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Assembly California Legislature



STANDING COMMITTEES:
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March 1, 2011

California Fund for Youth Organizing
Californians for Justice
ESPINO Coalition

To California's Youth:

I write to you—leaders of youth empowerment organizations in California—to invite you to organize a broad based, statewide youth coalition to articulate a new declaration of universal rights for California's youth.

One of my long standing priorities has been youth development and empowerment. Prior to my work in Sacramento I was a grass roots organizer working throughout the Central Valley on juvenile and educational justice issues. As a founding member of Escuelas Si, Pintas No-ESPINO (Schools Yes, Prisons No), I helped forge a broad based coalition of organizations working with at-risk youth to combat the prison industrial complex and low education rates of economically disadvantaged communities. Now, as an elected representative for California's 80th Assembly District, I continue to work on issues of economic and social justice. However, California's budget deficit threatens to further widen the gap between educational achievement and incarceration.

California's public education system continues to deteriorate. Funding reductions have led to a loss of teachers, increased class sizes, and a decrease in the amount of educational services offered to low-income communities and at-risk youth. The result—lower performing schools, higher dropout rates, especially within communities of color, and lower graduation rates of underserved and underrepresented youth. Currently, the high school dropout rate for Latino youth is 1-in-4, and for African-American youth it is a startling 1-in-3. At the same time, the prison system has received increasing funding, and the recidivism rate among youth in California's juvenile justice system is 82%.

It seems that now more than ever, the voice of today's youth needs to be amplified in the state decision-making process. In recent years, drafts of a Youth Bill of Rights have been prepared pertaining to environmental, personal, health, labor, educational and juvenile justice issues. The ground work has been laid, but it's time to create a Youth Bill of Rights that is relevant to the struggles youth are facing in this economic recession.

Clearly, for it to be meaningful and substantive, such a declaration must come from the ground and be youth-led. This is why your involvement, as leaders of different youth organizations and coalitions, is so critical for developing a process that ensures the fair and equitable engagement of youth from throughout California.

The completed declaration will then serve as the basis for a statewide resolution that I will present before the California State Legislature to recognize the specific rights of California's youth. The resolution, once chaptered with the Secretary of State's office, becomes a reference point and blueprint for future legislation. It is my hope to be one of the first to utilize this resolution to help leverage justice-oriented policy for California's youth. In addition, the statewide effort to develop the Bill of Rights will also set into motion the network needed for youth to be able to support, oppose and organize, as a single entity, around legislation affecting them.

Let's work together to develop this important resolution. I look forward to continuing to create platicas across the state on this issue.

Let's build.

In solidarity,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "V. Manuel Pérez". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

V. MANUEL PÉREZ, Assembly Member
80th Assembly District, State of California

VMP:rg

cc: