



WHITE HOUSE INITIATIVE on EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE for HISPANICS

Making a Difference in Puerto Rico

White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics' (Initiative) Trip to the Island – Friday, June 20-Saturday, June 21, 2014

The Initiative traveled to the island of Puerto Rico on June 20-21, 2014. This visit was an important milestone for the work of the Initiative, given that the population of the island is almost entirely Hispanic.

On Friday, Executive Director Alejandra Ceja and Chief of Staff Maribel Duran visited the Instituto Nueva Escuela to hear about their efforts to improve the early educational and socio-emotional outcomes of Puerto Rican young students through the training and certification of public school teachers in the Montessori approach. After touring the school and speaking with teachers, parents, and stakeholders in a roundtable discussion, staff congratulated the Institute leadership and highlighted the need for continued progress in the early learning space in Puerto Rico, fostering of partnerships to invest in what works, and commended philanthropic investments in early learning programs. Following the early learning site visit, the Initiative met with the leadership team of the Kinesis Foundation to learn about their efforts to make college accessible to and affordable for Puerto Rican youth. Afterwards, the Initiative, joined by the Kinesis Foundation leadership staff, met with the First Lady of Puerto Rico, Wilma Pastrana Jimenez and senior education policy advisors to share the Obama Administration's educational efforts, learn about the Puerto Rican educational agenda, and discuss opportunities for collaboration that address the need for educational excellence and more opportunities for Latino youth on the island and in the United States.

Later that evening, Executive Director Ceja addressed the graduating class of Kinesis Foundation's Bright Stars Program, a college access initiative which has awarded over 300 scholarships to Puerto Rico's top high school graduates and go on to attend the nation's most competitive universities. She discussed college access, affordability and completion by sharing her own story with students and inspiring them to persevere when faced with adversity.

On Saturday, Executive Director Ceja and Chief of Staff Duran met with philanthropic and education leaders to discuss bright spots, promising practices on the island, and the Initiative's 25th anniversary blueprint and celebration activities for 2015.

Day 1: June 20, 2014

Event 1 – Visit to the Instituto Nueva Escuela

Attendees: 20 participants - Initiative Staff, Center Executive Director, teachers, parents, foundation and business leaders

Quotes/Takeaways from Participants:

- “Yo soy, porque nosotros somos.”
- “If we talk about the economy, we need to talk about preschool.”
- “Family buy-in was critical to get this effort off the ground.”
- “If I know where I'm going, it's hard to tell me I'm going to fail.”



- Emotional problems with some of the children in schools are significant.
- No full time kindergarten programs.
- Foundations and philanthropy have been instrumental where the government hasn't.
- Minimal support throughout the island for teen mothers.
- Opportunity – parents and students often don't know their educational rights.
- “How do you get the funding to go to the child?”
- Need a budget for teacher preparation and development – currently not a priority in PR.

Overview:

Instituto Nueva Escuela (INE) is an independent, 501c3 non-profit organization dedicated to improving Puerto Rican students' academic and socio-emotional outcomes through the implementation of Montessori education in public school settings. INE partners with public schools to train and certify classroom teachers in Montessori education and provide leadership support and technical assistance to public school and community partners.

Dr. Ana Garcia-Blanco, INE's Executive Director, is the founder and former principal of the first public Montessori school in Puerto Rico – Juan Ponce de Leon Elementary School (JPL) in Guaynabo. The school's Montessori model, which includes a strong parent and community engagement component, is credited with transforming student outcomes and the school's surrounding community.

In response to growing requests from other communities to replicate JPL's public Montessori model in their neighborhood schools, Dr. Garcia-Blanco founded INE in 2004. Since then, INE has expanded to twenty-five (25) public schools across thirteen municipalities in Puerto Rico training 200 teachers and serving 5,000 students in Montessori classrooms. By 2020, INE hopes to expand to 50 schools and train and certify 1,500 teachers in Montessori education in order to reach 25,000 students and their families.

