

Italian American Youth and Educational Achievement levels:

How are we doing?

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The last twenty years have seen an explosion of technology that has literally changed the way we live. With the advent of computers, cell phones and the Internet, man's mode of communication has enhanced his knowledge and has made the world an even smaller place. The high tech world has already changed the face of the industrial complex, and promises to continue to define the global landscape for the foreseeable future. This surge in 21st century technology requires, more than ever, that those men and women who will have to make their way in the global market place have the tools to succeed in it.

Not too long ago, the Italian neighborhood, like many ethnic enclaves found in large cities, insulated by actual or imagined "boarders" tended to limit the perception of occupational possibilities. These enclaves of first and second generation Italians were generally inhabited by workers in every facet of the building trades, mom and pop shops, and city employees in one department or another. The focus for these youngsters was not the world of academia, but the role models they saw within their family, and neighborhood on a daily basis. Those eight or ten blocks became more than just broad avenues, but their "town"; to police, protect; to live with those they knew. Outsiders were suspect and not to be trusted until they proved otherwise. These conditions very much resembled a residual "*Paese*" mentality. This remained with those Italians that migrated

to America and kept alive those aspects of their lives in small towns that were deemed essential to the daily life of the community. The familiarity of the territory gave the youth a real sense of belonging to a close knit community made up of grandparents, aunt, uncles, cousins and *paesani* living within walking distance. This arraignment afforded them a sense of proprietorship of their neighborhood, while reinforcing the precepts of familial unity as a very important aspect of their lives. Perhaps another reason why they opted for jobs that did not require them to go beyond the limits of their city and not consider educational institutions in other parts of the country.

The fact their role models did not go to work in a shirt and tie was less important to these youngsters than their ability to give their family a better than decent life style. After all, an uncle was a shop steward in the bricklayer's union. Even as an apprentice one made thirty dollars an hour. Papa owned a grocery store right on the block. It'll be his son's once he retires. The boy can work there, and learn the business. A first cousin worked for the Transit Department and could help with the City test. Grandpa owned the two brownstones that would be his grandson's one day. All of these possibilities and the fact that they were all respectable jobs were reasons why they didn't consider the completion of high school a pressing necessity.

We must also consider the impact those films like "The Godfather" had on this generation and the some neighborhood types who seemed to have a lot of everything without apparently working for it. And while Italians were been portrayed as gangsters, these gangsters were also portrayed as having strong family ties, as loving parents, and men of honor willing to defend that which they hold dear, the traits seen every day by youngsters in their own neighborhoods. For a time these characters became the people to emulate because they were successful without going to college, and more importantly, they commanded respect and were feared. This again reflects the parochial nature of many "Italian enclaves" in urban areas.

These, of course, were not always the immediate reasons that Italian-American high students had the third highest dropout rate in our schools twenty years ago. It was possibly a family's financial situation, or perhaps the parents didn't encourage the child toward higher education. Very often it was the case of the child knowing very little about the subject and his parents knowing nothing about it. His peers were not role models since they weren't interested in college either.

However, many organizations recognizing these problems decided to create programs to show the positive side of the Italian experience in America. The Commission For Social Justice, the anti-defamation arm of The Order Sons Of Italy In America embarked on a nation wide program to profile famous Italian- Americans who were influential in every aspect of American life. Speakers were sent to schools to discuss the achievements of Italians, Italian-Americans and Italy's contribution to the world. Mentoring programs were started by organizations like the Calandra Institute's AMICI program that worked with students to tutor them in their schoolwork. Scholarship programs were created to assist students as they embarked upon a college education (ref.1). The media generated discussions that were carried over into the homes. In addition, counseling programs were instituted to assist students who were unfamiliar with academia. These programs and the realization that without formal training, the future for

