

Garcia: Helping ensure high schoolers' success

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By Robert Garcia

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This month, thousands of Virginia students will celebrate graduation. Families, teachers and students will laud the hard work and sacrifice that they made to reach this important achievement.

As the state director for the League of United Latin American Citizens, the nation's oldest and largest Latino civil rights organization, I also take time this graduation season to reflect on what needs to be done to help more Latino students complete high school in our state.

In 2008, the state of Virginia had a high school graduation rate of 77 percent. In 2013, the high school graduation rate was 84 percent.

While this is certainly great news, in 2013 the graduation rate for Latinos was 76 percent. There are still too many students who need help staying in school and graduating on time.

Unfortunately, in Virginia, there are nine high schools where more than one-third of the students do not graduate on time or drop out. Over 10,000 students are enrolled in these schools. We lose thousands of students in those schools alone.

It does not have to be this way.

The U.S. Congress is working on legislation to rewrite the No Child Left Behind Act. Organizations like LULAC are urging Congress to add strong language that ensures that states focus their efforts on schools that fail to graduate one-third or more of their students.

Through my experience working with students, I know that our youth also need support and guidance early on. That is why Congress must also ensure that states intervene when underserved students fall behind their peers.

Specifically, LULAC is pushing for language in the current version of NCLB that would require states to intervene after these students fall behind for two consecutive years.

These legislative fixes are important because challenges facing disadvantaged students continue to grow.

Divestment in public education, including cuts to teacher training and resources, cuts to arts and athletic programs, and decreased support for libraries and other community resource centers have contributed to students not succeeding in school.

Thankfully, LULAC is not alone in calling for more effective support for Latino students and others underserved by our schools.

Last week, U.S. Rep. Bobby Scott and over 80 members of the Congressional Tri-Caucus - made up of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, the Congressional Black Caucus, and the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus - sent a letter to Senate education leaders for action when students do not meet state-set performance goals and for a stronger focus on low-performing high schools.

The Senate could vote on these policies this month. This type of federal action can focus interventions in areas that are most needed.

On our end, LULAC will continue to work to provide families and students with educational resources, information, study guides, tutoring and access to practice tests to help students and their families.

The nation has seen how smart and focused policy, coupled with robust and innovative programming, can increase high school graduation rates, close achievement gaps and prepare students for college and a career.

If we want to see more students graduate from high school in Virginia and across the country, Congress must ensure that any new education law protects our kids by adding critical language that will guarantee that students get help when they need it and that high school graduation remains a top priority.

Robert Garcia is director of the League of United Latin American Citizens in Virginia.