



**State of Connecticut**  
**Latino and Puerto Rican**  
**Affairs Commission**

18-20 Trinity Street  
Hartford, CT 06106  
Tel. (860) 240-8330  
Fax (860) 240-0315  
E-Mail: [lprac@cga.ct.gov](mailto:lprac@cga.ct.gov)  
Web Site: [www.cga.ct.gov/lprac](http://www.cga.ct.gov/lprac)

**Chairman**

*Richard A. Cruz*

**Vice-Chair**

*Elena Trueworthy*

**Secretary**

*Emanuela Palmares Leaf*

**Treasurer**

*Yolanda Castillo*

**Immediate Past Chair**

*Isaías T. Díaz, Esq.*

**Commissioners:**

*Rosa Acosta*

*Ramón L. Arroyo*

*Francisco R. Borres*

*Migdalia Castro*

*Roberto C. Fernandez*

*Ana Gonzalez*

*Jay Gonzalez*

*George Hernandez*

*Dr. Agnes Quiñones*

*Dr. Eugene M. Salorio*

*Pablo Soto*

*Feny Taylor*

*Danny Torres*

**Executive Director**

*Werner Oyanadel*

**Special Projects**

**Director**

*Lucia Goicoechea-*

*Hernández*

**Senior Legislative Secretary**

*Clarisa Cardone*

**Testimony of Roberto Fernandez, Latino and Puerto Rican Affairs Commission**  
**In support of the Master Plan to Eliminate the Achievement Gap in Connecticut**  
**Public Act 11-85**

**Thursday, April 17, 2014**

Good afternoon Chairman Miguel Cardona and all members of the Achievement Gap Task Force. My name is Roberto Fernandez, Chairman of the Priorities & Legislation Committee of the Connecticut General Assembly's Latino and Puerto Rican Affairs Commission (LPRAC). I am here today to testify in support of the "master plan" produced by this task force with the goal of eliminating the academic achievement gaps by January 1, 2020.

For the record, the master plan, based on the report submitted to LPRAC a few weeks ago specifically aims at: (1) identifying the achievement gaps that exist among and between identified cohorts; (2) focus efforts on closing the achievements gaps; (3) establish annual benchmarks for implementation of the master plan and closing the achievement gaps.

Connecticut's Latino population, as many people in this room knows, is the state's second fastest-growing, with a nearly 50 percent increase during the past decade. The state's 510,645 Latinos now represent 14.2 percent of the population and Latino students as a percent of all K-12 students already reached 19% of the overall student population. It is also important to note that the child poverty rate for this population is hovering at 31 percent with unfortunately the largest achievement gap in the nation for low-income students of Hispanic descent. Moreover, in Connecticut there are more than 30,000 English Language Learners (ELL) that speak over 139 different languages – Spanish speaking students however, accounted for 72 percent of all ELLs based on information released by the State Department of Education (SDE) – an ELL student population, which based on the most recent data available, is increasing and is at a greater risk of dropping-out.

According to your "Master Plan", only 63% of low-income students graduate; the percentage of third grade Hispanic students who met goal in reading (27%) is roughly 40 percentage points lower than White students (67%); Hispanic and African American students score on average 28-35 points lower than white students in standardized reading and math tests and English Language Learners show much higher school absentee rates than their peers.

It is within this context that LPRAC is here to testify in support of the policy recommendations provided within this report and LPRAC is fully committed to help this task force and other stakeholders implementing the Master Plan both "inside"

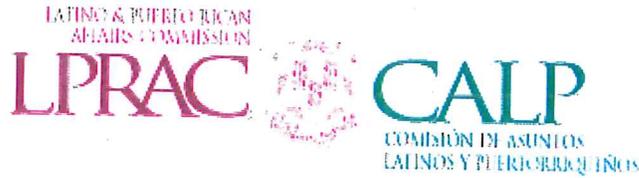
and “outside” the schoolhouse as so eloquently stated herewith. Moreover, we fully agree that change cannot take place without a synchronized approach to addressing quality education issues in our State and it will take significant leadership and collaboration to propel our shared goal of addressing the gaps.

In specific, we applaud your efforts in support of the creation of a new state ELL center that would focus on teacher preparation that incorporate effective – research-based – child development and reading instruction tools that are pedagogically appropriate. We respectfully suggest that all your recommendations within this framework can be examined within the cohort of this recommended “center”. For example, such “center” could concentrate in finding ways to disseminate assessments aligned to model curricula and develop benchmarks to determine progress in language proficiency. It could monitor funding issues and monitor quicker certification routes for bilingual educators to deal with bilingual teacher shortages; create standardized tests in different languages; and engage in third party assessments regarding the quality of services for bilingual and ELL programs among other responsibilities.

LPRAC recently hosted a public hearing on bilingual education at the LOB. We found, for instance, that it may take one full year for a newly identified school district servicing 20 or more identified ELLs who speak the same language in one school building to provide the appropriate interventions. A “center” focused only on these issues with broad decision making abilities could significantly help improve a system that has been neglected for a long time which in turn can help close the current achievement gap.

LPRAC is currently recommending to the legislature that the current statute that limits bilingual education to 30 months be expanded for at least one more school year in light of research indicating that it can take up to seven years to develop full academic proficiency in a second language. LPRAC is also recommending an increase of dual language programs and we urge this task force your support amending your recommendations to include them in your overall recommendations. By doing so you will be addressing the unique needs of English language learners by providing a comprehensive approach to a complex topic that includes accountability, teacher training, appropriate assessments, funding and other on-going issues that when well designed and well implemented – is an effective approach for teaching second language learners.

To create a Bureau of English Language Learners within the SDE or the Governor’s Office, we estimate that the cost would be approximately \$210,000 (for 3 positions) plus fringe benefits and some minimal expense for supplies and equipment. (2) It is estimated that each dual language program would require at least two full-time



certified teachers, at an average salary of approximately \$75,000 each, totaling \$150,000 plus minimal expenses for supplies and equipment.

Too frequently, as we hear repeatedly at our agency, being bilingual is seen as a liability rather than an asset. Instead of embracing the potential of emerging bilingual students, our State has in a high number of cases, been inappropriately identifying ELL students as students with disabilities or students in need of special education. Your efforts along with our recommendations and other stakeholders may significantly improve these problems that for so long have affected our ELL students.

In conclusion, LPRAC applauds your comprehensive approach to reduce the achievement gap and again offer our unconditional support during the implementation phase of these recommendations. We, at LPRAC, will work side by side with your task force prioritizing a legislative agenda that incorporates this Master Plan to assure that all children excel in Connecticut.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.