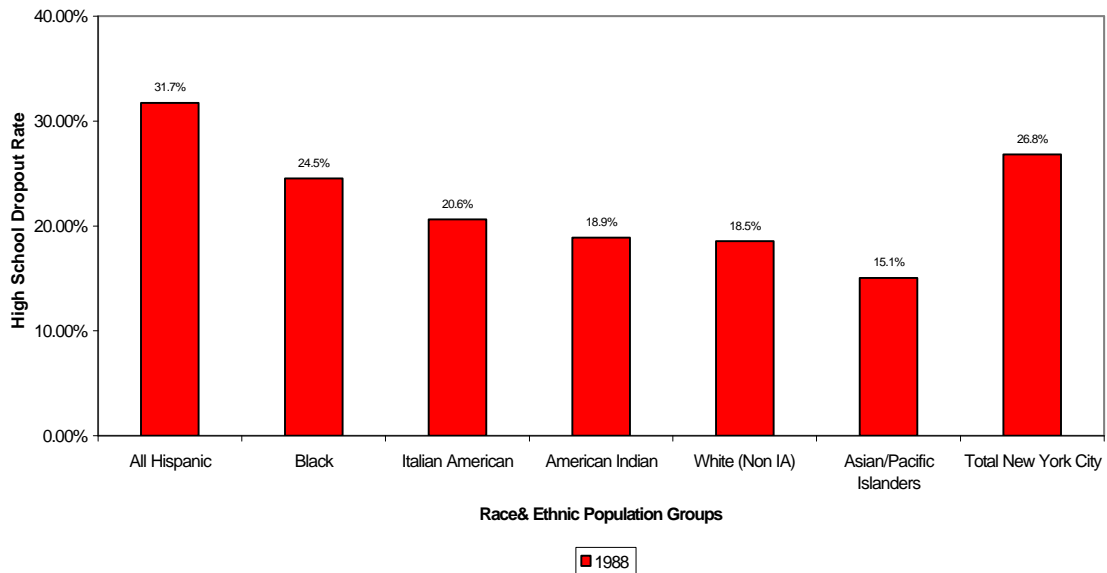
these young men and women would be bleak infused the Italian-American communities to actively correct this serious problem that found that in the New York City high school system, Italian-Americans had the third highest dropout rate of 21%.

Italian American High School Drop Out

In April 30, 1990 a conference was hosted by the Calandra institute, City University of New York, State of New York and United Federation of Teachers entitled “The Education of Italian-American Youth” focusing on Italian-American high school dropouts. Educators recognized that many Italian-American students were not completing 4 years of high school. The Calandra Institute accepted this challenge and for the first time estimated the non completion rate of Italian-American High School students as compared to other race and ethnic student populations that were being reported by the NYC Board of Education. (ref. 2)

Not surprisingly the data confirmed the education community’s perception that 1 out 5 of Italian-American students entering the 9th grade did not receive a high school diploma by dropping out of high school prior to 4 years (ref. 3). This resulted in Italian Americans having the third highest drop out rate in New York City after the Hispanics and Black high school students. (See Fig. 1)

Fig. (1)
New York City High School Dropout Rates 1988



There was an immediate reaction from Italian-American community as well as the general community: positive and negative. Many in the Italian-American community felt offended by the results and proclaimed that the Calandra Institute was “washing dirty

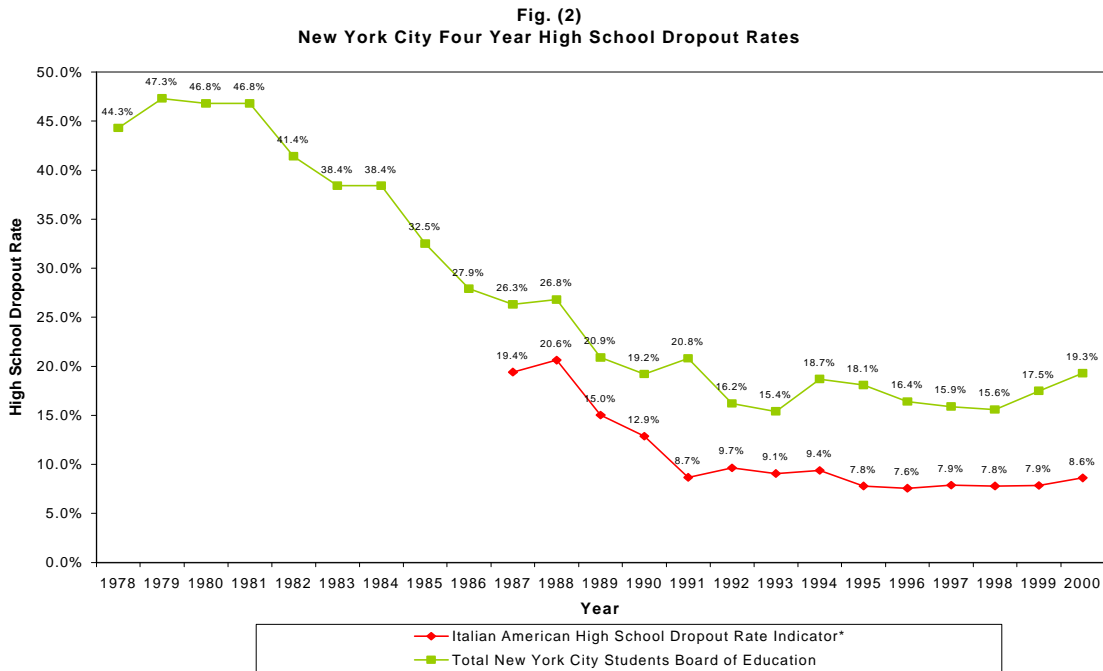
laundry in public”. Others welcomed the result because it signaled an opportunity to address a problem that the educators knew about.

