



# Leading on Latino Issues

BY EVELYN DEJESUS

As an AFT vice president, I am pleased that our union is engaging in a more formal and more public show of support for Latino issues. With my colleagues on the AFT executive council, I have often discussed the importance of advocating for Latino students and their families, as well as for all English language learners (ELLs) and Latino members.

Two years ago, AFT President Randi Weingarten, my Latina colleagues on the council—Kathy Chavez, president of the Albuquerque (New Mexico) Educational Assistants Association, and Catalina Fortino, a vice president of the New York State United Teachers (whose article appears on page 14 of this issue)—and I decided that the time was right to elevate Latino issues within our union. And so we created an AFT task force that crafted the resolution “¡Si Se Puede!: Improving Outcomes for Latino Children and Youth and Addressing the Needs of the Latino Community,”\* which was passed at the AFT’s national convention in July 2016.

The resolution will enable our union to highlight the particular needs of Latino

children and youth and their families in our public education system and our communities.

In November 2014, before the task force’s inception, then-President Obama announced an expansion of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program and the creation of the Deferred Action for Parents of Americans and Lawful Permanent Residents (DAPA) program. Those policies inspired us to create the task force and draft the resolution. My colleagues believed our union could effectively advocate for Latino children, who historically have had no voice. We wanted our undocumented Latino children to know that they don’t have to wonder who’s going to fight for them, because we at the AFT will always have their backs.

As a union, we also wanted to improve the recruitment and retention of Latino educators. What can the AFT do to support those teachers who have benefited from DACA? What can we do to help their families?

It’s important to note that the AFT’s Latino task force stands for many nationalities. For example, we now have many nurses coming to the United States from the Philippines. How are we preventing them from being exploited in the workplace? Thanks to our task force, we are nurturing partnerships with allies in the

labor movement and throughout the immigration community at the local, state, and national levels.

Forming these relationships is now more crucial than ever under a Trump presidency. Our undocumented students and teachers are scared, and we must protect them.

## A Sense of Validation

For me personally, the AFT’s resolution on Latino issues shows that Latinos have arrived. We’re here, and we’re not going away. I don’t feel we’ve ever been recognized by society at large in the way the AFT has recognized our contributions to public education and the United States in general. When Trump won the presidential election, Latino teachers in New York City and elsewhere called me to discuss the resolution. The document’s promise has touched many of our members, and it can serve as an organizing tool for our union as well.

Since the creation of the task force, the AFT has also sought to build alliances with Latinos abroad. For instance, our union has begun a cross-cultural partnership with the Mexican teachers union SNTE (Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación).

Closer to home, in New York City, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) sponsored its first-ever ELL-focused conference this past fall, which drew 800 participants from across the country. The conference

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\*To read the resolution, visit <http://go.aft.org/AE117link1>.

featured presentations on immigration rights and instructional strategies, among other topics. AFT members inquired about the union providing professional development for educators of ELLs with special needs, and we hope to offer such a program in the future.

It's incumbent upon the union to ensure that our members view their union as more than just the defender of the contract. As a union of professionals, the AFT stands for professionalism. To me, that means standing up for all aspects of instruction, in a safe teaching and learning environment, so that educators can help all children reach their full potential.

I truly believe our members work in education for the right reasons. It's a calling, as far as I'm concerned. We arrive at our schools very early. We prepare and plan instruction for all our students. We are ready



for every child who comes through the door. As educators and union leaders, we must make sure teachers get what they need and all children get what they deserve.

That's why two years ago, at the UFT, I spearheaded the creation of a new union position to support the work of ELL educators: ELL specialist. In September 2015, the UFT hired Christine Rowland, a retired ELL educator and founding member of the AFT's ELL Educator Cadre who had taught in New York City high schools for more than 20 years. Thanks to Christine's knowledge and guidance, the UFT is strengthening the district's bilingual and ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) programs, while preparing educators to take on increasing levels of responsibility and leadership for ELL issues.

We're also building an ELL speakers bureau at the UFT. The bureau will include educators who can speak a foreign language

that New York City families speak at home. So if you're a teacher meeting with parents who speak Urdu, for example, you can bring along an Urdu-speaking UFT member.

Compared with the previous New York City mayor and superintendent, both current leaders have shown a greater awareness of the need to help ELLs maintain their home language as they learn English. Under the previous administration, there was scant support for dual language programs. But the tide has turned. There is now more understanding of and respect for

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the research that supports this approach to teaching students academic content in their home language at the same time as they learn English.

In New York City, many ESOL programs are actually becoming dual language programs. Throughout New York's boroughs, leaders from the Greek and Albanian communities, to name just two, are advocating for the creation of dual language programs within public schools so children can maintain their home language. The district already offers dual language programs in Arabic, Bengali, French, Haitian Creole, Korean, Mandarin, Polish, Russian, Spanish, and Yiddish. It's a fascinating shift and a testament to America's growing diversity.

### Life as an English Language Learner

My own journey reflects the sense of possibility and educational opportunity that I wish for every ELL student. My parents were from Puerto Rico, and my first language was Spanish. When we came to New York in the 1960s, it was like *West Side Story*. I had to learn how to defend myself and became very tough because Latinos were picked on and called terrible names.

My siblings and I also grew up very poor, but we didn't know it because we were rich in spirit. The community raised us. Down the block, if you were doing something wrong, your mother knew about it by the time you got back home.

In school, I remember being bullied and

ostracized. People didn't see me as smart because I spoke slowly. As I was learning English, I always had to translate from Spanish in order to speak in class. So I did not respond as quickly or as clearly as my peers, and they often underestimated me.

It wasn't until I was a single mother with two children that I pursued higher education. In the early 1990s, while living on the Lower East Side, one of my daughters became sick from a school construction project,<sup>†</sup> and I started advocating for her and her peers. The New York City Department of Education

noticed my work and soon after hired me as a paraprofessional.

I earned my bachelor's degree in psychology from Baruch College by taking classes at night to become a social worker. But teaching was my true passion, and so a couple of years later I earned a master's degree in education and public administration from Baruch and eventually a master's degree in reading and curriculum development from Fordham University.

For more than 20 years, I taught preschool through second grade at P.S. 126 in District 2 in Manhattan, which is well known for its high-performing schools and focus on instruction and professional learning. Many of my students were Latino and Asian ELLs. Several had special needs, and our school's work with these students enabled my class to become a model for collaboration and instructional strategies districtwide.

In 2003, the UFT recruited me to work on behalf of educators full time. But I've never forgotten where I came from. I'm an English language learner and a teacher who found my voice through helping ELLs, and I could not be happier. I am honored to work on behalf of these students and their teachers because when I was a student myself, I didn't have the supports I needed. And that's what I'm fighting for. □

<sup>†</sup>For more on the importance of school building conditions, see "A Matter of Health and Safety" in the Winter 2016–2017 issue of *American Educator*, available at [www.aft.org/ae/winter2016-2017/roseman](http://www.aft.org/ae/winter2016-2017/roseman).