

National leaders meet in Miami to discuss early education for Hispanics

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Wednesday's National Summit on Hispanic Early Learning came after President Barack Obama called for a comprehensive plan to ensure that all children enter kindergarten prepared for success.

Education experts, senior White House officials, and business and nonprofit leaders from across the country met at Miami Dade College on Wednesday to discuss early learning within the Hispanic community. Although Hispanic children represent the fastest-growing segment of the nation's population under age 5, less than half are enrolled in an early learning program.

"The goal here is to place Hispanic early learning on the political educational agenda and raise awareness that it is vital for economic development.," said Modesto Abety-Gutierrez, who served as the first president and CEO of The Children's Trust in Miami-Dade County.

Wednesday's National Summit on Hispanic Early Learning came after President Barack Obama called for a comprehensive plan to ensure that all children enter kindergarten prepared for success. This includes Obama's proposal to provide preschool to all 4-year-old children from low- and moderate-income households; additional partnerships to expand the supply of high-quality Early Head Start and child-care providers; and the expansion of voluntary, evidence-based home visiting programs.

Among the speakers was Ricardo Rodriguez, the White House's special assistant to the president on education. He described early education, especially among Hispanics, as a crucial investment for the nation's economic development and global competition.

One in every five schoolchildren in the United States is Latino, Rodriguez told the audience. But only 13 percent go on to get a bachelor's degree.

Awareness of and creating a demand for early education programs like prekindergarten and child care is just as important as making them available, he said. Diana Rauner, a former investment banker turned early education advocate, called for private companies and policy makers to adopt a serious approach to early education.

“We are trying to shift from ‘Isn’t this a nice thing to do for our children’ to ‘This is an economic investment,’” she said.

Educating parents is just as important as educating children, said Marco Davis, the White House’s deputy director of the educational initiative for Hispanics.

“There are so many cases in which people think, ‘If I keep my child safe and healthy, I’ll be good,’” he said. “But those days are over. If you wait until kindergarten to start learning, they will be playing catch up from the beginning.”

Early learning stems beyond prekindergarten. It is about educating parents to raise curious children by reading to them and teaching them letters and colors.

Miami-Dade and Florida are ahead of the curve when it comes to policy, Abety-Gutierrez said. Both have passed referendums to fund early-education programs. Those funds, however, are not always enough.

Miami needs to take early education more seriously, he said.

“You don’t need a high school diploma to be in early education,” he said. “You only need to take a 30-hour training course.”