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East Palo Alto students, officials discuss dropout rates

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A group of East Palo Alto 10th-graders have spent the past few months researching a topic that hits close to home: why the high school dropout rate remains so high in their communities.

The East Palo Alto Phoenix Academy students' efforts culminated in a panel discussion on education reform held at their school Tuesday night with leaders and educators from Cañada College, Stanford University, Aspire Public Schools and the Sequoia Union, Palo Alto Unified and Ravenswood City school districts. The students will present their research to a separate panel next week and plan to publish a book.

The research was personal for 15-year-old Jesus Loya, whose brother, Jose, dropped out of high school during his freshman year. Jose spent the past 12 months sometimes working with the boys' mother but mostly sitting on the couch, Loya said.

But Loya's research on the long-term problems dropouts face helped convince Jose to re-enter high school next fall.

"He was still set on not coming back, but after I showed him some of the stuff I researched," he decided to re-enroll, Loya said Monday.

"East Palo Alto has a bad graduation rate, and I'm hoping (the panelists) can help us," he added.

On Tuesday night, 10th-graders asked panelists a range of questions about funding disparities among districts, undocumented students, teachers' unions and the problem of calculating the percentage of East Palo Alto students who drop out of high school. Estimates put that number between 60 and 73 percent, although it can be difficult to calculate because there isn't consensus about what constitutes a dropout, panelists said.

The 10th-graders also asked panelists to address remarks Palo Alto Unified School District Superintendent Kevin Skelly made — and later apologized for — about the achievement gap between low-income African-American and Latino students and their white and Asian counterparts.

In those controversial comments, Skelly said disadvantaged students couldn't compete with wealthy peers from highly educated families.

"Socioeconomic status makes a difference in education, in part because it also determines what communities you can live in and what schools you can attend," said panelist Amado Padilla, a professor at Stanford University's School of Education. "That doesn't mean that if you come from a lower socioeconomic status family you can't achieve." Maintaining high expectations for all students is key, Padilla said, noting that he came from a low-income family but earned an advanced degree, as did his siblings.

"What the superintendent said, I think, was wrong, inaccurate and hopefully he has learned something from it," Padilla said.

The panel chuckled when one student directed a question to Sequoia Union Superintendent Pat

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Gemma about how to protect teachers while addressing some of the problems unions create. But Gemma was quick to respond, saying he had long pushed for teachers to consider peer- and supervisor-evaluation as an alternative to tenure.

"Teachers are not the problem — teachers are the solution," Gemma said. "The most important thing that the teachers' union can do is to join hands with school leadership and say, 'Let's work together to make sure that every classroom has the best teacher possible.'"

At the end of the meeting, panelists thanked the students for making them think hard about an uncomfortable issue and agreed to work together in fighting the dropout problem.

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