As noted the response was to focus on the problem through the development of mentoring programs (i.e. Amici); positive image programs (i.e. CSJ famous Italian-American profiles on book covers) and notable speakers in school, word of mouth discussions generated by the media to grass root households, high school and college scholarship programs, presentations to community, Italian-American organizations, and counseling programs for high school students. (See ref. 4)

In the 90’s the Calandra Institute and others administered these activities on an ongoing basis. The larger community including the NYC Board of Education was made aware that Italian-American students could no longer be neglected. Throughout the 90’s there was concern to whether this problem was accelerating and what would be expected in the new millennium.

The Calandra Institute using a decade of data on the other student populations available from the New York City Board of Education was able to compare these trends to estimates of Italian-American high school dropout pattern throughout the 1990’s (ref. 5). Italian-American High School drop out rates have since decreased (ref. 6).

Fig. 2 shows the trend in NYC Board of Education High School dropout rates from 1978 to 2000 for the total population. Dropout rates defined by the percent of entering 9th grade students who leave the school system and do not return to obtain a high school diploma within 4 years. High School dropout rates went from a high of 47.3% in the late 1970’s to 19.3% in year 2000.

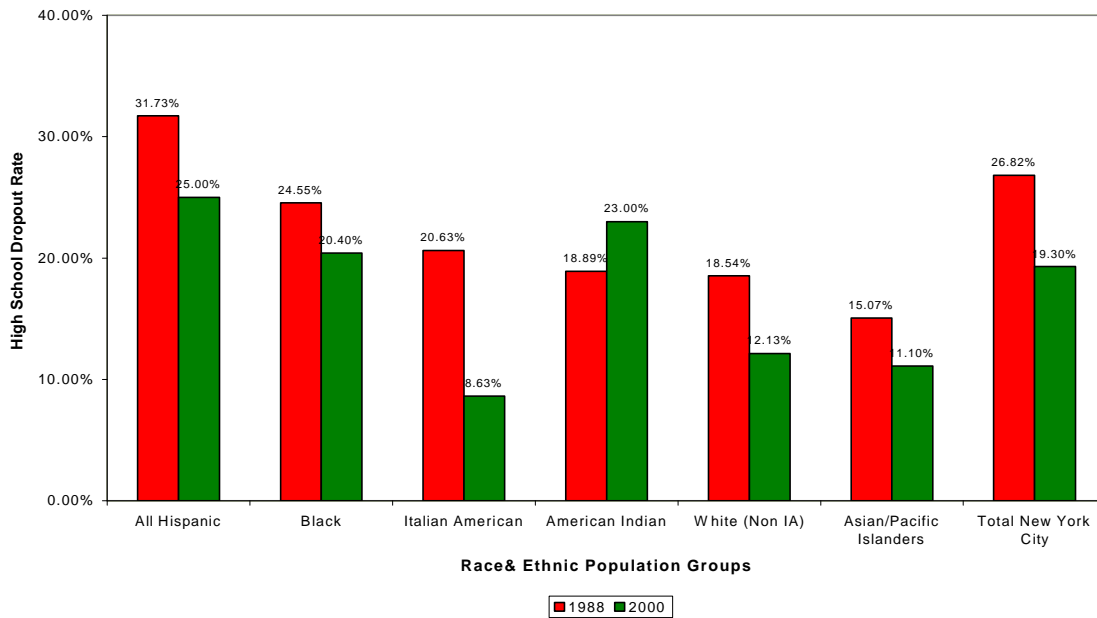


In 1986 the Board of Education started to report high school dropout rates by student populations of Black, Hispanics, Asian, American Indian and White. Indicators of the Italian-American high school dropout rate was estimated using the race and ethnicity stratified high school dropout pattern and the U.S. Census data of Italian- American student education achievement levels from 9th to 12th grades (See ref. 7)

Fig. 2 shows the Italian-American high school dropout rates indicators from 1987 to 2000. In the class of 1988 nearly 21% of the incoming 9th graders would have dropped out within the next 4 years. Making it the third highest after Hispanics and Blacks. In the year 2000 it decreased to nearly 9%. This was the largest decline of all the race and ethnic population groups.

