

Speech for the Bilingual, Immigrant, and Refugee Education Conference of the Great
City Schools
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By

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Good morning. And welcome to the Council of the Great City Schools' fifth Annual Bilingual, Immigrant, and Refugee Education Directors Meeting.

I want to begin this morning by thanking Gabriela Uro and Alejandra Barrio for their outstanding work planning this conference. You've done a great job.

I'd also like to thank our research and instruction teams, who have worked very closely with Gabi and Ale in putting together the agenda and making sure that the needs of English Language Learners are instilled in all of the work we do.

With us today are Ricki Price Baugh, Robin Hall, Denise Walston, Manish Naik, Candace Simon, and Moses Palacios. The team is supported by Michell Yorkman and Lenise Rutherford. Thank you so much.

I'd also like to thank the Co-chairs of the Council's Task Force on English Language Learners and Bilingual Education: Valeria Silva, Superintendent of the St. Paul Public Schools and Nury Martinez, School Board Member of the Los Angeles Unified School District. And thank you to Susan Enfield and the great Seattle Public Schools team for hosting this year's meeting.

Now, I know I do not have to tell anyone in this room that urban public schools are responsible for some of the country's most vulnerable students.

In the 2010-11 school year, the 67 member districts of the Council of the Great City schools educated about a quarter of the nation's poor students, a third of all African American and Hispanic students, and a third of our country's English Language Learners.

Actually, English learners are about three times more likely to be educated in one of our urban districts than in any other school setting.

In fact, the nation's Great City Schools are on the leading edge of population shifts we are seeing nationwide, a trend that will last well into the future.

These are our students. And the need to ensure access to high quality instruction and educational opportunity for English language learners is our charge and our responsibility.

Last fall at our annual conference in Boston, we released a new study on the social and educational factors contributing to the outcomes of Hispanic students in our urban schools. The report was titled “Today’s Promise, Tomorrow’s Future.”

Hispanics, of course, comprise just one out of the many ethnicities and language groups among our English language learners, and not all Hispanics are ELLs. But this group makes up the vast majority of ELLs nationally and in our Great Cities.

Latino students already constitute about half of all elementary and secondary students in California and Texas, and about 20 percent of all students in New York State. By mid-century, Latinos are projected to represent about one-third of all students in the U.S.

Our report laid out some of the encouraging trends facing this group alongside the perils. It tells a story of hope and optimism, and a tale of caution and uncertainty.

First, let’s take a look at some of the encouraging data about our Hispanic, and immigrant children and families. Much of this you know in your bones, but there are hard numbers behind what you think you know.

It is clear from the data that many Hispanic families are pretty stable, compared with other groups. Six out of ten Hispanic children live in households with married adults. And Census figures show that 84 percent of young children in immigrant households live in two-parent families, compared with 71 percent of U.S.-born children.

Conversely, Hispanic children were less likely to live in single-parent households than either African American or Native American children, but more likely to live in this setting than white or Asian American youngsters.

Infant mortality among Hispanic families is also lower than national averages.

Moreover, our report contains data on student achievement among Hispanic students and English language learners.

We were able to break down National Assessment of Educational Progress results into separate estimates for Hispanic ELLs, Hispanic non-ELLs, and former ELLs—and the results are both interesting and many times hopeful.

The trends show that Hispanic English language learners emerging from our bilingual programs often do about as well in reading and math as do Hispanic students who never had to learn English as a second language. A good sign.

In addition, the preliminary findings from our pending ELL report indicate that former ELLs tend to do as well or better in reading and math at the 4th grade level as non-ELLs do.

A positive case in point is a story told to me by an ESL teacher in one of our districts. A tenth-grader came into her English class with great aspirations to do well academically because she had been a good student in the Dominican Republic, her native country. But she did not know much English when she came to the U.S. The student – her name is Anita – was upset because she was not doing well in her regular classes.

She approached the teacher and asked how she could improve her grades. Using a mixture of Spanish and English, the teacher was able to help Anita transfer the skills she had developed in her classes in the Dominican Republic to her classes in her American school. The teacher spent a lot of time helping Anita develop her writing skills in English, putting particular emphasis on grammar, vocabulary, and language structure.

The end result: The dedication and hard work of the teacher and the support of the school administration – in combination with the student's own strong motivation – put Anita on the path to academic success. She went into Honors and Advanced Placement classes. Interestingly enough, she was recommended for these classes not by her ESL teacher, but by teachers in the honors program.

Our report has a number of these wonderful examples of how students benefit from the work you do and the programs you run.

