

**Amalia Chamorro, Sr. Director, Education Policy Project, UnidosUS**

Written Testimony on Behalf of UnidosUS

Before the House Committee on Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies

Addressing the U.S. Departments of Education and Health & Human Services

**Investing in Student Success**

UnidosUS is the nation’s largest Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization. In this role, we urge Congress to prioritize robust investments in education, recognizing that strengthening our nation’s schools is essential to ensuring the economic, academic and social prosperity of all students, including Latino students. To support these goals, we urge the Subcommittee to include the following provisions in appropriations legislation for FY 2027:

- **\$14.91 billion for Head Start [HHS]**, including Head Start Preschool, Early Head Start, Migrant and Seasonal Head Start and American Indian/Alaska Native Head Start. These programs provide early learning, school readiness, and health and family well-being services to low-income families with young children and expecting parents.
- **\$1 billion for the English Language Acquisition Program (Title III, ESEA) [ED]**, which provides English learners with the resources they need to become proficient in English and meet the same challenging academic standards as their peers.
- **Fully fund the Pell Grant and protect funding for Hispanic-Serving Institutions (\$232 million for Title V, Part A, HEA and \$27.8 million for Title V, Part B, HEA) [ED]** to ensure affordability and access to postsecondary education for Latino students.
- **\$100 million for Postsecondary Student Success Grants (PSSG), \$45 million for the Basic Needs for Postsecondary Students Program, protect funding for the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) [ED]** to support evidence-based academic and wraparound services that boost student retention and completion.

Currently, 1 in 4 babies born in the United States is Latino.<sup>1</sup> These students represent 28% of all K-12 public school students<sup>2</sup> and 1 in every 5 postsecondary students.<sup>3</sup> Among this group are our nation’s future business owners, leaders, scientists and other professionals who will make invaluable contributions to our economy and communities. To be successful, Latinos and English learners, like all students, must have access to a high-quality education from early childhood through college, career and technical training, and beyond.

<sup>1</sup> Brady E. Hamilton, et al., “Births: Provisional Data for 2023” (35), *NCHS Vital Statistics Rapid Release Reports*: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, April 25, 2024, <https://stacks.cdc.gov/view/cdc/151797>.

<sup>2</sup> “Accelerating Latino Student Recovery: An Agenda to Strengthen Our Schools and Help All Students Succeed,” UnidosUS, October 19, 2023, [https://unidosus.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/unidosus\\_acceleratinglatinostudentrecovery.pdf](https://unidosus.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/unidosus_acceleratinglatinostudentrecovery.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> “Hispanic Heritage Month Fast Facts,” National Center for Education Statistics, September 2023, <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=1142>. [PLEASE NOTE: THIS LINK IS NOT WORKING, FIX]

### **Setting the next generation up for success:**

Children who participate in high-quality early childhood programs experience better outcomes in school readiness, cognitive development and social-emotional development.<sup>4</sup> Research shows that Head Start results in higher levels of educational attainment, lower rates of teen pregnancy and reduced criminal activity for participants.<sup>5</sup> However, the enrollment rate of Latino 3- to 5-year-olds in school was just 48.6% in 2021, the second lowest of all racial and ethnic groups for which data was captured.<sup>6</sup>

Head Start programs provide early learning, school readiness, and health and family well-being services to low-income families with young children and pregnant women.<sup>7</sup> Almost 40% of families enrolled in Head Start identify as Hispanic or Latino,<sup>8</sup> and one in every five children and pregnant women served by Head Start speaks Spanish as their primary language.<sup>9</sup>

Unfortunately, these programs have been jeopardized by a reduction in force at the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (HHS), which has resulted in the closure of Head Start regional offices.<sup>10</sup> It is critical for Head Start programs, which receive the vast majority of their funding from federal appropriations, to have a staff infrastructure at HHS that will ensure program success and, most importantly, the success of infants and young children. We urge the Subcommittee to conduct oversight on this issue and direct HHS to restore proper staffing at the Head Start Bureau in the FY 27 Subcommittee bill.

In addition to the impact of the reduction in force, the current funding level for the Head Start program limits access to only 51% of eligible preschool-age children, and a mere 10% of eligible infants and toddlers.<sup>11</sup> **Investing \$14.91 billion in Head Start would help expand program capacity to enroll more eligible children and families, contributing to the short- and long-term benefits to this nation in education and workforce competitiveness.**

### **Investing in English learners:**

English learners, most of whom are U.S-born citizens,<sup>12</sup> represent 1 in 10 of all K-12 public school students nationwide.<sup>13</sup> The most current data shows that EL enrollment increased by 16%

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<sup>4</sup> Laia Fibla, et al., “Bilingual Language Development in Infancy: What Can We Do to Support Bilingual Families?” *Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 9, no.1 (2022): 35-43, <https://doi.org/10.1177/23727322211069312>.

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Barr and Chloe R. Gibbs, “Breaking the Cycle? Intergenerational Effects of an Antipoverty Program in Early Childhood,” *Journal of Political Economy* 130, no. 12 (2022) <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/720764>.