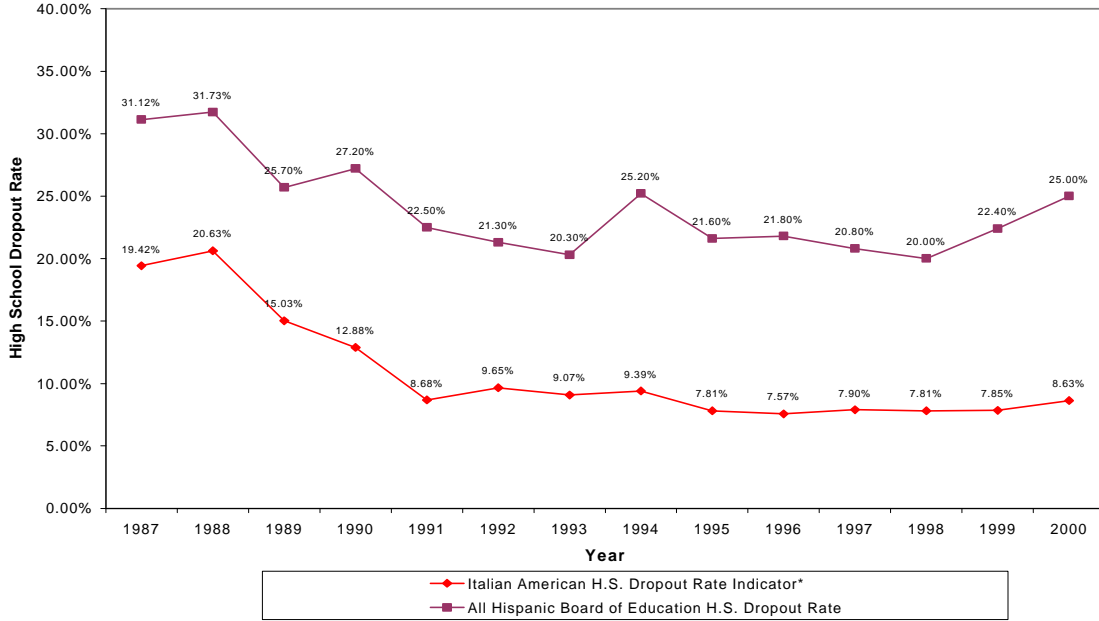
Fig. 3 shows the changes between the 1988 and 2000 high school dropout rates between the race and ethnic populations. In the year 2000 the Italian-American students have the lowest dropout rate at 8.63%. This was lower than the Asian dropout rate at 11.10%

Fig. (3)
New York City High School Dropout Rates 1988 vs. 2000



The next figure 4 compares Italian-Americans and Hispanic students. The highest dropout rate has been among Hispanic students.

Fig. (4)
New York City High School Dropout Rates Italian-American vs. Hispanic



The next figure 5 compares Italian-Americans and American Indians. The American Indians have the second highest dropout rate at 23% while in 1988 the drop out rate was lower than Italian-Americans

Fig. (5)
New York City High School Dropout Rates Italian-American vs. American Indian

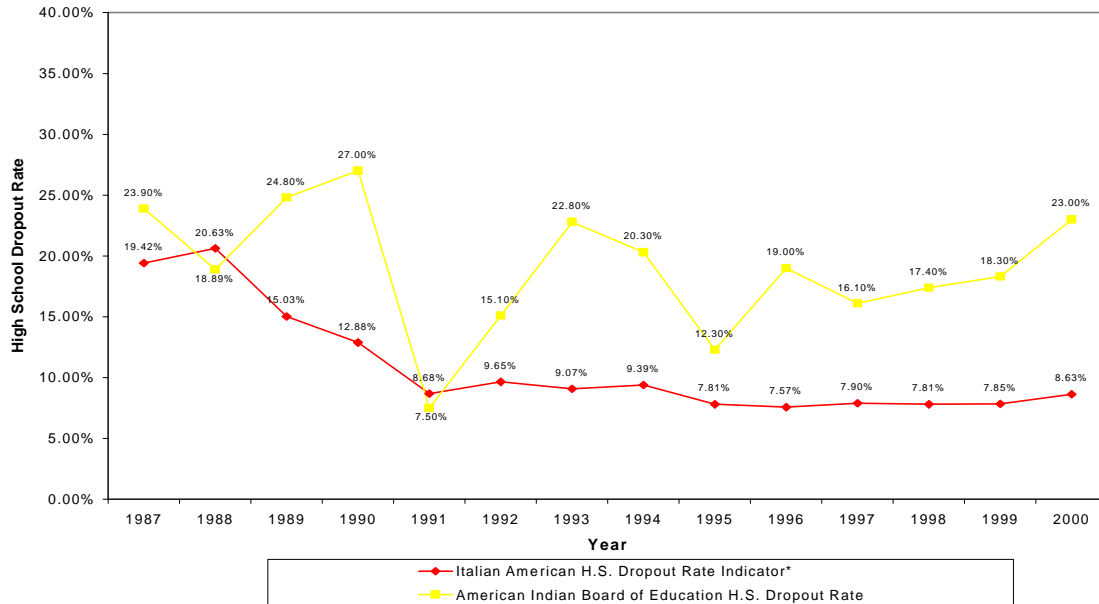
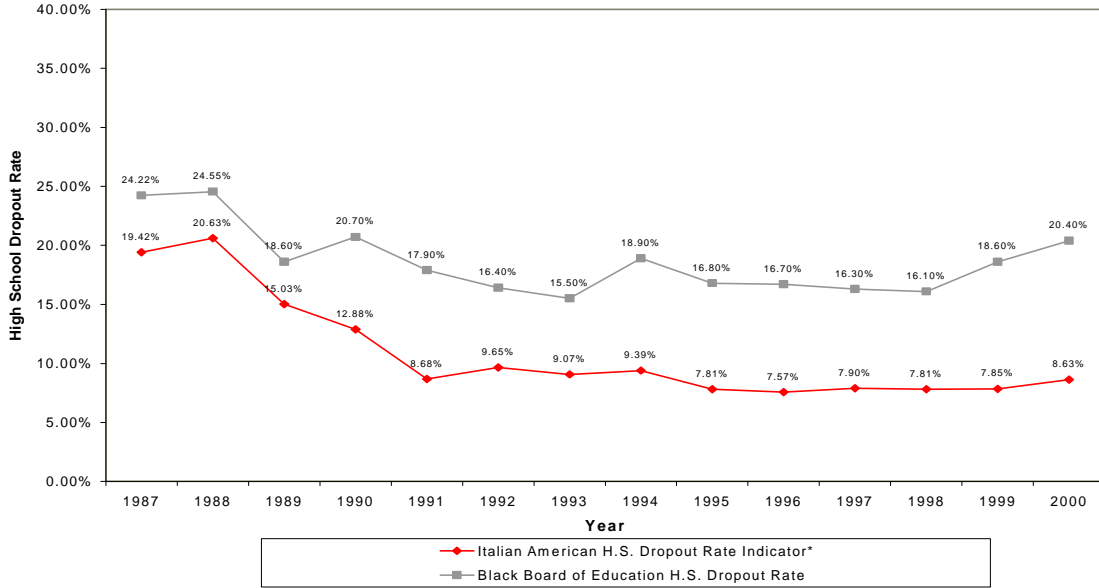


