as to identify and attempt to break down "systemic barriers" in their way.

"We need these statistics to change, Worcester must be a place of promise for all residents built on equitable systems," Ms. Marion said in a statement. "It is imperative that we offer solutions to these issues, which will bring about a metamorphosis in our city."

"A healthy Latino community is key to a vibrant, robust Worcester," Mr. Pedraja said in his own statement.

The commission will especially focus on the issues affecting Latino students in their schools, Mr. Petty said.

"Our schools and our students are the canary in the coal mine," he said. "The issues that our families and our neighbors face at home are played out in our schools every day. Poverty, hunger, health disparities, and homelessness all contribute to the performance of our students and our schools."