

Congreso de Latinos Unidos, Inc.  
TESTIMONY TO PHILADELPHIA CITY COUNCIL  
OUT OF SCHOOL YOUTH & E3 CENTERS  
February 6, 2007

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Good morning, my name is Nicholas Torres, and I serve as the President of Congreso de Latinos Unidos, the largest Latino social services agency in Pennsylvania. Congreso de Latinos Unidos, Inc. is a community-based nonprofit organization based in Eastern North Philadelphia, and we strengthen Latino communities through social, economic, education, and health services; leadership development; and advocacy. We thank City Council for prioritizing the needs of the Latino population in our great city, especially knowing that Latino communities have unique challenges *and* are a growing population in Philadelphia. Since 1990, the Latino population in Philadelphia has increased by over 65%, and more than half of the Latino population is younger than 25 years of age.

This point is tremendously important when compounded by the following, startling statistic. Latino males have the lowest on-time graduation rate of any group in Philadelphia: 29.3 percent to 38.2 percent<sup>1</sup>. Less than 40% of our population in Eastern North Philadelphia has graduated from high school. The drop-out crisis is very real for all of our youth, but especially so for Latinos. Given the language and cultural barriers and the poverty that faces the Latino community, Latinos are very vulnerable to dropping out of school. So how do we tackle this in an effective, streamlined manner, factoring in all of the stakeholders who can potentially contribute to transformational change?

Congreso has been in the community for almost 30 years, and our services reach more than 10,000 youth per year. We view the schools as the heart of the community, and as such, we have strategically aligned many of our youth programs with the education system. Our contribution to the school system provides supports to prevent high school drop-outs. Even outside of the school

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<sup>1</sup> Philadelphia Youth Transitions Collaborative & Project U-Turn, "Turning It Around: A Collective Effort to Understand and Resolve Philadelphia's Dropout Crisis", 2006  
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system we attempt to attack the root causes that lead youth to drop out of school. Prevention strategies are paramount.

But we realize these strategies are not enough. There are many youth already out of school who desperately need the larger community's support. In response to this, we are one of the community-based organizations charged with managing one of the city's E3 Centers. The E3 centers were designed as intensive career preparation programs for youth age 14-21. Students who drop out of schools are very unlikely to return. As such, E3 centers provide an appropriate and youth-driven context within which to educate clients toward a High School equivalency diploma and to build the essential skills they need to enter the workforce. Members work with our staff to identify their career interests, set goals and gain the skills needed to achieve them. But this is hard work that takes extensive dedication to each of the youth to ensure they meet the goals set out with them. This is especially so for the youth who have entered into the juvenile justice system – approximately 90% of them dropping out of school.

On average, currently \$3,000 is dedicated to each youth slot in an E3 center. An amount that differs quite dramatically from upwards of \$40,000 that can be spent on youth placed in residential treatment. One of our most important investments in the E3 Center and in many of our youth programs is human capital. Our Career Advisors and instructors are vital investments because research demonstrates that the primary critical factor in successfully intervening with these youth is a caring adult. Nevertheless, under the current funding structure at \$3,000/youth we must often make difficult choices regarding providing social or instructional supports. When we have to make these difficult choices we fail to give the youth comprehensive support resulting in very few gains leading to a degree or employment. As such, we propose increased capacity within the current centers to

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fully address the myriad of needs that each of our clients present. Another essential need for our centers is the entrée for more workplace internships for our clients as real time experience, not limited to the classroom, is often the essential ingredient that motivates a youth to change his/her life . **We respectfully request your partnership in supporting workplace internships for our youth for the upcoming fiscal year.**

With an emphasis on quality over quantity, we will more likely ensure real, positive change in the lives of the clients we serve. We have seen in the year that we have operated the E3 center the absolutely essential component of personal connections with an adult at the center. Again, an adult connection is one of the most influential components that lead an out-of-school youth toward success.

Let me share a client story with you. “Cristina” is a 17 year old Latina who dropped out of high school when she was 14 (in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade). She had become pregnant, and when her baby was born, her mother kicked her out of the house. So where does this leave Cristina? She doesn’t have consistent child care; she has been evicted three times from housing; she doesn’t have relationships with her parents, the father of her daughter or other relatives; she is an only child; and she is currently looking for work, but because of her child care situation she hasn’t been able to hold down a job very long.

She connected to the E3 Center last January. So far, Cristina has improved from 4<sup>th</sup> grade to 7<sup>th</sup> grade reading and math levels; is currently in GED 201 (7<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> grade levels); has completed a 6 week program in Computer Repair Program within the Center; and is currently working 15-20 hours per week in the program. Just as important, through case management, she has found more stable housing and child care; built better peer and social networks; and is working towards involving the

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father of her daughter in their lives. The connection she has made with her case manager and the direction the case manager has been able to provide to her have been the successful keys bringing her toward self-sufficiency. She is not quite there, though. More time, committed focus and resources will be dedicated to Cristina so that she actually receives her GED and works in a more sustainable job. We are committed to getting her there.

And there are many Cristina's in Philadelphia. We aim to provide quality, outcomes-based results that will lead our clients toward self-sufficiency. The collaboration of all of these organizations here today is significant and needs support. **In addition to financial support from City Council, public education efforts around the issue of drop-outs and increased community collaboration for proposed solutions, on your behalf, would assist us immeasurably.** With such limited time to discuss very imperative issues, Congreso graciously invites any and all City Council members to view our E3 center and other youth programs, to see more intimately the important supports we offer to enhance the work in and out of our schools. We are committed partners, dedicated to the well-being of our communities. Thank you for your time.