

# NBCDI and NCLR Advance *Mutual-Empowerment* Strategy

by Carlos Juan Marrero

The key to *mutual-empowerment* is a set of actions taken by two or more organizations to extend the efficacy of work carried out by partnering organizations. In principle, mutual-empowerment serves to boost the organizations' effectiveness and scope of action through a collaborative cultivation of relationships and the concomitant preparation of the organization's work *ecology*. This is precisely the innovative approach that National Black Child Development Institute (NBCDI) has deployed in a promising partnership with the National Council of La Raza (NCLR). At the helm of this unprecedented work is Melinda W. Green, director of the Early Childhood Leadership Resource Center (NBCDI). Other notable contributors to the development of this initiative are Evelyn K. Moore, president of NBCDI, and Anthony J. Colon, deputy vice president, Center for Community Educational Excellence (NCLR). A crucial addition to this list of credits are scores of remarkable community leaders in Miami, Los Angeles, New Jersey, and throughout the United States, too numerous to mention.

This historic forum opened up a course of action for the Partners that has since included community forums, numerous other meetings with early childhood leaders, and the formation of community

task forces. These critical interventions are underway in three sites, and are laying the foundation for early care and education action agendas for children living in African American and Latino

communities, in the state of New Jersey, in Los Angeles County, and in Miami-Dade. The Partners, with support from The Prudential Foundation, hope that these modest yet pioneering first steps will spur similar movements throughout the country, for all children.

Latino and African American communities were chosen for this intervention because they are expected to remain the two largest culturally diverse communities for the foreseeable future. Another reason for beginning this work with Latinos and African Americans is that children in these communities continue to be disproportionately represented among children facing mammoth challenges in American schools. The initiative is helping early childhood leaders develop models for positive change and



Carlos J. Marrero is program associate with the National Black Child Development Institute, Early Childhood Leadership Center, where he

works on the planning and implementation of a cross-cultural initiative that brings Latino and Black leaders together to formulate early childhood policy and program directions. Prior to that, he served as co-evaluator for interventions in Newark, New Jersey, with Community Research Associates. He is a Ph.D. candidate in developmental psychology at The City University Graduate Center in New York City. His interests include the use of mentoring and other strategies to promote mobility and leadership development for minorities, and the use of advocacy and communication strategies to build bridges across ethnic and linguistic communities.

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serving as a catalyst to the formation of new and powerful partnerships.

The Partnership has also obtained the support and active participation of leaders from a number of other communities, including Native Americans and Asian Americans. Project activities acknowledge the internal diversity of all groups and provide them with opportunities for the broadest representation in all discussions and interventions. The Partnership is modeling collaborative problem solving, developing a form of mutual-empowerment. This approach highlights commonalities between these two culturally diverse groups and unites them to bring about redress of shared challenges. The initiative is grounded on the premise that there is power in unity, especially in unity that is broadly warranted by historical and contemporaneous commonalities.

## Organizing Principles

A number of principles guide this effort to empower African American and Latino communities to meet the needs of children. Some of these are:

- *Early* parenting and caregiving is the launch pad to the rest of life.
- *Quality* care and education prepares children for a life of success.
- Cross-cultural partnerships enables educators/providers to support children and families.
- Healthy children bring *prosperity* to their families and communities.

## The Initiative and Its Mission

This unique and pioneering cross-cultural collaboration between NBCDI and NCLR is helping early childhood leaders to expand access to quality early education in African American and Latino communities. Their work has become the meeting ground where traditions and communities cross-pollinate and become mutually supportive; where the produc-

tion of sound knowledge and best practices go hand in hand. The Partnerships' accomplishments lead to, among other things: giving visibility to culturally diverse voices, cultivating relationships within communities, facilitating broad recognition of familiar and unfamiliar leaders, and bridging the discourses of distinct but complementary communities.

## The Future of Children In Society

Around the country, early childhood leaders are re-thinking and re-shaping early care and education policy and practices. The Partners share their urgency for giving all children experiences of success in school and is working to build capacity in early childhood leaders so that together we can lift the barriers that limit the educational attainment of children.