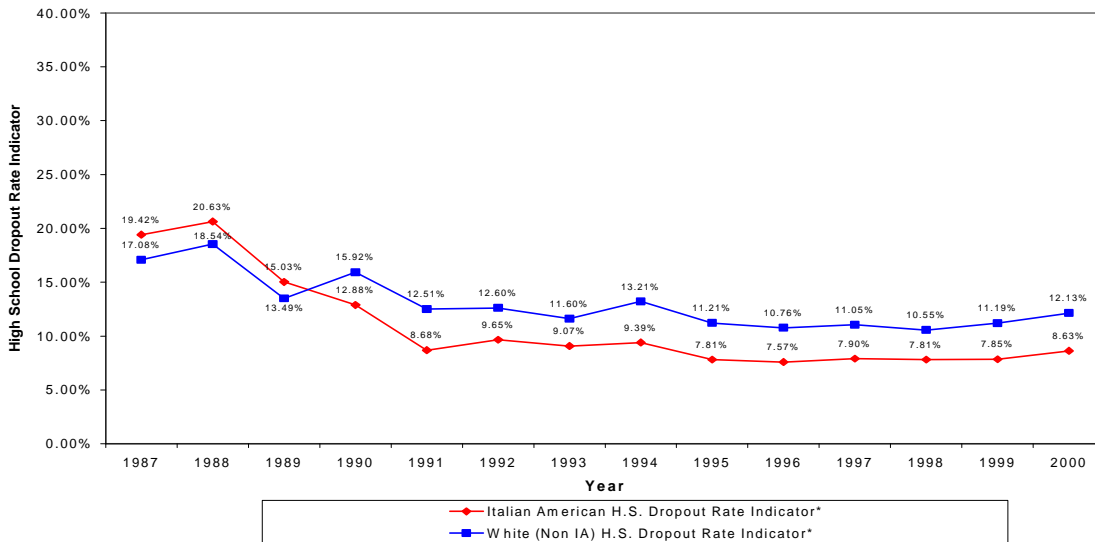
Figure 6 shows Italian-Americans and Black students where in the 80's the high Italian-American high school dropout rate was close to the rate of the Black students. In the year 2000 the difference between the two groups was very large.