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, “Table 202.25., Percentage of 3- to 5-year-old children enrolled in school, by race/ethnicity and state: 2021,” Digest of Education Statistics, November 2022, [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d22/tables/dt22\\_202.25.asp?current=yes](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d22/tables/dt22_202.25.asp?current=yes).

<sup>7</sup> Including Head Start Preschool, Early Head Start, Migrant and Seasonal Head Start, and American Indian/Alaska Native Head Start programs.

<sup>8</sup> “Head Start Program Facts: Fiscal Year 2022,” HeadStart.gov (last updated February 27, 2025),

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/data-ongoing-monitoring/article/head-start-program-facts-fiscal-year-2022>.

<sup>9</sup> “Celebrating Head Start Hispanic and Latino Heritage,” National Head Start Association (accessed April 22, 2026), <https://nhsa.org/hispanic-heritage/>.

<sup>10</sup> Allie Schneider, “Closures of Head Start Regional Offices Jeopardize Critical Services for Children and Families,” *Center for American Progress*, April 29, 2025, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/closures-of-head-start-regional-offices-jeopardize-critical-services-for-children-and-families/>.

<sup>11</sup> U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, “Report to Congress on Head Start Eligibility,” Administration for Children and Families, March 2022, <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ohs/report-to-congress-hs-eligibility-2022.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Leslie Villegas, “Accountability for Long-Term English Learners,” *KAPPAN*, September 25, 2023, <https://kappanonline.org/accountability-for-english-learners-villegas/>.

<sup>13</sup> “English Learners: Demographic Trends,” Office of English Language Acquisition, (accessed April 22, 2026), [https://ncela.ed.gov/sites/default/files/2022-09/ELDemographics\\_20220805\\_508.pdf](https://ncela.ed.gov/sites/default/files/2022-09/ELDemographics_20220805_508.pdf).

from 4.9 million in the 2012-13 school year to 5.7 million in the 2022-23 school year, but funding has not kept pace with the growing need.<sup>14</sup>

Congress has flat funded Title III, the only federal program dedicated to supporting English learners, at \$890 million for the past three years. Congress has also failed to adjust the investment to account for inflation. In fact, the Children’s Equity Project estimates that the 2002 appropriation of \$664 million, the year Title III was established, would be equivalent to \$1.19 billion today. At its current level, Title III provides just \$156 per English learner.<sup>15</sup>

Across all 50 states, schools rely on Title III funds to provide language and academic instruction, English learner-focused training for teachers, and family engagement activities that enhance instruction. With support, most English learners acquire mastery of the English language within 5-7 years and are then reclassified as proficient. Indeed, studies show that former English learners can go on to outperform their non-English learner peers across multiple academic measures.<sup>16</sup>

**A \$1 billion investment in Title III will help level the playing field for English learners, enabling all students to access a high-quality education, regardless their home language. This investment would in turn deliver returns for our economy and society.** When these students achieve English proficiency and strong academic skills, they can access higher-paying jobs, contribute more tax revenue and help fill critical workforce gaps.

In addition to providing increased funding, it is critical that Congress ensure the efficient distribution and use of Title III funds. However, the U.S. Department of Education’s (ED) March 2025 reduction in force left all but one staff member in the Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA), the office that administers Title III. Shortly thereafter, ED folded OELA into the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (OESE), and in November, ED transferred the management of Title III to the Department of Labor. On February 13, 2026, ED notified Congress that it would be dissolving OELA and moving its functions to other offices at the end of a 90-day period. These decisions significantly disrupt the administration of Title III, jeopardizing the timely disbursement of funds and the quality of technical assistance states receive. To ameliorate these issues, we urge the inclusion of bill language instructing the Secretary to restore OELA as a standalone office at the U.S. Department of Education with adequate staffing within 30 days of enactment.

### **Supporting success in higher education:**

Latino students have a strong desire to further their education and place high value on going to college as a pathway to economic mobility. Nearly 4 million Latino students attend postsecondary institutions, making up 1 in 5 of all postsecondary students.<sup>17</sup> These students often come from a low-income background and are the first in their families to attend college.

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<sup>14</sup> Xigrd Soto-Boykin, PhD, et al., “Federal Funding to Support the Learning and Success of Multilingual Students,” The Children’s Equity Project, September 2025, <https://cep.asu.edu/sites/g/files/litvpz916/files/2025-09/Protecting%20Federal%20Funding%20to%20Support%20English%20Learners%20%284%29.pdf#page=10>.

<sup>15</sup> Xigrd Soto-Boykin, PhD, et al., “Federal Funding to Support the Learning and Success of Multilingual Students,” The Children’s Equity Project, September 2025, <https://cep.asu.edu/sites/g/files/litvpz916/files/2025-09/Protecting%20Federal%20Funding%20to%20Support%20English%20Learners%20%284%29.pdf#page=10>.

