



**English Learners' Principals Conference
July 14, 2015**

Good morning and thank you to Principal Ocon and to your team at Benito Juarez Community Academy for welcoming us today.

It is a privilege for me to speak with you on such an important topic, and one that is so close to my heart.

I want to start this morning by thanking you for all your hard work this school year. It was a challenging year for many of us, and I appreciate all of the support you have given me and for always putting our students first.

Because of your commitment to your schools and your children, we have been able to maintain our momentum in the classroom, and we continue to set a new standard for academic achievement at Chicago Public Schools.

So I thank you.

As you all know, I am not an educator by trade. I have never had the privilege of teaching in a classroom, or leading a school.

So my experience in public education is a bit different than yours.

But throughout my career I have fiercely advocated for providing all children – particularly those for whom English is not their first language – with equal access to a high-quality education.

I was inspired to get involved in education because of my dad, who only got through the third grade before dropping out of school to work on our family's farm in Mexico.

Many years later – after immigrating to this great country of ours – he would tell me there were only two ways to make a living: With your head or with your back.

He never had that choice.

For my dad and the boys he grew up with, there were few opportunities that didn't involve back-breaking labor in the fields and on construction sites.

But he did so knowing that every dollar he earned would someday open doors for his children that he couldn't possibly have imagined.

The key to that better life my dad so desperately wanted for his children was education.

This was a generation or two ago, but I tell you this because even today there are many children in our schools that are the product of this kind of sacrifice.

Whether you are a teacher or principal ... an administrator or board member ... or even Interim CEO of CPS ... our job as educators is to make sure that sacrifice is rewarded. And we do that by investing in our students and by giving them the tools they need to succeed.

Forty years ago, our nation's highest court reaffirmed the rights of students whose limited English might prevent them from reaching their full potential in the classroom.

Title six of the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964 required public schools across our country to provide the right supports and resources for English Language Learners.

That meant that diverse school districts like ours had to invest in additional staff and programming to remove language barriers that often impeded the progress of so many of our students.

In the decades since, our commitment to serving this vulnerable student population has only grown.

But to ensure these supports and resources are reaching every child who needs them, I am requiring all of our schools to undergo a thorough review to demonstrate how they are complying with federal law.

At schools where some English Language students have fallen behind their peers, they will be required to put appropriate measures in place to get those students back on track.

As I mentioned earlier, this work is personal for me because of my family background and because of how my life has been enriched by an immersion in two languages – English and Spanish.

Growing up on Chicago's Roseland community in the 1960s, my older sisters and I were, like a lot of children of first-generation Americans, divided between two worlds.

There was the world of my parents, who met and married in Mexico before coming to the U.S., and who primarily spoke Spanish to us at home.

And there was the world of my friends, my classmates at school, and the American customs I was all too eager to learn.

When I look back on those early years, I realize and appreciate the gift of biliteracy that had been given to my sisters and me.

The gift of language ... of culture ... of knowing there were worlds out there beyond my own.

Though I spoke English around my friends at school, Spanish is what helped me connect with my grandmother and extended family in Mexico.

Speaking both English and Spanish, I was able to bridge that divide between two cultures and – as we so often talk about at CPS – lay the foundation for success in college and in life.

We are blessed with a richness of diversity at CPS.

Some 130 languages are spoken by our students. More than 70,000 of them are growing up in households like mine where English was the second language.

When you think about how challenging it is to learn a new language – at any age – and then to master that new language well enough to hold a conversation or to write a research paper, it takes an extraordinary amount of skill and practice.

The students in our schools today are fortunate to be growing up in a time when mastering two or more languages is celebrated – and is seen to give them a competitive advantage when applying for college or the culturally diverse jobs of tomorrow.

The great labor leader and civil rights activist Cesar Chavez once said: “Our language is the reflection of ourselves. A language is an exact reflection of the character and growth of its speakers.”

He said, “We need to help students and parents cherish and preserve the ethnic and cultural diversity that nourishes and strengthens” our communities, our cities, and our nation.

Those are powerful words that underscore the importance of establishing in our children a sense of pride about who they are and where they come from.

That starts by delivering to them the supports and resources they need to overcome the barriers to a great education.

I want to thank each of you for your commitment to our students, to their families, and to the communities we serve.

I want to thank you for helping to create a learning environment in our schools where diversity is not only better understood but celebrated.

We could not do this important work without you.

Thank you.