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The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

October 15, 2015

Remarks by the President at Hispanic Heritage Month Reception

4:45 P.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: Buenas tardes. (Applause.) Bienvenidos a la Casa Blanca! (Applause.) Everybody, please give Diane a big round of applause for sharing your inspiring story -- she did great. (Applause.) We are so very proud of her and all the young people who are here today. I also want to recognize the Cuban Ambassador to the United States, Ambassador José Cabañas. (Applause.)

And give it up for the Buena Vista Social Club! (Applause.) It is wonderful to have you here. I was explaining to them that when the documentary about the Buena Vista Social Club came out, I was told it was around 1998, I bought a CD. Now, for those of you who are too young to remember -- (laughter) -- it was this round thing. You had to slide it. (Laughter.)

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I remember records. (Laughter.)

THE PRESIDENT: So we are thrilled to have them here.

For nearly two decades, this group has been a symbol of the strong bonds between the American and Cuban people -- bonds of friendship and culture and, of course, music. So I just hope they enjoy their stay. And I hope that I look as good as they do in a few years. (Laughter.)

So today, we're here not just to celebrate Hispanic Heritage Month, but also to celebrate the 25th anniversary of a powerful vehicle for progress -- the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics. (Applause.)

Here's how the initiative came about. Back in the late 1980s, it was already clear that Hispanics were on pace to become America's largest minority group. But at the time, opportunity for Latinos wasn't growing as quickly. Roughly half of Latino adults didn't have a high school diploma. Nearly one in three Hispanic students were dropping out of high school. And Latinos didn't have a voice in Washington to match their growing share of America.

So one man, Raul Yzaguirre, set out to change that. Raul is right here. He's hiding in the corner. (Applause.) At the time, Raul was president of the National Council of La Raza. And he saw what was happening with our Latino youth. He believed that smarter federal policy could make a difference. So Raul went straight to the White House, asked for a federal commitment to make sure that the needs of Hispanics were being met.

Initially, his plans were rebuffed. It that didn't stop him -- he just started working harder. Long

before you could reach millions of people with a single tweet, Raul was using the phone. (Laughter.) For those of you who don't remember, this was not like the -- (laughter) -- and it'd sit like this here. You had to dial. And so Raul picked up the phone, and he built a coalition. (Phone rings.) There you go. (Laughter.) That's called a ring. (Laughter.)

So he built a coalition of Hispanic organizations, and educational allies, and individuals all across the country. They took out advertisements in newspapers. They rallied members of Congress. They stuffed thousands of envelopes in a letter-writing campaign.

And it worked. In 1990, President George H.W. Bush signed an executive order establishing a commission to support the achievement of Hispanic children and to help them -- I'm quoting here -- "take their rightful place at the American table of opportunity." (Applause.)

And in the years since, Presidents from both parties have renewed America's commitment to this initiative. We've seen the educational outcomes of Hispanic youth gain steam along with the prospects of Latinos as a whole.

So today, our country's high school graduation rate is at an all-time high, and it's powered in large part by dramatic gains among Hispanic students. The Hispanic high school dropout rate is down by more than 60 percent since the early '90s, since Raul's work. The portion of Hispanic children in preschool is up by about 50 percent. (Applause.) The percentage with a bachelor's degree has nearly doubled. Math and reading scores have improved dramatically over the last decade.

And so this is truly an American story. It's the kind of progress that we need to celebrate -- the story of hardworking people, strong advocacy, coming together, lifting up not only the fortunes of a people but, ultimately, the entire country's fortunes. It's bending the arc of history to be fairer and more just.

Now, obviously we've still got more work to do. Hispanic students continue to lag behind most of their peers when it comes to graduating from high school, graduating from college. More than half of three and four-year-old Latinos are not yet enrolled in early learning programs. And while one in four public school students are Hispanic, fewer than one in twelve of their teachers are. So we've got a lot of work that we still have to do to make sure that every child in this country gets a fair shot at a world-class education. We've got to make sure that DREAMers like Diana don't have to live in fear -- (applause) -- that somehow this country that they love, the only country that they know, somehow will turn its back on them.

And so these are the challenges that the White House initiative has taken on during my

administration. I want to recognize the work of our outstanding chair for the past five years, Dr. Eduardo Padron. (Applause.) And it's not as if he is not busy enough, heading up one of the most important community colleges in the country. I want to thank all his fellow commissioners who have worked hard to ensure that our efforts are reaching Latino students. Last fall, under the leadership of executive director Alejandra Ceja -- (applause) -- the initiative has been rallying even more support around the country to keep us moving forward. Today, by the way, I'm proud to announce more than 150 private and public sector commitments totaling more than \$335 million on behalf of America's kids. (Applause.)

Just to give you a couple of examples -- Boys and Girls Clubs of America is ramping up family engagement and STEM education. Univision and Opening Doors projects are reaching out to parents to help prepare children for school at the earliest age. So that's just an example of some of the great contributions that are being made.

And that's what this is all about -- everybody doing their part to make sure the next generation does even better than we do. That's how we've always made this country great -- not by building walls, but by tearing down barriers to opportunity. (Applause.) Not by trying to divide us, but by trying to build community. Not by telling people to go back where they came from -- (applause) -- because this would be a really empty country if that's what happened -- (laughter and applause) -- but by making sure everybody has got a "rightful place" at the table.

That's the story of America -- the story of the hunger and the desire to make us live up to our expectations, the high expectations set forth in our founding documents. It's people like Raul who dedicate their lives to raising hopes of those who had been overlooked for too long. It's people like Cecilia Muñoz -- (applause) -- who, 25 years ago, Cecilia was stuffing envelopes for Raul's campaign to give more people a voice at the White House. And today, she's helping to run the White House as one of my top senior advisors. (Applause.)

And America is a generation of young people like Diana, who dream big and who hope deeply, and whose future, like America's, is not yet written but is as bright as they are willing to make it.

So that's always been our trajectory as Americans -- moving forward; build each other up, not tear each other down. We've come together to make this country more perfect for our kids and for those who come after us. That's our American heritage as well as our Hispanic heritage. That's what we celebrate this month.

And thank you, all of you, for the great work you're doing on our behalf. Thank you. (Applause.)

END

4:55 P.M. EDT

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