

**TESTIMONY to CITY COUNCIL, PHILADELPHIA
COMMUNITY ADULT LITERACY CLASSES**

Nicholas Torres, President of Congreso

March 29, 2006

Page 1 of 3

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Good Afternoon, my name is Nicholas Torres and I serve as President of Congreso de Latinos Unidos, the largest Latino health, education, social services, and workforce development community-based not for profit agency in Pennsylvania. On behalf of the over 24,000 clients we service at Congreso, 70% of whom are Latino, and 23% are African American, I am honored to be here today to emphasize the critical need adult literacy classes.

One of the most assured means of securing a stable workforce is through educating our populace and preparing them for higher skilled jobs in the city. As such, community adult literacy classes are of the utmost importance for the thousands of adults with low-literacy skills in Philadelphia. With your support, Congreso and other Latino-based community organizations are seeking a long-term solution to maintain adult literacy classes through The Community College of Philadelphia (CCP). Together we need to ensure the continuance of adult literacy classes across Philadelphia.

Pennsylvania state law outlines that community colleges are designed not only for postsecondary studies, but also for education programs for out-of-school youth and adults. Even though this is the case, only about 1.5% of state and city public funding for community colleges is dedicated to adult literacy classes. This is even more significant considering that this is during a time when the city is experiencing demographic changes through new immigration requiring more ESL classes, continues to have a tremendously high drop out rate (over 50% for the Latino Community), and continues to struggle with many residents being unemployable given their low literacy rates and a changing job industry. Specifically, the Latino community has seen CCP's investment in adult literacy decrease from approximately

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Page 2 of 3

60 sections annually to its current 18 sections. This is a 70% decrease in less than 3 years. Again, I would like to emphasize that this has been done at a time when, as the recent National Research Council's study reports, increased immigration means that Latinos are highly overrepresented in low wage industries. Low wage jobs and limited English proficiency lead to lack of self-sufficiency. In short, as the US economy continues to move toward high skilled jobs, Latinos with such challenges and without proper support are finding it difficult to compete.

Latino students are seeking a solution, but Dr. Steve Curtis, President of CCP, seeks to increase the cost shared with students to approximately \$100 per class representing about 43% of the class cost. This cost of \$100 per course to the student competes with the essentials necessary to sustain a family - healthcare, food and housing. On average, annual family income for Latinos in Eastern North Philadelphia is \$14,000. Making \$100 available for a semester course becomes a luxury for the population most needing adult literacy. This questionable fund allocation is highlighted by the fact that CCP has received a 6.5% (1.8M) increase in funding from the state this year – reportedly a part of the largest increase in statewide funding for community colleges in the last 15 years. There are no restrictions in how the funding is spent. So why cut adult literacy sections and increase costs for the poorest demographic in the city?

As mentioned before, this decrease in funding comes at a time when demand for the classes and, hence, job readiness and workforce development, is soaring. Congreso alone saw that only 50% of its applicants could be placed in literacy classes. There is currently a waitlist of 400 students at Congreso for adult literacy. This is our target audience, those critically in need of education. 50% of our community residents over 18 years of age do not have a high school diploma or its equivalent. The demand for continuing education is there; now we just need to secure the basic resources that are needed to provide this valuable, broad-based service, which directly benefits not only clients but also even the broader community.

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Page 3 of 3

The decrease in availability of these classes only further reduces any hope of individuals entering the workforce and becoming self-sufficient. As such, unemployment equates to a larger drain on social service resources, as the heads of household have to support their families through alternative means. Keep in mind that as baby boomers in this country reach retirement, the community will be increasingly dependent upon the US workforce, which will be increasingly composed of the younger, growing Latino population.

In closing, I would like to remind City Council that our future will be in the hands of the next generation. We need to prepare them for their future and for ours. As such, we again implore your assistance for funding on the city level and an increase in the allocation designated for adult literacy classes.

Sources:

1. "Many obstacles cloud future of Latinos in U.S., report says", Michelle Mittelstadt, Dallas Morning News, as reported in the Philadelphia Inquirer, March 12, 2006
2. Philadelphia Youth Council minutes, March 8, 2006 – comments from Dr. Steve Curtis, President, Community College of Philadelphia
3. Pennsylvania Community College Law, Section 1901-A(4) of the act added July 1, 1985 (PL 103, No. 31)
4. Community College Bill formula and summary, July 2005, Pennsylvania State Government
5. Letter to Dr. Stephen Curtis, President of CCP, written by Mr. Johnny Irizarry on behalf of the Eastern North Philadelphia Youth Services Coalition, March 10, 2006