

One Nation, One Standard: An Ex-Liberal on How Hispanics Can Succeed Just Like Other Immigrant Groups, by Herman Badillo

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One Nation, One Standard covers a lot of ground: this short book is a memoir of Herman Badillo's early life and political career intertwined with his reflections on increasing upward mobility of Hispanics in the United States. As an admirer of Mr. Badillo, I greatly enjoyed the book as biography for its engrossing and inspiring view into his long life of personal and professional achievement. Now in his late 70s, Badillo rose from a childhood of poverty in Puerto Rico to a highly successful career as a political reformer. His achievements in education include raising academic standards in the New York City public school system and the City University of New York. His accounts of these long struggles reveal courage, determination and tenacity in the face of political resistance and intransigence from educational administrators, teachers' unions, and left-wing faculty groups.

One Nation, One Standard is less successful on a policy level. References are sparse, and Badillo's policy recommendations are largely personal reflections stemming from his own experiences. Educational policy questions, such as the effectiveness of special education programs and ability tracking, require a more scholarly and in-depth analysis than could be included in this short memoir. The author discusses Hispanic-Americans as one homogenous cultural group rather than making distinctions among Hispanic groups from different countries of origin. In this context, some readers may take exception to his inclusion of Puerto Ricans, who are US citizens, in Hispanic immigrants.

Herman Badillo's early life and education resemble a Horatio Alger story. He was born in a small Puerto Rican town where his father was a teacher and his parents among the few Protestants on the largely Catholic island. Orphaned at age five after his parents died from tuberculosis, he spent the rest of his childhood with relatives. He was the only Protestant in his aunt's family and continued to attend church

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regularly. His main recreation was hiking in the island's mountains. The 1930s depression caused severe hardship in Puerto Rico, and Herman's adoptive family endured poverty and hunger so great that his cousins regularly begged for food money. Herman, however, refused food purchased with the proceeds of his cousins' begging forays, so his relatives found him a job cleaning floors for a wealthy family so he could earn his own money to buy food.

At age eleven, he arrived with his aunt in New York City and was soon sent to live with other relatives: another uncle and his family in Chicago. Herman entered into mainstream American life when he and his new English-speaking family moved to a middle-class Anglo neighborhood in California. He rapidly learned English and took it upon himself to register in school, where he became involved in student government and was elected president of his class.

After 2 years, Herman returned to New York to attend junior high and high school, where he was placed in a vocational program for airplane mechanics, wrote for the school newspaper, and worked as short-order cook in an automat. He did not plan to attend college because he lacked tuition money. By chance, he learned from a classmate that he could attend City College where tuition was free, and Badillo quickly changed to an academic program. He entered City College, majored in business and accounting, and graduated magna cum laude in 1951.

After Brooklyn Law School, Badillo began his career as an attorney specializing in tax law. He frequently did pro bono work representing Spanish-speaking clients and quickly became aware of the obstacles confronting Hispanics and other minorities in New York. He entered New York Democratic politics as a liberal reformer in largely Hispanic East Harlem. For the next several decades, he held elected and appointed positions in city government and was elected the first Puerto Rican member of the House of Representatives in 1970. In Congress, he sponsored legislation establishing bilingual education.

About 1990, he became disillusioned by the failure of liberal policy interventions to improve the city and the lives of New Yorkers. He switched to the Republican Party and began his strong partnership and friendship with Rudy Giuliani. It was during his work with Giuliani that Badillo made his most significant improvements to academic standards in both the public school system and the City University of New York.

In the public school system, he tackled the widespread practice of "social promotion": passing every student to the next grade at the end of the year whether or not they were ready to move ahead. Social promotion had become pervasive during the late 1970s, when New York's schools attempted to conceal the growing numbers of black and Hispanic students not meeting standards for promotion. Social promotion resulted in many students without basic skills entering New York's labor market and large increases in unprepared students being admitted to the City University of New York (CUNY) and needing remediation to perform college work.

For the next 30 years, Badillo battled politicians and a succession of school chancellors to eliminate social promotion. Initially, it was ended in grades 4 and 7, but Mayor Dinkins and his administration re-established the practice in 1989. Largely as a result of Badillo's efforts, social promotion in the New York Schools was phased out for third, fifth, and seventh grades beginning in 2003.

Badillo's other major success in educational reform was at CUNY, where he led the movement to eliminate remedial courses from the University's 4-year colleges. In the early 1970s, politicians and university administrators had capitulated to protests largely by minority students and politicians and established a policy of "open admissions" at the University. Open admissions required CUNY's undergraduate colleges to admit any student with a high school diploma and provide the remedial courses they needed. Unprepared students flooded the system, remedial courses multiplied, and academic standards fell as well-qualified students chose other colleges.