Fundación Angel Ramos (in attendance)— Angel Ramos was a Puerto Rican communications pioneer. He founded Telemundo, the first Puerto Rican TV network that is now an NBCUniversal subsidiary. As part of their commitment to the social and economic development of Puerto Rico, the Ángel Ramos Foundation focuses on developing and supporting early learning initiatives. With an investment of more than \$3,500,457, the Foundation has divided its funds between 5 early learning initiatives in Puerto Rico, which serve as the backbone of the Ángel Ramos Foundation efforts to improve the quality of education on the Island. INE is one of those five programs. The remaining four are: *Despertar Musical*, *Integrando Artes Visuales*, *Apriendo*, and *Alcanza*.

Despertar Musical (in attendance)— *Despertar Musical* (“Musical Awakening”) integrates musical education. Founded in 2006, it created a teaching guide of musical activities to be used by preschool educators. This guide was created to stimulate the development of musical skills in children from 3 to 5 years old. The program significantly improves the education outcomes of preschool students by incorporating socio-emotional layers that allow them to develop crucial skills needed for success.

Feedback from Participants:

- Share best practices (from all 3 programs) with ED and encourage Office of Early Learning to visit
- Funds should filter to schools and programs that are doing good work – currently funds are distributed without needs assessment or analysis
- Need data – several roundtable participants flagged the need for data, for example - data on elementary grades and high school drop out rates
- Need for autonomy – there are bright spots in the island but the PR Department of Education doesn't provide flexibility to fund those that are working. *Per roundtable attendee – law says it allows for autonomy.*

- Need to create public policies reflective of the early learning priority; also critical to develop robust pipeline between early years and grade school

Event 2 – Meeting with Kinesis Foundation

Attendees: 10 participants - Kinesis Foundation Leadership Staff and Initiative Staff

Quotes/Takeaways from Participants:

- Middle school is where you see the majority of drop-outs
- Students achieve...attain PhDs but return to no jobs or jobs that do not pay well
- College Board does not provide SAT in Spanish and it is only accessible once a year
- English teachers are not experts in English language instruction
- How can PR become a Promise Zone?
- Fewer opportunities for graduate degree scholarship resources
- Alliance for Catholic Education – mentioned their models in AZ and FL
- Need more funding streams/opportunities

Overview:

- In Puerto Rico, the Kinesis Foundation is the only non-profit organization that provides high school students with individual and group college access and readiness preparation, within their Bright Stars College Access Program.
- The Puerto Rican Department of Education recently found that 1,769 senior public school students maintained a grade point average of 4.0. Even though there is no data for younger students, nor students with a grade point average of 3.5 or higher, they estimate that this number is within the thousands. Kinesis Foundation assisted 71 senior students, all which have a grade point average of 3.5 or higher, still leaving thousands of talented students without access to college readiness services.
- The foundation currently assists approximately 250 high school students, of which an estimated 70% are from public schools and 30% from private schools. Data shows that college standardized tests (local and national) are only taken by a small number of students, which limits the college access opportunities, especially for low-income students and families. College access and readiness is addressed through four main components: College Counseling, Career Counseling, Personal Counseling and Financial Aid Advising. Like many non-profit institutions, their funding is limited and every year many students are left unable to receive these services. Similarly, the Foundation's Scholarship Program assists financially disadvantaged bright Puerto Rican students who wish to complete studies in institutions outside of Puerto Rico. Every year, the foundation receives a record-breaking amount of applications but is only able to provide scholarships to 10% of applicants. The foundation is constantly looking for new funding opportunities and efforts in order to assist more students and families.
- During outreach to schools and students, they have come across many school counselors with an alarming lack of knowledge of the basic skills necessary to assist and advise students regarding higher education access. In September 2013, Kinesis Foundation along with K-Counselor Corp provided counselors, principals and related personnel with several continuing education workshops, targeted to address college access and readiness. The surveys administered during these workshops reaffirmed the need for higher education institutions to revise their curriculums for school counselors in order to address this issue.
- The Foundation has a strong family engagement component – requiring families to sign contracts for example. They are also launching a mentoring effort this year to further support their students.

