

Good evening Members of the Board,

My name is Pablo Venturino and I work for Identity. In my position with Identity, I coordinate and run two programs for Latino youth in Gaithersburg High School: the Identity METS program during school time and the Identity After School Leadership program.

I always tell my students how lucky they are to be part of Montgomery County. County leaders are remarkable for their efforts to provide meaningful opportunities for local minority groups to reach their goals and be productive assets for the community.

I am here to thank you for your support of the METS program, and to discuss briefly the current situation of many of the youth in my program. You will hear from some of them tonight.

As you know, a student needs to have two or more years of interrupted education in his/her own country in order to be enrolled in the METS program. As a result, many METS students struggle with reading and writing, even in their own languages. As research shows, the more formal education students have, the easier and faster they are able to learn a new language, and new subjects. The youth in the METS program are trying very hard to better themselves and change their destiny. They regularly show great resiliency as they overcome significant obstacles in their daily lives. **It is easy to see the hope in their faces, but it is also easy to see their loneliness and their frustration within themselves.**

Most of the students I work with were separated from their parents for many years due to their parents' emigration in response to difficult economic situations, civil wars, and natural disasters in their home countries. Many have suffered traumatic experiences even prior to adolescence, and all of them suffer from loneliness.

Under these circumstances we know that young people gravitate to risky behaviors as a coping mechanism. Gangs become the family you don't have. Drugs and unsafe sex become your escape, and the effects of these behaviors leave a lasting legacy for future generations. We must continue to invest in culturally-specific prevention messages in order to prevent the conditions that lead to these negative behaviors.

I am asking to the Board of Education to keep supporting the METS program, to keep hiring bilingual and multilingual personnel at schools to provide Latino youth with positive role models, and to keep educating immigrant families about the MCPS educational system.

Once again, thank you very much for all your past and current efforts to give the members of our community opportunities to better themselves and become active members of society. Finally, I would like to particularly thank you for listening to the voices of the students at this forum.

Thank you very much.