Fig. (6)
New York City High School Dropout Rates Italian-American vs. Black



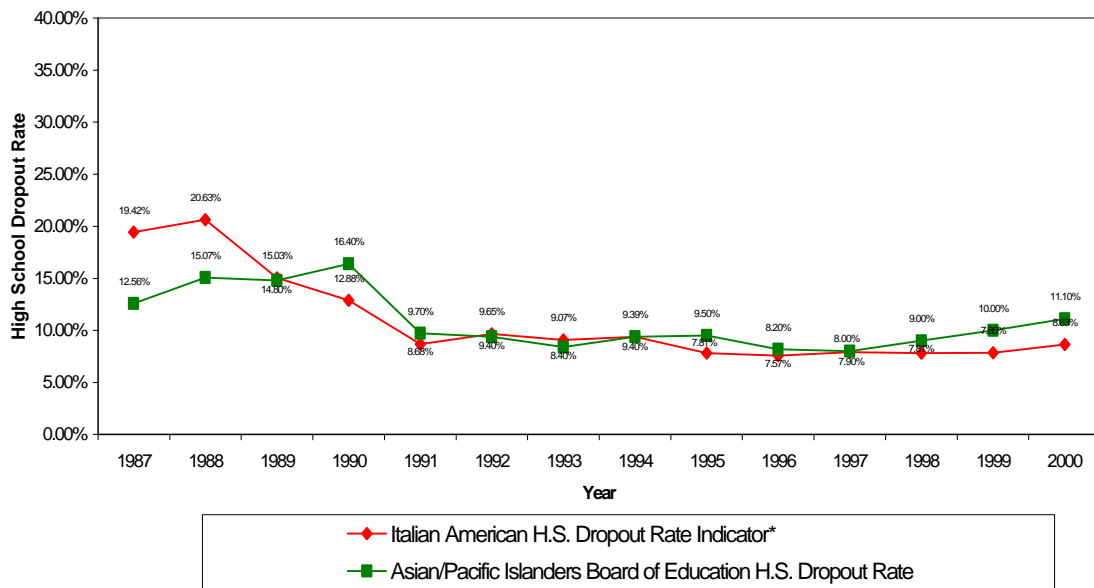
The next Figure 7 compares Italian-Americans and other whites (non Italian-Americans). While the other whites had consistently lower drop out rates than Italian-Americans in the 80's, the drop out rates for the other whites were consistently higher than Italian-Americans in the 90's.

Fig. (7)
New York City High School Dropout Rates Italian American vs. White (Non Italian American)



And finally in the next graph, Figure 8 showing Italian-Americans and Asian/Pacific Islanders, the Asian students drop out a lot less than Italian-Americans students in the 1980's. And though the dropout patterns of the two groups were similar through out the 1990's, by the year 2000 Asian students tended to drop out of high school more than Italian-Americans (ref. 8).

Fig. (8)
New York City High School Dropout Rates Italian-American vs. Asian/Pacific Islander



Italian American Higher Education Achievement

High School Graduates

The changes in Italian-American high school drop out rates from the 1980's to the 1990's are reflected, in the overall educational achievement levels of the New York City Italian-American community in this period between 1980 and 1990. Italian-Americans with less than High School decreased more than the other population groups from 44% to 30% of the New York City Italian-Americans than had less than a high school degree. (See Figure 9) (ref. 9).

It is important to note that Italian-American high school dropout rates were at a low of 7.57% in 1996 and has been slightly increasing to year 2000. Hopefully the increase will not continue to the high points of the 1980's. In fact, recent reports by high school educators and Calandra Institute counselors indicate more Italian American youth are now not completing high school.

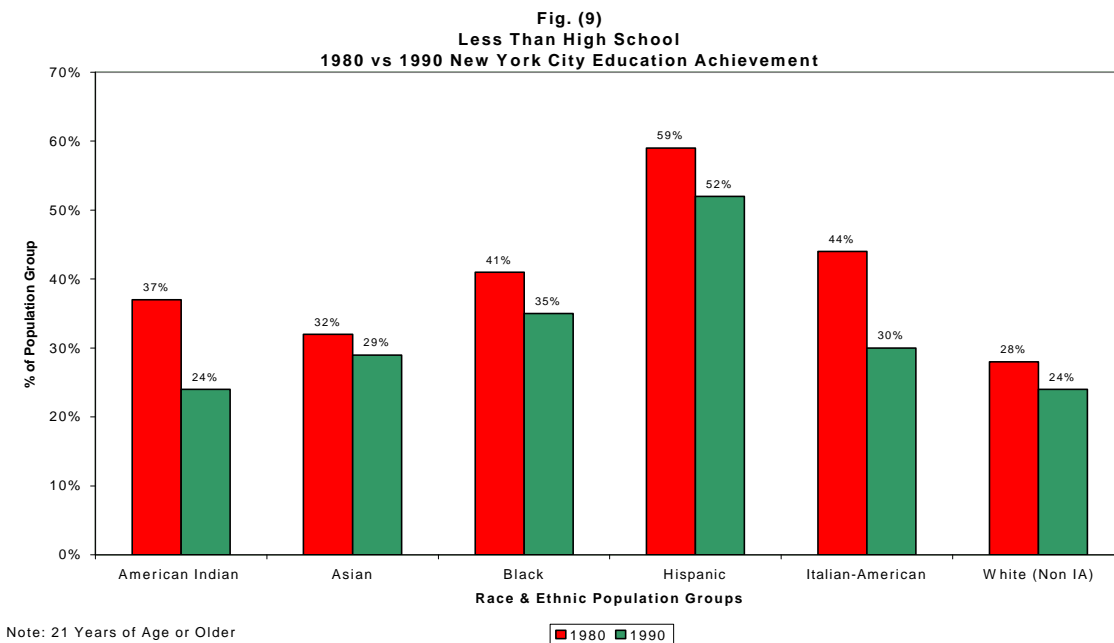
There could be argued that many social factors are affecting these growing numbers. Some believe that our school system is on the verge of collapse and not able to

retain students due to its inability to successfully challenge them intellectually. There are a growing number of young people who have lost faith in our educational system because teachers are overwhelmed with extraneous duties which reduces their time and ability to effectively impart a meaningful education.