Feedback from Participants:

- Need flexibility spending plan for schools

- PR Department of Education should conduct needs assessment at schools and provide funding based on real needs
- PR Department of Education should provide autonomy to schools and school leaders that have a proven track record of success

**Event 3 – Meeting with the First Lady of Puerto Rico
Wilma Pastrana Jimenez**

Attendees: 9 participants - Kinesis Foundation, Initiative Staff, First Lady, Education Advisors, Head Start Program Director



Quotes/Takeaways from Participants:

- One challenge for organizations, educators and foundations is understanding the complexity of federal education funding streams/no clarity from PR Department of Education
- Governor’s office is aware of the requests for further flexibility for schools
- First Lady focusing on nutrition, math and science; developed a seminar on college access with orientation for girls
- “Students don’t know how to navigate the college process” *Kinesis Foundation*
- Annual budget has so many proposals that should not be there – we are trying to fund only what works...but it is not easy (like the Bright Stars Program) *Education Advisor*
- “There are 690 schools on the island and not all of have a counselor”

Next Steps:

- Kinesis Foundation to follow up with Governor’s office and share best practices and insight learned around the counselor issue and college access efforts

**Event 4 – Kinesis Foundation’s Bright Stars
Program Graduation**

Attendees: 150 participants - Kinesis Foundation Leadership Staff, Initiative Staff, teachers, students and parents



Quotes/Takeaways from Participants:

- Parent support was critical every step of the way.
- Alumni provided key tips for not only surviving but also excelling and persisting in college.
- Emphasis throughout the night on “giving back to the island” and helping those that come after you

Overview:

- Since 2004, Kinesis has awarded over 300 scholarships to students pursuing bachelors, masters and doctoral degrees in the most competitive universities around the world.
- In 2010, Kinesis started a second program called **Bright Stars College Access**, to address the college access gap between high and low income students. Almost 400 students have received college entrance test preparation courses, application waivers, college guidance and counseling.

- The ***Bright Stars College Access*** objective is to prepare low income, academically high achieving students for college through college counseling, personal and career counseling, and financial aid orientation.

Class of 2014 Profile

- 95 students:
 - 51 students (54%) will complete studies in local universities
 - 38 students (40%) will complete studies in universities in the US
 - 6 students (6%) with unknown status
- Students will attend colleges ranging from local state schools to prestigious Ivy League institutions.
- In addition to the graduating students, the Bright Stars College Access Program has 112 participants in 11th grade and 43 participants in 10th grade.

Press and Social Media Coverage:

<https://twitter.com/WilmaPastrana/status/480180658757595136/>

<https://twitter.com/KinesisPR/status/481521587909177346/>

<http://www.elnuevodia.com/estudiantesdebrightstarbrillanensunochedelogros-1798576.html>

Follow-up:

- Initiative to share Bright Spots with Kinesis Foundation for promising practices
- Initiative to share CRDC data website link and OCR resources available in Spanish and for parents
- Initiative to invite and engage Kinesis and First Lady Pastrana to 25th Anniversary Celebration activities
- Initiative to connect Instituto Nueva Escuela and Montessori programs with the Office of Early Learning and recommend a site visit
- Initiative to meet with Administration's PR Taskforce
- Recommend Tour of the Island's educational organizations to ED Senior Staff and PR Taskforce
- Initiative to connect Kinesis Foundation with the First Lady's office regarding REACH Higher and with the Department of Housing and Urban Development for information on Promise Zone initiative.

Follow-up – Meeting with Kinesis Foundation, July 14, 2014

Agenda Items provided by Kinesis Foundation

Attendees: *WHIEEH staff, Alex Sanchez (ED's Office of the Secretary), Stephanie Sprow (ED's Office of Intergovernmental Affairs)*

Summary of Kinesis Foundation Objectives and areas of mutual interest with the WHIEEH

- Thank you and feedback re: Bright Stars graduation and roundtable with Alejandra and Maribel. Summary of discussions/ideas from visit.
- Kinesis continuing to seek opportunities to partner with the U.S. Department of Education to improve college counseling and increase college access (knowledge, scholarships, partnerships with colleges/universities)
- Kinesis goal to develop a financial aid center in Puerto Rico--Kinesis currently making connections with sites in the states where this is working (example: Riverside Options Center, Harlem Children's Zone?)
- Interest in promoting the First Lady's Reach Higher program in Puerto Rico. How can Kinesis, WHIEEH and Reach Higher partner to advance this initiative?

