

BACKGROUND

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A. WHAT IS ASPIRA?

The ASPIRA Association, Inc. is a national nonprofit organization that has served and advocated on behalf of Puerto Rican and Latino youth and their families for over thirty years.

ASPIRA is the only national Latino youth organization in the country. ASPIRA's central mission, the development of the Latino community, is advanced by providing over 17,000 youth annually with the emotional, intellectual, and practical resources they need to remain in school and contribute to their community.

In addition to its major efforts in leadership development and education, ASPIRA also conducts research and informs policy makers on issues critical to Latinos.

The pitirre is ASPIRA's symbol. A small tropical bird found in Puerto Rico, the pitirre is known for its agility, rapid flight, and ability to outsmart and tire out large birds, such as the hawk.

There is a saying in Puerto Rico that goes, "a cada guaraguao le llega su pitirre."

ASPIRA believes that the pitirre is a fitting symbol for young Puerto Ricans and Latinos. Aspirantes gain the confidence of the pitirre by acquiring knowledge and developing their leadership and problem-solving skills. They then organize groups to bring about change which is beneficial to the community.

B. ASPIRA'S COMEX (COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION FOR EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE) PROGRAMS

As a community-based organization, parent and community involvement have always been important to the success of ASPIRA's programs.

In 1961, ASPIRA's founders recognized a natural capacity for leadership in the energy of Puerto Rican youth and their families. To cultivate these qualities, ASPIRA has made a priority of working directly with students, their parents, and community leaders to harness the collective will and resources of Puerto Rican and Latino communities.

In 1988, ASPIRA undertook a three-year, national demonstration project to explore how Puerto Rican and Latino parents might better contribute to their children's academic success. The Hispanic Community Mobilization for Dropout Prevention (HCMDP) project raised community awareness and provided practical information to help parents become more effective participants in their children's education. Funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, HCMDP was a cooperative venture involving six ASPIRA Associate Offices and organizations in Wisconsin, Texas, and Washington, D.C. HCMDP staff provided direct services to an estimated 7,000 parents during the three years of the program. During the 1989-1990 program year, local Community Development Coordinators conducted a total of over 1,000 one-to-one counseling or technical assistance sessions with parents. In keeping with its philosophy, ASPIRA approached one-on-one outreach with parents in a spirit of "personal advocacy." Rather than just providing services, Coordinators worked to empower Latino parents.

HCMDP Community Development Coordinators led over 150 workshops for small groups of five to twenty-five parents. Chief among the materials used for the workshops was ASPIRA's bilingual booklet, **Making the Most of Your Child's Education: A Guide for Parents**, which was produced by the ASPIRA National Office in 1989. A second volume, **Making the Most of Your Child's Education: More Topics for Parents**, was published in late 1990. The two booklets offer advice and encouragement in a friendly, non-technical way on how parents can be better advocates for their children's education both at home and in the school. Eight thousand copies of each have been distributed through the project sites. In addition, nearly 50 school districts in over 25 states and hundreds of individuals around the country use the booklets with other local parent groups.

These efforts laid the groundwork for ASPIRA to undertake more comprehensive and integrated approaches to involving families and communities promoting educational excellence in Latino communities. In early 1992, ASPIRA launched the Community Mobilization for Educational Excellence (COMEX). Under this new campaign, a full complement of programs forge new relationships between Puerto Rican and Latino families, their communities, and local educators.

1. Teachers, Organizations, and Parents for Students (TOPS)

ASPIRA Teachers, Organizations and Parents for Students (TOPS) was developed in response to extensive research which confirms the benefits of involving mentors and parents in working with middle school youth.

The TOPS program links features of existing ASPIRA programs -- the ASPIRA Youth Club structure, youth counseling, parent and mentor training -- into a unique support structure in order to provide a distinctive educational challenge for Puerto Rican and Latino youth. Each student in the program is surrounded by a core group of adults: a teacher, a parent, and an ASPIRA counselor. Each team member is essential to helping students establish and achieve personal and educational goals. Through constant exposure to caring adults, Latino children develop confidence and steadily achieve.

With a grant from Borden, Inc., ASPIRA is placing TOPS in 10 cities. ASPIRA Associate sites in Florida; Puerto Rico; and Illinois are each conducting local programs. Four other sites are collaborative efforts with the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health, at their "Schools of the Future" sites located in San Antonio, Houston, Dallas and Austin, Texas. Sites in El Paso and Corpus Christi, Texas were also selected to participate in the TOPS program. A four year research project funded by the U.S. Department of Education School Dropout Demonstration Grants Program is underway at ASPIRA Associate sites in Florida and Puerto Rico. Twenty TOPS teams in each city will be tracked and evaluated over three years. Student performance, attitude changes of parents and teachers, and other program influences will be studied and documented.

Programs such as TOPS, which forge new bonds between students, teachers and educators, will enable ASPIRA to contribute to school reform and stimulate new education policies to benefit Puerto Rican and Latino communities.

2. Hispanic Opportunities through Parent Educational Support (High HOPES)

ASPIRA initiated a two-city pilot program in Chicago and New York sites to help Latino parents better support their children's educational goals. ASPIRA Hispanic Opportunities through Parent Educational Support (High HOPES) Project, funded by Philip Morris Companies, provides direct assistance to parents of college-bound students using one-to-one outreach, small groups, field trips, seminars, and workshops.

Workshop topics are based on a mini-curriculum designed specifically for use with High HOPES, entitled Making the Most of Your Child's Education: What About College?. The curriculum uses the same format of the highly successful parent involvement materials used for ASPIRA's HCMDP project.

At each site, a resource center provides parents with information in Spanish and English on a variety of issues including financing ideas and financial aid opportunities. Financial aid forms are also available at the center.

3. ASPIRA Parents for Educational Excellence (APEX)

A six-month planning grant from the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund enabled the ASPIRA National Office to develop and test components of the ASPIRA Parents for Educational Excellence (APEX) initiative. In 1992, ASPIRA received a three year grant from the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund to implement the APEX Program at its Philadelphia and Chicago Associate offices. The APEX Program unites ASPIRA's substantive efforts to build family/school partnerships and community based leadership development into a single approach. The APEX Program trains parents to devise ways to improve education in their communities, and helps them mobilize other parents to join in their efforts. The project produced this manual, The APEX Workshop Series Manual, and its companion book, Organizing and Working With Parent Groups: A Manual for APEX Facilitators, to serve as training publications for Puerto Rican and other Latino parents.