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Testimony before the Committee of Education and Labor
Hearing on High School Graduation Rates

Chairman Miller, Ranking Member McKeon and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today about the critical issue of high school graduation and the dropout crisis. I welcome the opportunity to address this very timely issue, and I am grateful to the Committee for prioritizing this important discussion.

In my role as Chairman of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Education and Work Force Task Force, I would like to discuss the issue of high school graduation as it relates to the priorities of the Caucus and to the goals and needs of Latinos and all of our children.

Latinos are our nation's fastest growing and largest minority group of children. Latino children make up one in five of our public school enrollment, comprising more than 10.9 million students enrolled prekindergarten through twelfth grade. Latinos represent 17% of all secondary school students, that's about 2.9 million high school students.

45% of Latino students are English language learners. Almost 80% of the five million ELLs enrolled in schools are Spanish-speaking Latinos. The ELL enrollment in our public schools has doubled in fifteen years, and by 2025, it is expected that one in four students in U.S. public schools will be an English language learner.

Latino children remain the least likely to attend pre-school, the least likely to graduate from high school, the least likely to enroll in college and the least likely to complete college. Only fifteen percent of Latinos are proficient in reading by the eighth grade – compared to almost forty percent for non-Hispanic White students.

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The dropout crisis has a devastating impact on the Latino community. Only about half of the Latino students who enter the ninth grade will graduate with a high school diploma. This is compared to 75% of non-Hispanic White students. Latino English language learners are even more at risk of dropping out, and only 41% of Latino ELLs graduate high school. Every year, between 600,000 and 700,000 Latino students drop out of school.

The data and statistics are daunting but the tasks to improve Latino education are feasible. Congress must work toward policies that address the dropout crisis for Latinos in light of the changing characteristics of our schools.

I would like to recommend to the committee six principles for inclusion:

Accountability:
We must ensure that states are held accountable for accurate counts of their dropout numbers. Congress must ensure that loopholes for counting dropouts remain closed and that the definition for what constitutes graduation is a fair and accurate depiction of the state of affairs on the ground.

Training and Support:
Congress should make a strong commitment to increasing support for teacher training, including for ELL teachers. An effective teacher can mean the difference of success or failure for a struggling student.

We should also increase the Federal commitment to schools serving ELLs. We must consider a commitment to graduation for all high school students in light of the ever increasing number of students who have the added struggle to succeed in their core curriculum while gaining English language acquisition. If we want graduation success, we must put resources where they are needed. Enhanced supports for schools serving ELLs will go a long way toward that goal.

Parental Involvement:
Support for dropout prevention should include a commitment to parental involvement in the education of a child, since family support provides a tangible boost to success. Along this same line, we should provide increased support to family literacy programs, so that families can learn together. Such programs can reinforce the commitment to education and offer better opportunities to parents and children.

Targeted Intervention:
Congress should act quickly to assist those high schools that are most critically in need of intervention to staunch the loss of students to dropping out. Legislation like the Graduation Promise Act, soon to be reintroduced, can provide the implements of aid to schools with low-graduation rates and help to roll back the dropout crisis.

Middle Grade Intervention:
No plan to address the high school dropout crisis will be effective without an adequate middle grade intervention to aid the most troubled feeder middle schools and elementary schools of the most troubled high schools. Research confirms that success in sixth through eighth grades is imperative to ensure success in high school and college. In fact, studies show that sixth-grade students who do not attend school regularly, have poor conduct scores, or who fail math or English, have only a 10% chance of graduating on time.

Latinos in Human Resources:
It is imperative that Latinos have a presence in administrative and policy positions to ensure inclusion of Latinos in the decision making process. If we want to make schools work for Latino students, we must ensure that Latinos, or those that have expertise in working with Latino students, are at the table to implement best practices.

The Department of Education is lacking in diversity, which impacts the overall interpretation and understanding of education policy in regards to Latino students. The overall education structure is missing Latinos as professors for training teachers, recruiting and retention of teachers in our classrooms, and training, recruiting and retention of Superintendents and Principals. We must work on increasing the workforce of Latinos in education if we are to improve Latino education.

These changes are an important element in improving graduation from high school. In addressing this dropout crisis, we must be aware of strategies that have been proven effective to retain and recover students on the verge of dropping out. We must be aware of the changing composition of our student body and address the changing needs of our students. These are important elements in a long term strategy for a goal of graduation for all of our students.