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Immigration coalition sets sights on education goals

by TG Branfalt Jr.

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Several immigration reform groups supporting the passage of the New York State DREAM Act held their annual leadership summit in Albany last Wednesday. The groups were joined by state Education Commissioner John King, the governor's Secretary for Civil Rights, Alphonso David, and Assemblyman Felix Ortiz, D-Brooklyn.

The New York Immigration Coalition released its top 10 budget and policy priorities for 2013 and asked their partners in government to assist them in helping pass their agenda.

Number one on the list is the passage of the DREAM Act (A.2597/S.2378) which would open up the Tuition Assistance Program and other college financial aid to undocumented immigrants, creation of a DREAM Fund, which would raise private funds for all documented and undocumented children of immigrants and give undocumented immigrants access to 529 college savings accounts using Individual Tax Payer Identification Numbers. ITPNs are given by the Internal Revenue Service to those required to pay taxes but do not qualify for social security numbers.

"I very much hope that this is the year where, finally, we are able to pass the state DREAM Act to provide financial aid to our undocumented students to attend higher education," King said. "We understand that their success is the state's success, their success is the success of our state's economy."

King's assertions were backed by a recent Fiscal Policy Institute study which found that a student who obtains a bachelor's degree and receives \$20,000 in state TAP funds will earn \$25,000 per year more than those without a degree. That would lead to an additional \$3,900 in state and local tax revenue.

The Fiscal Policy Institute's study also illustrated how citizens with college degrees contribute to the state and local economy. College degrees bring higher salaries, which leads to more spending and more tax revenue for the state, say DREAM Act supporters.

The report also found the DREAM Act funding would cost about \$17 million a year, or 2 percent of current TAP funding.



Education Commissioner John King at the podium during the New York Immigration Coalition's annual Leadership Summit. King expressed the importance of the passage of the New York DREAM Act this year. The DREAM Act would allow undocumented immigrants access to the state's Tuition Assistance Program. *Photo by TG BRANFALT Jr.*

King cited recent changes in the General Educational Development program which might serve as a detriment to students seeking pathways to a high school diplomas and college degrees. The American Council on Education, a not-for-profit that historically offered the GED test, has recently partnered with Pearson Education to redevelop the test and change it to an online only format. King said the new test would double the cost, which could restrict access.

"We're working with the governor and Legislature to ensure that access to the high school equivalency diploma is not reduced at result of the changes to the GED," King said.

He said there was bipartisan support in the legislature for the DREAM Act including key support from the Independent Democratic Council.

Along with the DREAM Act the immigrants' rights coalition is looking to ensure English Language Learners are prepared for college.

"Recently we announced the Office for New Americans ... An office the governor wanted to create to provide services to immigrants in New York who are seeking to become new Americans," David said. "We're looking at, and are providing, language access services [and] English-language classes."

David, an immigrant from Liberia, said he understands the challenges immigrants face while trying to "create a pathway" for their families in America and the Office for New Americans was created to assist new families in creating that path.

The coalition also urged lawmakers to support adult education and job training by protecting Adult Literacy Education funding in addition to funding for the creation of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals Transition Fund which would provide educational services and support for Deferred Action eligible out-of-school youth and young adults.

Assemblyman Ortiz promised he would support the agenda items proposed by the coalition.

"I believe the time is now to get whatever we can, not just from the state but from the nation," Ortiz said. "We need to figure out what will be the next step, rather than continue to talk about rhetoric and business as usual. I do believe the two issues of the DREAM Act and DREAM Fund should be taken care [of] without a problem."

Also on hand was Max Ahmed, an immigrant from Pakistan. He shared his story about financial hardship during his college career because he was unable to gain access to state TAP aid. His grades slipped while working full time during his academic career and it was not until the New York Immigration Coalition awarded him with a scholarship was he able to focus solely on his studies which helped him raise his grades.

"There are a lot of people who have dreams, just like you, just like anyone else," Ahmed said. "There are socioeconomic factors that do not allow them to progress over a certain level... If we can have every DREAMer able to get into college and to finish college then that would mean that we have everyone's dreams that want to achieve more become a reality."