The fact that today many households have both parents working full time jobs, thus leaving the child to his own devices, may also be a factor. The parents are often involved in their jobs and more disposed to letting the child act on his own without guidance.

Finally, since the divorce rate in America has become epidemic, many youngsters are without a father figure to instill any type of work ethic. They cannot even contemplate the notion of education under what are sometimes very difficult circumstances for their family. They all too often have to leave school to help the family financially.

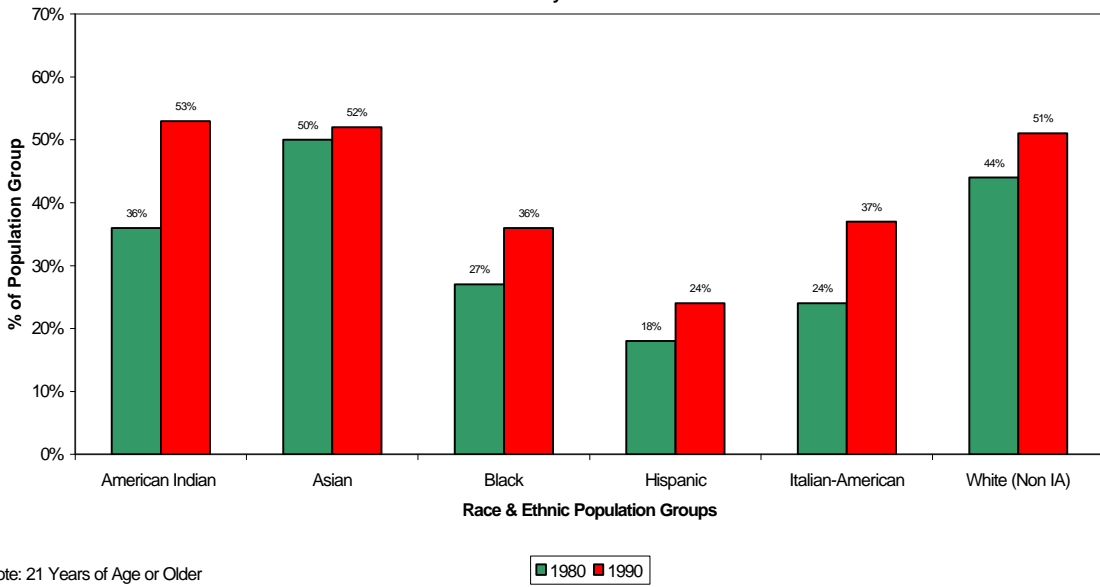
Certainly these are not the only considerations effecting the increase in the dropout rates of Italian-American students, as other groups no doubt are also seeing a rise in dropout rates due to the same afore mentioned situations.



University/College Studies

From 1980 to 1990 Italian-Americans had the largest increase of the population having some college and above (24% to 37%). (See Figure 10)

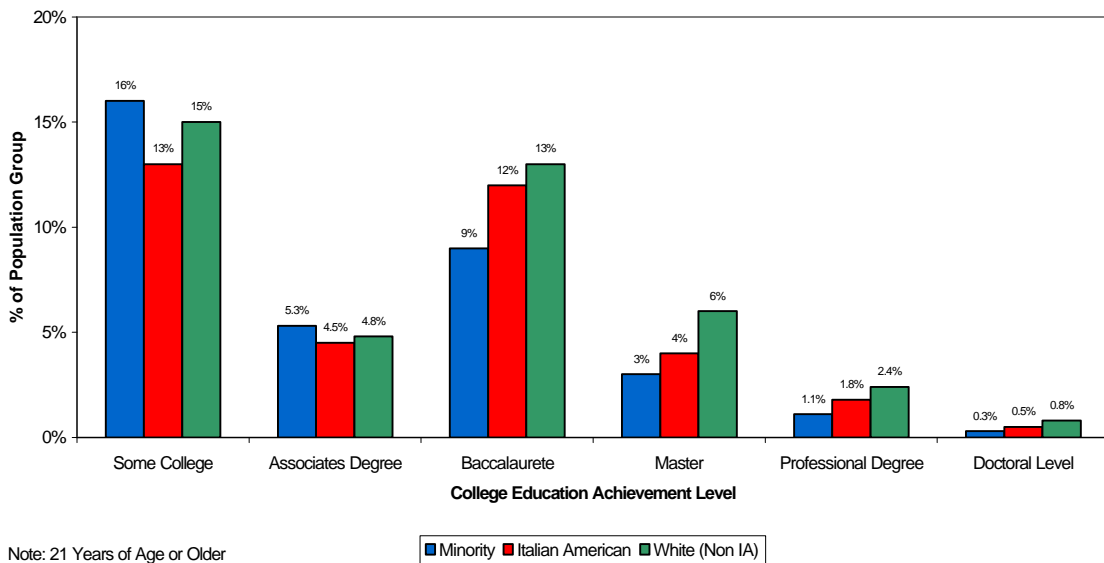
Fig. (10)
Some College and Above
1980 vs 1990 New York City Education Achievement