Finally, our initial report shows that a number of major cities—including Austin, Boston, Charlotte-Mecklenburg, and Miami-Dade County—have very strong academic attainment among their Hispanic students on NAEP.

In fact, Hispanic students in Miami-Dade County, Charlotte-Mecklenburg, and New York City exceed national averages among their peer group.

And in Boston, New York City, Los Angeles, and the District of Columbia, Hispanic students have seen substantial gains in their reading and math scores over the last several years.

But, the reports also show storm clouds that we need to pay attention to if we are to ensure that our ELLs and immigrant students have the opportunities they need to thrive.

Among these warning signs is that nearly three times more Hispanic children live in poverty than do White children, and the socio-economic condition of immigrant Hispanic children is even harsher.

For example, about 39 percent of immigrant children born in Latin American and 37 percent born in Africa are living in poverty. For Mexican immigrant children, more than 2 in every 5 live below the poverty level. And median incomes among Mexican-born heads of household were the lowest among all immigrant groups.

In addition, almost one-third of all Hispanic children live in a family where no parent has a full-time job, although the labor force participation among immigrant families is generally high.

Second, Hispanic children are twice as likely as white children not to be covered by health insurance. And immigrant populations from Mexico and Central America were the least likely to have health insurance among incoming groups.

Third, nearly half of all Hispanic pre-school age children do not have access to early childhood education, and rates of access among immigrant children is even lower. For instance, only 19 percent of three-year olds born to Mexican parents are enrolled in pre-school, only 21 percent of Central American children are enrolled, and only 31 percent of Southeast Asian children participate in early childhood programs.

The urgency is underscored by the fact that one in four children younger than age 8 in the U.S. today has immigrant parents. And African and Central American parents have the highest percentage of children ages 0 to 2.

Four, Hispanic children ages 3 to 5 were also less likely to have parents who engaged in literacy-related activities at home, and these children were less likely to arrive in kindergarten with the readiness skills and vocabulary of either white or African American pupils.

Hispanic students were also less likely to participate in academic and music clubs in school and were more likely to be suspended, expelled, or retained in grade than white students.

The on-time graduation rate of Hispanic students is well below that of other groups and, as you know, Hispanics over 18 make up only a small portion of college enrollments.

But, it is the data on the academic achievement of Hispanic students that may be the most troubling part of what we looked at. The most troubling warning sign.

Again, our analysis involved a first-time breakdown of NAEP data for Hispanic ELLs, non-ELLs, and former ELLs.

By disaggregating the NAEP results in this way, one can see that the reading and math achievement of non-ELL Hispanic fourth and eighth graders improved significantly between 2003 and 2009, but that the achievement levels of ELL Hispanics did not change appreciably over the same period.

The NAEP data also show that average reading and math achievement among Hispanic students was substantially below white students—despite the successes of many of our language programs.

The gap was a consistent 26 scale score points or more, equivalent to about two and a half years difference in attainment among children in the same grade.

In fact, only about 16 percent of the nation's Hispanic fourth and eighth graders scored at or above the *proficient* level in reading on NAEP in 2011.

Hispanic males did worse than Hispanic females.

And only about 20 percent or so of Hispanic fourth and eighth graders nationwide scored at or above proficient levels in math.

The data also showed that Hispanic students from families whose incomes did not qualify them for a free or reduced price lunch read and did math at levels that were no better than white students who were poor enough to qualify for a meal subsidy.

In most major cities, over 50 percent of Hispanic students scored below *basic* levels of attainment in reading and math. Several cities actually posted below-basic rates in excess of 60 percent. One city has over 70 percent of its Hispanic students reading below basic levels of achievement.

Finally, Hispanic students take AP courses at only one-third the rate of white students.

Fewer than 50 percent of Hispanic students meet ACT college readiness benchmarks in reading, English, or mathematics.

And SAT scores were too low for most Hispanic students to gain entry into a competitive college or university—even if they wanted to go.

If they did get in, then they were less likely to stay and less likely to graduate.

And if they did graduate, they were unlikely to earn the same wage as a white graduate with the same degree. At that point, the cycle starts all over again.

Our upcoming report on English Language Learners highlights trends that are cause for additional concern. It will show that the achievement gap between ELLs and non-ELLs actually widened between 2005 and 2011 at both 4th and 8th grades.

In fact, ELL achievement in reading fell approximately 20 percentage points below non-ELLs over this six-year period.

The simple answer to the question about whether we are looking at a crisis or an opportunity with all these numbers is yes we are—both and both at once.

To be sure, there are developments on the national and local horizons that suggest reason for cautious optimism, and they are developments we should seize.

One ray of hope is that the current era of accountability and disaggregated data in public education has brought the achievement of English language learners to the forefront.