In 1990, Badillo was appointed to CUNY's Board of Trustees and later became its chairman. He was appalled by the fall in standards at CUNY, and he convinced Mayor Giuliani to commission a task force to study the University and recommend changes. Badillo championed the task force's proposal to eliminate remedial courses at CUNY's senior colleges and concentrate them in the system's 2-year programs. During the ensuing "remediation war," liberal politicians, faculty groups, and student associations assailed supporters of remediation reform, including the NAS and members of the CUNY Association of Scholars, the only faculty group to publicly endorse remediation reform. Moreover, reform opponents singled out Herman Badillo and targeted him with their most vicious attacks on his character and integrity. Badillo refused to back down, and he demonstrated exceptional courage and dignity in confronting his detractors. Badillo finally prevailed when the CUNY Board of Trustees approved remediation reform: by a one-vote margin!

The second focus of *One Nation, One Standard* is Hispanic underachievement and slow upward mobility compared with other immigrant groups, especially Asians. Badillo concentrates on low educational achievement, including Hispanics' higher drop-out rates and lower college attendance. He attributes the differences among immigrant groups in upward mobility to the cultural value each group places on education, and he traces the Hispanics' undervaluing of education to Spain's conquest and imposition of a feudal system on Latin America. Badillo acknowledges discrimination against Hispanics and dysfunctional school systems as contributing to Hispanic underachievement, but he places the primary responsibility on the Hispanic community's failure to value educational achievement and make it a priority for their children.

Badillo's prescription for change is a massive cultural shift toward education and self-improvement in the Hispanic community. He urges Hispanics to make education their priority and Hispanic families to act more like Asians by insisting that their children excel in school and graduate from college. He rejects special education and vocational programs as forms of ethnic and racial segregation, and he counsels Hispanic parents to do everything necessary to keep their children out of these programs. If schools use academic tracking, parents should make sure their children are placed in the strongest group where the most rigorous education takes place.

In my view, Badillo's focus on academic education as the only way to increase Hispanic upward mobility is an over-simplification of a complex issue and neglects other more promising approaches. Understanding the differences in educational achievement and upward mobility among immigrant groups requires a more empirical and extensive analysis than is possible in this short book.

Academic education through college has been a path to career success and assimilation for many immigrants and their children, as it was for Badillo. However, Leef¹ makes a compelling case in a recent *AQ* article that vocational education or on-the-job training would provide greater benefit to many young people than does college. Too often, students with little academic aptitude or interest attend college because they lack alternatives and believe that college is the only route to a better life and a good salary. Equipped with a college degree but lacking a real college education, many of these graduates get jobs like bank teller or customer service representative for which college wasn't necessary. Technical training would provide better preparation for the many well-paying jobs which require skills but not academic degrees.

Moreover, Badillo advocates a fundamental change in Hispanic attitudes toward education, but he does not offer recommendations for *how* this attitude change could be accomplished. Behavioral scientists, political candidates, and parents of teenagers can all attest to the difficulty, if not impossibility, of modifying other people's attitudes. When attitude change does occur, it is more likely to do so as a result of personal experience than from outside influence or pressure.

The value different cultures place on education is an important predictor of upward mobility, but not the only one. Badillo's comparison of Hispanics and Asians omits other influences on children's school performance, such as two-parent households and lower fertility rates. Sowell's history² of Italian immigration to the United States shows that a group can achieve assimilation and upward mobility even when its culture does not hold education in high esteem. Italians have immigrated disproportionately from the poor rural areas of Southern Italy, where work and family—but not education—were highly valued. For many years, Italian-Americans were less likely than other groups to graduate from high school or attend college. Nevertheless, they have assimilated and achieved success largely through fields such as entrepreneurship and construction trades which do not require advanced formal education.

Sowell notes that age, educational background, rural or urban origin, and immigration status also affect the attitudes and upward mobility of different Hispanic groups. Lack of an intellectual tradition is typical of immigrants from rural areas, and this includes many recent arrivals from Puerto Rico and Mexico who are also disproportionately young and poor. In contrast, Americans of Cuban origin are more likely to come from middle class urban areas and have higher levels of upward mobility after arriving in the US.

It is puzzling that Badillo does not include school choice as a way to improve education. His decades of experience trying to change New York's dysfunctional school bureaucracy make it clear that major institutional changes are needed in education and that the entrenched interests of politicians and teacher unions will prevent them from being made in the public schools.

Effective vocational education is not an option in most US public schools, but charter or voluntary schools could provide it. Vocational programs combining

¹ George C. Leef, *The overselling of higher education*. *Acad Quest* 2006;19(2): 17–34.

² Thomas Sowell, *Ethnic America*. New York: Basic Books, 1981.

school-based instruction in basic skills with on-the-job training have been successful for many years in Europe and could be viable here. Moreover, Catholic schools have been able to educate disadvantaged minority children by providing a structured learning environment and requiring student responsibility and parental involvement. Badillo highlights the role of the Catholic church as the primary and most respected institution among many Hispanics, and parochial schools might be more successful than the public school bureaucracy in convincing Hispanic families of the importance of education to their children's future.

NAS members who are interested in education reform, especially its recent history in New York City, will find insight and inspiration in *One Nation, One Standard*. The book's value as biography greatly outweighs these limitations of its policy analysis.

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