

Hispanic Christians launch initiative to bolster student achievement

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(RNS) With minority students now making up a majority of public school enrollments, a national group of Hispanic evangelicals is calling for strong ties between churches and schools to encourage better academic results.

The National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, which includes 40,000 U.S. churches, has launched a website with resources and a bilingual parental toolkit that its officials hope will bridge an “opportunity gap” between Hispanic and other students.

“We say that pastors and principals should meet,” said Carlos Campo, chair of the NHCLC’s Hispanic Education Alliance, at a recent National Press Club news conference. “We say that parents and professors should meet so that we no longer have these false dichotomies, these barriers that keep us apart.”

Ahead of his organization’s annual observance of National Hispanic Education Sunday on September 7, Campo introduced other new programs, including “Becas and Bibles,” which encourages churches to give children Bibles and seed money for scholarships when they are baptized or christened. (*Beca* is the Spanish word for scholarship.)

Campo said a joint study conducted by NHCLC and Barna Group in 2012 found that at least 25 percent of Hispanic American children don’t graduate from high school, and the percentage is much higher in some communities.

The new website, FaithandEducation.com, includes resources for students about choosing a career, how to be successful in college, and scholarship applications to select evangelical universities. Its parental tips feature a guide to “help your child make it to college,” details about the importance of a high school diploma and lists of English-as-a-Second-Language opportunities.

Former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee joined Campo in the August 22 announcement.

Referring to the program, the former Southern Baptist pastor said “it will remind the parents that it is your responsibility to make sure that your children are getting the very best education that they are possibly able to receive.”

The NHCLC has supported the Common Core State Standards, which will be implemented in dozens of states this fall but have been criticized by some conservatives. At the news conference, Campo called the standards “redeemable” while Huckabee, who now considers them “toxic,” said he wants to “fight for students” rather than over the program.

Edwin Hernandez, director of the University of Notre Dame’s Project for the Study of Latino Religion, said the initiatives by NHCLC are “important first steps in creating awareness and raising symbolically as well as rhetorically the power of the pulpit to the importance of education.”

They represent a change he has observed from past acquiescence about education from Hispanics who often shy away from challenging the U.S. educational system.

But he said that in addition to celebrating achievement and bolstering parents’ roles, Hispanic Christians must push the educational institutions for student success.

“These institutions may not be serving us well,” he said. “You have to be vigilant: ‘How well is our student doing?’”