It was no accident that many of the national civil rights groups supported *No Child Left Behind* because it required those of us who run the schools to be accountable for the results we get with poor, African American, Hispanic, ELL, and students with disabilities. The Council of the Great City Schools actually supported NCLB for the same reason.

Accountability is a positive development and one that we embrace—because you can't address a problem if you pretend it doesn't exist and no one is responsible for doing anything about it.

Another positive development is that the discourse about English language learners and how to teach them has moved away from the methodology wars and moved towards discussions about English language development.

What's so promising today is a growing acknowledgement that a mixture of approaches built on one's native language is needed to help boost the academic achievement of English language learners.

The exact structure and nature of the instructional program is not as essential as the quality of the instruction – just as it is for every child, regardless of his or her fluency in English.

The emerging research in this area is getting better and better, and over the course of the next few days, we will have a chance to hear about a number of promising studies and research-based interventions and approaches from researchers, district leaders, and experts in the field.

Finally, I think another encouraging development involves the common core state standards. At this meeting, we will delve into some of the work being done to ensure that the new standards are implemented to meet the needs of English learners, and all students.

I know there are some who are skeptical about the common core. I know there are people who claim that they were not involved in the process. And I know there are some who would note that there is precious little mention of English language learners and no mention of Hispanic students or other groups in the common core documents.

There is truth in those claims. But there is also a larger truth, which says that the new standards will raise expectations for students who have had little expected of them

for too long. And that is particularly true of Hispanic students, poor students, African American students, ELLs, and students with disabilities.

The brilliance of the common core is not really that it expects the same things of everyone, but that it relies heavily on the thorough study of limited amounts of very complex text to help students comprehend meaning, deconstruct language, and formulate arguments.

Why is this important? It's important because it creates the intellectual framework on which academic vocabulary is acquired and conceptual understanding is built.

That conceptual work is important for all students, but it is particularly crucial for English language learners who are attempting not just to acquire vocabulary but to garner meaning from what they read.

Academic vocabulary and understanding language structure and how to express it gives students true access to power.

Think for a minute what a lesson introduced to us last year by Lily Wong Fillmore on Irene Kelly's story, "A Butterfly's Life," would do in a third-grade class of ELLs with a team of teachers who could help deconstruct the language of the story, discuss the clauses and phrases in how the story is put together, describe the concepts of metamorphosis and transformation, have children write about their notions of change, and discuss their work.

Does anyone not think that such a lesson wouldn't build comprehension, fluency, academic vocabulary, English acquisition, writing skills, science awareness, and even collaboration in one stroke—for ELLs and non-ELLs alike?

It—and lessons like it—give students the tools and confidence they need to handle future tasks that demand strong literacy skills.

The other secret weapon of the common core is that its deeper study of limited amounts of more complex text helps neutralize the advantages that students from more well-to-do backgrounds often bring to their reading, because the emphasis in the standards is on the text itself rather than the experiences a child may have had outside of school.

The common core won't solve all our problems to be sure. And there is a cautionary note to the optimism I'm expressing.

The positive move away from the methodology wars, the rise of the common core, and the individual success stories of students like Anita cannot mute the fact that

much work remains to be done to close the achievement gap between students who are proficient in English and those who are not.

And much work remains to ensure that our students have the language proficiency needed to fully access the common core.

Many English language learners not only lack proficiency in English, but they also have weak or nonexistent literacy in their native languages, and they are further disadvantaged by living in high-poverty households.

Many urban school districts in which English language learners attend school must cope with a shortage of teachers with sufficient training in how to work with students who are learning English.

Many of these students attend school in buildings that are inadequate or are inadequately equipped or both.

Too few are taught by our best and most experienced teachers or have the resources they need to thrive academically.

Too many ELL students simply do not have access to the core curriculum, are held to low levels of expectation, or they are presented with a watered-down version of the curriculum that keeps them performing at low levels.

Too many English learners must figure out a way to survive in a world where the adults won't get out of their bureaucratic silos and compliance-oriented mind-sets.

And too many of our students face larger hostilities around their very presence in this country—a collective and shameful animosity that only reinforces patterns of failure.

Over the years, the Council of the Great City Schools has tried to be a progressive force on behalf of these and other students.

Some of our earliest work in this area was in support of immigrant and refugee legislation on Capitol Hill in the 1980s.

We vigorously fought Unz in California, Massachusetts, and other states when they sought to bar the use of any language other than English in their classrooms.

We filed suit against the California Department of Education alongside San Francisco when it challenged a state requirement to test students in English when they didn't know the language.

