

TESTIMONY
OF
EYAL BERGMAN
TO THE
MONTGOMERY COUNTY BOARD OF EDUCATION
COMMUNITY FORUM
AT
WHEATON HIGH SCHOOL
OCTOBER 11, 2007

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Good evening members of the Board:

My name is Eyal Bergman. I am a facilitator of after-school programs with Identity, a non-profit organization that works with Latino youth and their families in Montgomery County. I also facilitate and coordinate an Advocacy Training program for Identity. The goal of this program is to identify a group of dedicated Latino youth, and empower them to speak on behalf of their community. Some of our participants are here this evening.

These youth are participating in Identity's Advocacy Training program because they understand the challenges facing the Latino community, and they have made a commitment to improving its condition. A constant theme in our sessions is the need for a responsible community led by responsible individuals. Identity is helping these young Latinos to maximize their potential, and hopes that they grow into the next generation of Latino leaders.

Unfortunately, our group of advocates remains small. MCPS has worked hard to accommodate the needs of its growing Latino population, but more is needed.

Many immigrant youth benefit from a natural talent and desire to learn, but they are forced to deal with numerous obstacles that impede their progress. The heavy task of learning English is just one of them.

Many immigrant youth arrive here during adolescence, having been separated from their parents, at a time when positive role models are most needed. Because many Latino parents work more

than one job, the most capable role models for Latino youth are oftentimes unavailable at the most important time during their development.

How can we expect a student to succeed when he/she must learn a new language, adjust to a new culture without sufficient support at home, and simultaneously navigate a foreign school system?

More culturally-competent bilingual school counselors are needed to supplement those already in place. Even the most dedicated school counselors are regularly bogged down by administrative matters and simply do not have the time to counsel and advise their students, or work on continuous outreach efforts.

One or two serious conversations about college is not enough to encourage students who are struggling to grasp the complexities of high school, let alone post-secondary education.

Grade point averages, AP courses, SAT's, letters of recommendation. Many of the students we work with have only a rudimentary understanding of the importance they have in allowing them to steer their own future. But that does not mean that they are incapable; quite the contrary. They need proper guidance that is diligent and continuous. I encourage MCPS to hire more Spanish-speaking counselors whose sole responsibility would be to counsel and advise.

I ask you to reflect on your experience working with youth. Is it not amazing to see how every young person holds a unique talent waiting to be exposed? Do you still feel inspired when you hear of a special student getting into college?

Unfortunately, they are few in number, and they need your help to allow their group to grow.

They expect to make a change in their community. I would expect that MCPS would support them in their endeavor.

Thank you for your time.