Graduate Studies

However as shown in Figure 11 when Italian-Americans are compared to other groups (minority and other whites) for college and advanced graduate degrees, Italian-Americans are still lacking graduate education compared to other whites (non Italian-Americans) even though they are slightly better than the minority populations.

Fig. (11)
1990 Higher Education Achievement
New York City (All race and ethnic Populations)



The year 2000 census will provide opportunity to assess additional improvements in college achievement levels for Italian-Americans. However it does appear that similar efforts as were exerted to high school dropouts in the 90's should be applied to Italian-American college students in 2000's to further increase college graduate studies. It is interesting to note that while the ranks of Italian-American college students are increasing, there is a disproportionate gap in the graduate level achievements of these students. It would seem that the immediate goal is to get the "Sheep Skin" and embark upon a career. It has become increasingly obvious that the undergraduate degree, no matter the profession, is not what it was a decade ago. There is more evidence that an advanced degree is now becoming the entry-level requirement in many areas. The question then is: how do we inculcate the need for going beyond four years of higher education so that these students will be able to effectively compete in their chosen professions?

The answer is fundamentally the identical approach taken in the 80's that insured that the dropout rates of students would begin a steady decline from 21% to the present rate of less than 9%. There must be mentoring programs that make our students aware of the necessity of advanced degrees and pointing them in those directions that will help them effectively understand the need and advantages of a post graduate degree. That means that organizations like the Order Sons of Italy in America, UNICO and the National Italian American Foundation that were in the forefront of programs that provided mentoring and generous scholarships for high school students to attend college, should now make scholarships available for graduate studies to qualified students just as many other ethnic groups have been doing over the years. Certainly the family must also get behind the idea that the new millennium requires them to help their children make right choices when preparing for higher education. This can be accomplished by making information about the need for graduate studies available to them through programs that discuss and detail how to understand the need for their child to pursue higher education and what kind of institution best provides those advanced studies. Now that the high school graduate wishes to go to college, it is imperative that they receive *career advice* that helps them choose wisely regarding the institution to best serve them, and the path that best represents a chance to use their particular skills to their advantage. How many bright young men and woman should have gone on to post graduate studies at Ivy League universities but didn't because they or their families couldn't afford it and the fact that they were not fully apprised of their potential as it applied to a particular career?

Summary

During this time we have seen a marked change, for the better, in the dropout rate among Italian-American students in our large urban areas, as well as throughout the entire country. This is particularly evident in those households where both parents have higher education and have risen into the middle class. This paper reviewed those elements that were "traditional barriers" to Italian-American students seeking higher education twenty years ago.

Italian-American High School drop out rates were highest in the 1980's reaching the third highest in New York City of 21%. Italian-American community's outreach effort to encourage its students to complete high school were successfully in lowering high school dropout rates in the 1990's. By the year 2000 Italian-American students had the lowest dropout rates of all groups measured by the New York City Board of Education at 8.6%. Lower than other whites (non Italian) and Asian students. A slight increase in Italian -American high school dropout rates indicator since 1996 cautions that outreach efforts continue so as to avoid the inordinately high dropout rates of the 1980's

Between 1980 and 1990 High school and college achievement levels drastically improved with major increases in the population that have some college or graduate studies. In 1990's although progress was made with college attendance, Italian-Americans with graduate educations are still lagging behind other white (non Italian-Americans).

It is important to continue the aggressive mentoring, counseling, positive image and outreach programs to Italian-American students Further expansion is needed of these outreach programs to Italian-American college students to improve career choices, retention and graduation. In addition there is a stronger demand to provide career counseling and scholarship incentives for college and graduate studies.

Many students today may not recognize themselves in this thesis; for all of this began to change when their parents who were the beneficiaries of these out-reach programs began to realize the importance of education. And as the parents became better educated, their views regarding where they wanted their children to be in the new millennium changed and with them the shifting of traditional perceptions regarding their children's future as it pertained to education. Their children realize that it's only through a solid formal education that they will reap the rewards our system affords those who can compete and create. Today, Italian-American students throughout the country are filling the seats of every major college and university and acquiring those skills that will make them the leaders of the future.

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