

In youngsters' graduation, a win for immigration program

The Philadelphia Inquirer

June 4, 2010 Friday, CITY-C Edition

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Section: PHILADELPHIA; P-com News Local; Pg. B12

Length: 694 words

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Body

The pint-size scholars wore white caps and gowns, adding grandeur to the balloons-and-streamers decor of their preschool graduation.

For these 12 children of Hispanic immigrants, there was much to celebrate Thursday at Accion Communal Latinoamericana de Montgomery County, the social services agency known as ACLAMO. When they enrolled a year ago in its free private school in Norristown, many spoke only Spanish. But now, after 16 hours a week of intensive English instruction disguised as fun, they are ready for public kindergarten.

"In this time of heated immigration debates," said ACLAMO executive director Juan Guerra, the "family literacy program" that the children and their mothers just completed is an "an assimilation plan that works."

ACLAMO did a five-year study of its graduates who went on to Norristown public schools and found they outperformed children of similar immigrant backgrounds.

For the mothers, most of whom were born in Mexico, Thursday's graduation was a milestone, too. They also had to commit to a yearlong course in English and parenting skills at ACLAMO before they could enroll their children in the program.

Not only are their children ready for the next grade, but the mothers also are ready for new jobs or promotions, thanks to their growing proficiency in English.

"What we are looking at here," Guerra said, "is the future of our country and part of the revitalization of Norristown." The county seat has one of the fastest growing Hispanic populations in Southeastern Pennsylvania.

The preschool is built on the premise that a parent is a child's first and most important teacher.

"Teachers are great, but there has to be someone at home to reinforce what [the children] learn," said Marla Benssy, who heads parent education. "It would be very easy for these mothers to say, 'I'm too old. I can't do this.' But they don't. We have mothers who read 100 books a year to their children, and all they get for it is a gold star."

Because most of the children were born in the United States, they are U.S. citizens. Some of their parents are not.

The incidence of illegal immigrants giving birth in the United States has inflamed the debate about immigration reform. Some advocates of stricter controls say such children are "anchor babies," born here to bolster their parents' attempts to remain in the United States.

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Founded in 1977, ACLAMO runs on grants from the United Way, the Norristown Area School District, the Pennsylvania Department of Education's "Even Start" **program**, private donors, and foundations.

Program administrators say they do not inquire about the **immigration** status of the parents, while privately acknowledging that some may be here illegally.

"They are people," said ACLAMO board president Joanna Cruz, adding that it is in a community's interest to educate them. "Otherwise, they are going to be uneducated, nonproductive and a drain on our society.

"Some people would like to round every one up and kick them out. They say, 'Why should people who are here unlawfully benefit from anything?' I get that. . . . But they *are* here. So what are we going to do?"

Benssy and Linda Maldonado, who teaches the children, said the most important criterion for admission into the **program** was parental commitment, not **immigration** status. It's not acceptable to just drop a child off.

"The litmus test," said Benssy, is "whether the mother has a goal for herself independent of just educating her child."

The burden falls on the mothers, she said, because most fathers are working in construction and similar jobs to support the family.

Justin Fink, the longtime associate director of ACLAMO, has watched successive waves of newcomers arrive in Norristown.

Thirty-three years ago, Puerto Ricans founded ACLAMO. Through the 1980s and '90s, he said, El Salvadorans, Chileans, Bolivians, and other Latino immigrants arrived. In this decade, the influx is predominantly Mexican.

"Immigrants built this country, and they are still building this country," he said.

As for ACLAMO's purpose, he said: "The agency was born in the civil rights era. Advocacy is in its DNA."

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Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: **IMMIGRATION** (89%); EDUCATION SYSTEMS & INSTITUTIONS (89%); CHILDREN (89%); PUBLIC SCHOOLS (89%); EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION **GRADUATION** (78%); EDUCATION DEPARTMENTS (78%); SCHOOL DISTRICTS (78%); PRIMARY SCHOOLS (77%); HISPANIC AMERICANS (77%); PRIVATE SCHOOLS (77%); FAMILY (77%); PREGNANCY & CHILDBIRTH (77%); INFANTS & TODDLERS (77%); COUNTIES (77%); TEACHING & TEACHERS (77%); LANGUAGE SCHOOLS (76%); EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION EMPLOYEES (76%); PRIMARY & SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHERS (75%); PARENTING SUPPORT (75%); PARENTING

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(73%); ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (72%); EXECUTIVES (70%); POPULATION GROWTH (70%); LITERACY & ILLITERACY (70%)

Industry: EDUCATION SYSTEMS & INSTITUTIONS (89%); PUBLIC SCHOOLS (89%); PRIMARY SCHOOLS (77%); PRIVATE SCHOOLS (77%); LANGUAGE SCHOOLS (76%)

Geographic: PENNSYLVANIA, USA (92%); UNITED STATES (94%)

Load-Date: June 4, 2010

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