



HISPANIC DIRECTORS ASSOCIATION
of NEW JERSEY
Building Bridges to a Better Life

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Let Us Take Stock

By: Daniel Santo Pietro, Executive Director

The past few days have produced an incredible string of events that should wake up all Hispanics and people who are concerned about where our country is headed. I have always been driven by the idea of leaving a better country for my grandchildren, and we have to realize how much of a challenge that has become.

These events ironically happened on the same day: the Senate killed the Immigration Bill and the Supreme Court made achieving diversity in our schools more difficult. Smaller but significant events occurred when the Governor vetoed the Hispanic Directors Association Family Services funding and the Commissioner of Children and Family finally released a statement decrying the treatment of immigrant children affected by federal raids in their neighborhoods.

Senator Menendez said early on that the immigration debate was about more than 12 million undocumented people. It went to the heart of the Hispanic contribution and future role in the country. A small group of conservative senators painted an ugly picture of undocumented immigrants raping America and clearly opposed the growing influence of immigrants in general and Hispanics in particular. Denying legalization to the undocumented is a way to assure an underclass of poor workers that will feed the growing inequality that afflicts our society. It denies the contribution of Hispanics in general to sustaining our economy and seeks to limit their potential to address social problems. We see the consequences of this short sighted thinking every day in the children, who regardless of their parents' legal status, suffer an assault on their self worth from public leaders and extremist elements.

This leads to the second event, when the Supreme Court declared unconstitutional using race as a factor to diversify schools. In other words the inequality we have built into our school systems which underlie the larger problem will be harder to address. In New Jersey, which has the most segregated school system in the country, this ruling could worsen our situation. One remedy, the Abbott decisions, is under attack and may be set back when a new school funding formula is passed later this year. Improving our urban schools is a necessary step to creating more diversity in our urban areas. Ninety percent of children in those districts are Latino and African American and we cannot allow them to be trapped in failing schools.

The other event was Governor Corzine's signing of the FY'08 budget. Clearly, the State is going to become more important for our community because of the above mentioned events. HDANJ was disappointed when he vetoed our Family Services funding even though the intention is for the Department of Human Services to fund it from their budget. This program over the past eight years has sought to educate and give assistance to Hispanics to access vital human services, ranging from Preschool to Early Intervention and other programs for their youngest children. Numerous legislators cosponsored the amendment to make mandatory the commitment of the State to closing this gap. Naturally, we will work with the alternative, but we want the State to understand that this issue is a growing concern made more challenging by the federal impasse on immigration. Children and Family Commissioner Ryan's statement on protecting children affected by ICE raids also was released yesterday. It strikes the right tone in saying that legal status should not determine whether we protect children. We will need concerted action in this area. The State will have to take on a leadership role to prevent the excesses some mayors and others might promote because of federal inaction.

So let us take stock because we have much work to do.