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Reaching Out to Hispanic Students and Families, It's a festive atmosphere in the high school cafeteria, with a mariachi band, dancers in brightly colored skirts and pizza for everyone. People are gathered in small groups talking and laughing.

But the reason for the gathering is quite serious: encouraging Hispanic students and their families to set goals for the students to complete high school and go to college.



Sponsored by UNCW's Coalitions 4 Success program, the after-school "family nights" are being held at five coalition high schools in Brunswick, New Hanover and Pender counties.

"We want to help illuminate education as a very powerful possibility for the Latino population and help support parents so they can take a leadership role in the education of their children," said Diane Calhoun, project director for the grant-funded program of the Watson School of Education. "There is a national, state and local need to provide support to this growing population."

As part of the family nights, UNCW psychology professor Tony Puente (pictured) presents to the students and their families about the changing demographics of North Carolina and the nation, the growth of the Hispanic population, and the need for higher education in order to prosper in American society.

Puente pointed out that many Latino students drop out of school, largely for two reasons. If it is before the ninth grade, it's largely due to gang-related activity or disciplinary issues. Between the ninth and twelfth grades, the reasons become largely economic and the students drop out to go to work.

"I explain to the parents that there is a strong relationship between how many years of education you have and the amount of money you earn," said Puente. "For every year of education gained, salary actually doubles. Education or lack of it is the fastest way to move up or move down the social ladder."

At a recent family night at New Hanover High School, senior Alexia Diaz listened intently to the presentation with her uncle. She moved to the U.S. from Mexico six years ago and hopes to attend college next year.

"I wanted to come tonight because I knew there would be information about college that I need for next year," she said. "A lot of people think they can't go to college or they can't get financial aid. This is a way to let them know they actually can go to college."

The purpose of the Coalitions for Success grant program is to increase the success of at-risk, diverse student populations.

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