We fought for decades to protect and enhance funding for the original Title VII—now Title III—and the emergency immigrant education program.

We worked alongside the late Senator Kennedy to transform Title III from a discretionary grant to a formula grant program—even when some Hispanic groups opposed us.

You may have noticed that funding for the program jumped from \$380 million to \$750 million as a result of the change—and you now have a consistent revenue stream to meet the needs of your bilingual children rather than having to compete for it.

We sided with the Chicago schools when the State of Illinois eliminated assessments that accommodated the linguistic needs of English language learners.

We were an early supporter of the DREAM Act to provide citizenry for any graduate of our schools who lacked it.

We opposed efforts over the years to block-grant Title III; exclude immigrant students from federal support; and conduct ICE raids in our schools.

We have also proposed innovative modifications to the accountability provisions in ESEA to handle the movement of limited English proficient students in and out of AYP status.

We opposed legislation that was supported by some national educational organizations that would allow local school districts to transfer funds out of Title III programs for other purposes.

We caught the Department of Education just as it was about to approve state waiver applications that muted accountability for ELLs.

And we have made proposals to spur better coordination of Title I and Title III, expand the use of Title III funds, allow testing exemptions for newcomers, offer balanced accountability provisions under Title III, and expand ELP assessments.

In addition, our Strategic Support Teams have worked hand-in-hand with district staff to identify the factors driving weak instructional programming for English language learners in a number of our cities, and have provided recommendations for how to improve.

We are working now with several cities that are under review by the Office of Civil Rights for their practices with English learners.

We host these annual meetings of bilingual education staff to provide you with a forum to work with your colleagues and other leaders in the field, to share successes and challenges, and to ensure that we are doing everything we can to support you.

We have all worked very hard over the years on behalf of our English language learners. And you can see the results in our kids.

You can see it in Ermias, a native of Ethiopia who came to this country alone after his parents were killed and who graduated last spring from Lee High School in Houston and is now an engineering major at Syracuse University.

You see it in a young man who calls himself “Peter” who survived the camps in Darfur to graduate from the St. Paul Public Schools two years ago. He is at the University of Minnesota now.

And you see it in a young lady named Natalia, who moved from the Dominican Republic to Anchorage, knowing no English, but who immersed herself in her school, graduated in the top 10 percent of her class at age 16, and went on to college and graduate school.

When she received her diploma, she noted that she could not control her origins, but could define her destiny.

She was right about that, for many of our kids come from nothing but find in their Great City Schools the sanctuary, the helping hand, and the intellectual stimulation they need to take their first steps toward the American dream.

Now, we need to work together to ensure that all of our English language learners have access to the best teachers and curriculum.

We need to stop the disproportionate placement of ELL children into special education because they can’t yet read in English.

We need to enrich our instruction with greater emphasis on vocabulary, language acquisition, and English language development.

We need to work together on the recruitment of more language minority teachers and administrators. And we need to turn the tide of English language learner dropouts from our schools.

We need to stop relegating the instruction of our immigrants and newcomers to the basements of our worn-out buildings.

We need to seriously question why so many of our long-term ELLs slip through the cracks without anyone noticing.

We need to think more clearly about how to diagnose and handle the language needs of our English language learners with disabilities.

We need to break down the bureaucratic silos that result in only the bilingual offices in our districts owning the success of our English language learners.

And we need to honor the language skills that our students bring with them from home every day.

A study that we produced two years ago called, *Succeeding with English Language Learners: Lessons Learned from the Great City Schools*, showed that we can accomplish a lot of these things with:

- a strong and shared vision for action
- clear leadership on behalf of ELLs
- bilingual and ELL staff who are given authority to act
- a clear language-development strategy
- long-term commitment of resources and support
- a culture of shared accountability
- high quality instructional programs that all English learners have full access to
- appropriate staffing
- the consistent use of rich and differentiated data to inform instruction.

This is work we should pursue together and work we should do with a sense of urgency. We face deep and entrenched societal challenges and hostilities.

Unfortunately, the nation's efforts on behalf of our urban school children are too often defined around who is valuable in this society and who is not. Who we have high hopes for and for whom we have no hopes at all. Who we have high standards for and for whom we hold no great expectations.

Our job in public education is not to reflect, affirm, and perpetuate these inequities. Our job is to overcome them.

The great civil rights battles and other struggles for equality were not fought so brown and black children, English language learners, immigrants and refugees, and special needs students could have access to mediocrity.

They were fought over access to excellence and the resources to pay for it.

I hope you agree, and I hope we can continue to pull together to meet the challenges ahead, and ensure that what is now crisis will one day soon be opportunity for all our children.

Thank you.