

EDUCATION

Group eyes progress in Hispanics' education

By Priscilla Greear
Catholic News Service.

ATLANTA — U.S. Treasurer Rosario Marin and leaders of the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans pulled into an Atlanta strip mall on a summer evening shopping for ideas.

The mall houses the Solidarity Mission Village with its Catholic outreach center and bilingual Solidarity School. The mission village, operated by Holy Spirit Catholic Church, is given credit for cutting crime and raising community spirit in this poor Hispanic pocket of Atlanta.

Marin's group is trying to improve academic achievement among Hispanics, who have this country's highest high school dropout rate.

The group was taken to Solidarity School by Frank Hanna, a Holy Spirit parishioner who co-chairs President Bush's Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans, a separate body that receives staff and assistance from the White House initiative.

Visiting Solidarity School was important because "the school is not removed from the community," Hanna said in an interview with *The Georgia Bulletin*, Atlanta's archdiocesan newspaper.

"It is an integral part of the community and parents are recognized as an integral part of the education process," he added.

"Catholic schools for over 100 years in this country have played an instrumental role in educating the poor and those who are marginalized, particularly immigrants to this country. I think it's crucial that the Catholic Church be able to continue in that role," Hanna said.

The outreach center and the school also offer adult education, such as literacy

programs, computer classes, counseling services and classes in crafts, self-esteem and faith for stay-at-home mothers.

The importance of reaching Hispanic immigrant parents and empowering them to better understand and support their children's education, even when they are uneducated and don't know English, were among the topics discussed by the task force during the summer visit.

Other concerns addressed included the need for youths to work to support their families; a lack of supplemental language support services; teachers who discourage undocumented students academically; and the presence of gang members in schools.

The commission has been holding similar meetings in Hispanic areas around the country as part of efforts to prepare a report for Bush on Hispanic educational progress. Its work is also part of federal efforts to promote high quality education for Hispanics; find ways to increase parental, state, local, private sector, and community involvement in improving education; and maximize the effectiveness of federal education initiatives within the Hispanic community.

According to White House figures, more than 30 percent of Hispanics drop out of high school.

On the 2000 National Assessment of Educational Progress, 40 percent of white fourth-graders scored at or above proficient in reading while 16 percent of Hispanics scored as proficient.

These statistics are "tragic," said Marin, whose department assists the Bush commission.

"We are not going to tolerate it," said Marin, the highest-ranking Hispanic woman in the Bush administration.

Marin recounted her story as an immi-

grant in the United States.

After growing up in one of the poorest neighborhoods of Mexico City, she arrived in this country with her mother, who worked as a seamstress, and her father, who cleaned buildings. When she enrolled in school she scored 27 on the IQ test (100 is average) because of her limited English proficiency.

"I tell you this because, if I was able to do it, any of you are able to do it, and your children are able to do it," she said.

Brian Jones, general counsel for the Department of Education, said Bush's edu-

cation bill would require that academic progress be broken down by subgroups according to race, socioeconomic disadvantage, disability and limited English proficiency.

"No longer can a state or local school district sort of lump everybody together and turn to the federal government and say, 'Hey, we're making great progress as a big group,'" he said. "You've got to show that students in those particular groups are making progress if you're going to keep your federal funding and the status quo intact in your school."



Karin von Voigtlander/Staff photographer

Remembering a classmate

Principal Mary Elizabeth Sullivan (center) and students at St. Helen's School in Gates raise their hands June 17 to bless a garden they created in memory of fifth-grader Gaby Napodano, who died in 2001 after a battle with cancer.

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