

CENSUS REPORT UNDERSCORES NEED TO INCREASE ATTENTION TO EARLY EDUCATION FOR HISPANICS

Washington, D.C. - Data released yesterday by the U.S. Census Bureau about the growth of the nation's Hispanic population underscore the need for President Bush and Congress to invest in initiatives that benefit Latino children, especially in the area of early childhood education. According to the report, Hispanics were the most likely of all Americans to be preschoolers; more than one in ten (10.4%) Latinos are five years old and under. In fact, Latinos are the only racial or ethnic group whose five-and-under population exceeds 10%.

"These data confirm what we have been saying for some time," noted Raul Yzaguirre, President of the National Council of La Raza (NCLR). "Latinos are a young population, and the nation's future students, workers, and taxpayers. The public policy choices we make today will determine our future social and economic well-being."

In the most immediate sense, the data have implications for preschool programs, such as Head Start, and the public school system. Head Start is the nation's premier, federally-funded preschool program that has a track record of success in preparing children from low-income families to enter school ready to learn how to read and do math. In addition, Head Start provides health and nutrition services to these families. Recent NCLR research and Census data show that 30% of all poor children in the U.S. ages five and under are Latino, which means that a significant proportion of the children eligible for – and whose lives may be touched by – Head Start are Latino. The future effectiveness of this valuable program largely rests on the implementation of policies that improve the quality of services to Latino and limited-English-proficient (LEP) children and their families.

"Given what we know about Head Start, it is a major disappointment to the Latino community that Congress has yet to renew the Head Start program. There is no time to waste. In light of these new data, we need to ensure both that all children who are eligible to participate in Head Start can do so and that the program provide Latinos with access to high-quality services, including services to LEP children and their families," advised Yzaguirre.

Educational investments are especially important because Latinos now represent one in six (16.3%) of all U.S. public school students. This new Census analysis indicates that this share will grow in the next decade, so public school systems serving Latino students should plan appropriately and policy-makers must act accordingly. "Public schools must receive the resources they need to educate and prepare our future workforce. In addition to Head Start, our nation's children deserve a commitment from lawmakers on other promising initiatives," underscored Yzaguirre.

As NCLR has documented, this includes full funding of the No Child Left Behind Act and positive action by Congress and the President on the "DREAM Act," which would provide immigrant students who have successfully completed their education in U.S. high schools with an opportunity to attend college and seek meaningful employment opportunities.

"A large share of our nation's future economic growth will depend on the millions of Hispanic children in our preschools and public school system, on the opportunities we give them, and on the priorities we set for ourselves today. If we equip Latino and all children with high-quality education, we will have a tremendous pool of talent ready to lead the nation forward, and every American will benefit. If we improve their educational outcomes and overall well-being, we are not only addressing issues important to the Latino community, but also laying a cornerstone for the nation's future economic prosperity," concluded Yzaguirre.