

HISPANICS: NEW AWARENESS, NEW CHALLENGES

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Princeton, NJ - More than ten million Latino voters are credited in great measure for President Obama's re-election. That milestone event launched a buzz that continues today. What does the heightened attention mean for us and our nation?

Our top challenge: Harnessing Latino political and economic power to address the most pressing issues, especially education and the related issues of immigration reform, jobs, healthcare and housing. No matter how immigration reform pans out, as a society we must marshal the talents, resiliency and aspirations of newly enfranchised residents and new citizens. The sheer number of Hispanic Americans — those learning to speak English and second-generation young people now in college and entering the workforce — requires a national will to integrate them fully into our society.

This means increased educational opportunities, job training and capitalizing on their work ethic and entrepreneurial spirit. If we can do it, our economy will grow and the numbers consigned to an enduring underclass will decline.

Education for Latinos shows promise: Reduced dropout rates, increased higher education enrollments, greater awareness of students' needs, and valuable new research on positive aspects of Hispanic children's social and language skills. But challenges remain.

Replicating successes on a larger scale remains a hurdle. Many nonprofits lack resources to expand their programs beyond the populations they now serve. Parents Step Ahead (PSA), for example, a model organization that educates parents about their children's education, is extending its program from its base in Dallas to San Antonio.

Like PSA, countless Hispanic organizations are doing amazing work with few resources. The challenge is how to apply their best practices and take the best programs to scale. I don't have the answers, but publicizing their successes is a critical first step.

The Association of Latino Administrators and Superintendents (ALAS) and its Executive Director, former Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund attorney Verónica Rivera, represent Hispanics and others on the front lines of education. It is preparing the next generation of school system leaders with the skills and commitment necessary to narrow achievement gaps and address the needs of English-language Learners and other marginalized groups. ALAS merits our attention and support.

The high cost of higher education is another challenge. Many work to forge a college-bound culture in Latino homes. Yet some Latinos — as other Americans — question the value of postsecondary education as tuition costs rise and jobs aren't there. Tuition debt, especially for working class families, remains a burden that cries out for remedies.

The American Association of Hispanics in Higher Education (AAHHE), Excelencia in Education, and the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU) are among the leaders in this area. AAHHE, for example, has conducted an annual outstanding doctoral dissertation competition for six years, helping to meet a critical need.

Increased awareness of Latino power means opportunity. The challenge — the sad reality — is that stereotypes, distorted perceptions, negativism and even hostility survive. Hard work lies ahead if we are to make our Hispanic community truly transformative, enduring, more powerful and respected, a stronger force for good in our society. Despite our numbers and commitment, the tasks ahead seem daunting.

Ever the optimist, and with my focus on equity and opportunity in education, and with encouraging trends for Latinos, I hope our Hispanic leaders will coalesce, find the resolve and wield the influence our concerns demand. The National Hispanic Leadership Agenda, a coalition of 34 organizations, is wielding its influence more and more. This is a very promising sign. Together we can help build a better nation.

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