

Federal education law must support Latino students

Joseph Enriquez Henry 11:04 p.m. CDT June 21, 2015



This year, thousands of Iowa students celebrated their graduations.

Families, teachers and students celebrated the hard work and sacrifice these students made to reach this important achievement.

As state director for the League of United Latin American Citizens in Iowa, graduation season is also a time when I reflect on what needs to be done to help more Latino students complete high school in our state.

In 2008, Iowa had a graduation rate of 86 percent. In 2013 (the latest year for which figures are available) the graduation rate was 89 percent.

While the increase is certainly news to applaud, when you look deeper at the numbers, various disparities come into focus. The graduation rate for English language learners in 2013 was at 76 percent — 13 points below the overall graduation rate. This fact demonstrates there are still students who need help staying in school and graduating on time.

It does not and it should not have to be this way.

Currently, Congress is working to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). We urge Congress to add strong language to this legislation that ensures states focus their efforts on schools that fail to graduate one-third of their students.

Through my experience working with students, I know our youth also need support and guidance early on in their lives and school years. This is why Congress must also ensure states intervene when underserved students such as Latinos, African-Americans, students with disabilities, English learners and others, fall behind their peers. We are pushing for changes to the current version of the ESEA that would require states to intervene after these groups of students fall behind for two consecutive years.

Iowa Sens. Chuck Grassley and Joni Ernst must support these important additions to the education legislation pending in the Senate.

These legislative fixes are important because the challenges disadvantaged students face continue to grow. Cuts to teacher training and resources, arts and athletic programs, and decreased support for libraries and other community resource centers have contributed to students not succeeding in school.

We will continue to do our part 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.

We have seen how smart and focused policy coupled with robust and innovative programming can help increase graduation rates, close achievement gaps, and prepare our students for college and career. If we want to continue to see our students graduate high school, Congress must ensure that the ESEA protects our kids by adding critical language that will guarantee students get help when they need it and that graduation remains a top priority.

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