<sup>16</sup> Leslie Villegas, “Accountability for Long-Term English Learners,” *KAPPAN*, September 25, 2023, <https://kappanonline.org/accountability-for-english-learners-villegas/>.

<sup>17</sup> “Hispanic Heritage Month Fast Facts,” National Center for Education Statistics, September 2023, <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=1142>. [PLEASE NOTE: THIS LINK IS NOT WORKING, FIX]

**Protecting the Pell Grant.** Crucial to unlocking economic mobility has been the Federal Pell Grant, of which nearly half of all Latino undergraduates receive to finance their education.<sup>18</sup> Without the Pell Grant, access to higher education for Latinos would be severely limited, as Latino families hold a median household income roughly 18.7% lower than the national median.<sup>19</sup> Recent projections from the Congressional Budget Office showing the Pell Grant facing a \$5.45 billion funding gap for FY 26 and \$11.5 billion gap for FY 27 are deeply troubling.<sup>20</sup> **Providing funding to cover the current and upcoming projected Pell Grant shortfall is critical to preventing a disruption in access for Latinos to postsecondary education.**

**Hispanic-Serving Institutions.** Congress must also invest in Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSI), which serve most Latino postsecondary students.<sup>21</sup> Enrolling two-thirds of all Hispanic undergraduates and over one-third of all Pell recipients, HSIs have routinely delivered value for students, despite receiving only 68 cents for every federal dollar non-HSIs receive.<sup>22</sup> Funding for HSIs enables critical investments to build capacity for colleges to best serve all their students — for example, expanded advising, strengthened student support services and improved facilities.

However, HSIs have been impacted by the withholding of Congressionally appropriated funding by the Department of Education, which has harmed these colleges’ abilities to serve all of their students, not only Latinos. **Congress must reassert its constitutional authority to provide Hispanic-Serving Institutions with the funding they were appropriated (\$232 million for Title V, Part A, HEA and \$27.8 million for Title V, Part B, HEA) and ensure these critical investments reach the students and communities they were intended to support.**

**Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE).** During FY 25, the Department of Education also reprogrammed \$167 million from FIPSE programs, defunding critical investments such as the Postsecondary Student Success Grant (PSSG) and the Basic Needs for Postsecondary Students Program (Basic Needs Grant). Both programs support evidence-based strategies to improve retention and completion for underserved students.

Such interventions are critical for ensuring Latino student success, particularly given that, despite growing enrollment, Latinos are roughly 20 percent less likely to earn a degree than their white peers.<sup>23</sup> In fact, two-thirds of Latino college students have considered leaving school, citing emotional stress, inability to afford costs, and family obligations as driving factors of non-

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<sup>18</sup> “Pell Grant: Unlocking Latino Economic Mobility,” UnidosUS, April 2025, [https://unidosus.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/unidosus\\_pellgrant\\_unlockinglatinoeconomicmobility.pdf](https://unidosus.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/unidosus_pellgrant_unlockinglatinoeconomicmobility.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> Gloria Guzman, “Median Income of Non-Hispanic White Households Increased While Asian, Black and Hispanic Median Household Income Did Not Change,” *America Counts—Stories*: U.S. Census Bureau, September 10, 2024, <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2024/09/household-income-race-hispanic.html>.

<sup>20</sup> “Federal Pell Grant Program,” Congressional Budget Office, February 2026, <https://www.cbo.gov/system/files/2026-02/51304-2026-02-pellgrant.pdf>.

<sup>21</sup> “Hispanic-Serving Institutions across the Nation Total 645,” Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, April 8, 2026, <https://hacu.net/hispanic-serving-institutions-across-the-nation-total-645/>.

<sup>22</sup> Stephanie Aguilar-Smith, PhD, “Serving Many in Many Ways: Hispanic-Serving Institutions as Drivers of Opportunity and Socioeconomic Mobility,” *Third Way*, May 22, 2024, <https://www.thirdway.org/report/serving-many-in-many-ways-hispanic-serving-institutions-as-drivers-of-opportunity-and-socioeconomic-mobility>.

<sup>23</sup> “Yearly Progress and Completion,” National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, December 4, 2025, <https://nscresearchcenter.org/yearly-progress-and-completion/>.

completion.<sup>24</sup> Programs such as PSSG and the Basic Needs Grant significantly improve the ability of Latino students to complete their degrees by allowing institutions to implement and scale evidence-based strategies that boost retention and completion rates, which in turn help meet workforce needs nationwide.

**Therefore, we urge Congress to increase funding for PSSG to \$100 million and the Basic Needs Grant to \$45 million in FY 27 to expand access to these proven programs. To prevent any administration from diverting these funds, this funding total should be reflected in bill text, not solely in the Subcommittee report.** This investment in developing a more skilled and prepared workforce is crucial for our nation’s economic future.

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<sup>24</sup> “Latinos and Higher Education Survey,” UnidosUS, October 22, 2024, <https://unidosus.org/publications/latinos-and-higher-education-survey/>.