As more families enter the two-wage income system that has become the pillar of American life, and as public regulation increasingly throws its weight behind this way of life to the exclusion of alternatives, early care and education must help families in America prepare children for success. Young mothers, compelled to enter the workforce in their child's first years of life, cannot support many of the emerging skills that formal schooling presupposes without some very creative solutions from a range of support services. Equitable access to education in this context means giving low-income and immigrant families the support they need to prepare their children for school.

## Overview of the Initiative

This mutually-empowering collaboration creates opportunities for dialogue between Latino and African American leaders on the grave difficulties that families face when they seek early care

and education services that are accessible, affordable, and culturally and developmentally appropriate. Currently in its second year, the Partnership is orchestrating the formation of Community Task Forces that bring priorities and consensus identified through dialogue into everyday practice and policy. These committees are working diligently (often volunteering their time and expertise) to translate the priorities and challenges articulated by their community leaders and service providers into interventions that build capacity and leadership. Task forces are also identifying gaps in services and advocating for these services. These committees will convene in Washington, DC, where they will learn from each other, and help the rest of the nation form more sensible policy and strategies around early education challenges.

## Outlines of An Emerging Agenda for Young Children

From this initiative we glean a number of critical challenges. A number of them are emerging with greater force from these conversations.

### ■ Identifying Needs and Preparing For the Future

Minority children currently represent the majority of children in over 20 of our nation's largest cities. The concentration of these child populations in specific service and educational districts pose significant challenges to methodological stagnation and teaching orthodoxies, at all levels of instruction, including early childhood settings. Moreover, domestic and international migrations are swiftly redrawing the picture of the number and distribution of minority children throughout the nation. Miami, New Jersey, and Los Angeles, the implementation sites of this cross-cultural initiative, in many ways foreshadow the population changes that early childhood communities nationwide must prepare for. But, unlike the patterns

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established in the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, turn-of-the-century and early twenty-first century migrations are more likely to have dramatic effects on the suburbs surrounding the cities.

Furthermore, the cultural substance of these *minorities* is also being redefined by immigrations that powerfully amplify the internal diversity of not only Blacks and Latinos, but of many other culturally-diverse groups in the U.S. The increased class mobility and educational attainment of minorities is also contributing to these internal group differentiations. All this indicates a tremendous need to develop leadership that celebrates, sustains, and encourages diversity, tolerance, and cross-cultural cohesiveness. Caregivers and teachers must take the lead in making children and families feel appreciated for the cultural and linguistic resources that they bring to the whole of society.

### ■ Building Networks of Support

The need for developing systemic integration of services for young children and their families is a dominant theme. Professional support for young children is often narrow and over-specialized in its focus, spread out across localities and difficult to access. However, the expertise that can produce sound interventions is distributed across many disciplines and specialized practices. Early interventions with children and families must form broad networks of support, so that they are multifaceted, coordinated, and mutually reinforced. When families seek support of a very particular sort for their young children, pediatricians, teachers, and social workers should make multidisciplinary teams and resources accessible. Policy and procedural channels must be instituted to facilitate the emergence of this system of integrated services.

### ■ Parental Involvement Through Systems Change

Another major theme is the need to creatively bring parents and other caregivers into the care and education of the youngest of children. Parental involvement is essential, but all too often elusive. Bringing parents into the educational process at its earliest stages should become a priority. Providers are already developing outreach strategies that recognize that family structure continues to evolve and diversify, in many instances to the exclusion of familiar structural features, e.g., a dedicated homemaker and “breadwinner.”

We must devise new ways to bring parents and other significant caregivers into the learning process of children, taking into account the options these families actually have, given their cultural, personal, and socioeconomic characteristics. Early childhood educators must find ways to build relationships using realistic expectations and sensitivity. Early childhood settings can serve as a means to form close relationships between schooling and parents, and these relationships can have desirable life-long consequences for children.

### ■ Professional Development

Acquiring the expertise to be effective with culturally diverse children and families depends on a variety of sources, such as good training by informed educators, culturally diverse networks of colleagues, sensitive administrators, relevant and accessible continuing education programs, technical assistance, and other capacity-building efforts. The first step to an effective early childhood professional is the refinement of caregiving and teaching skills. These are fundamental to all interactions with children.

Beyond this foundation, early childhood professionals need to be involved in professional and learning activities that seek to discover and promote best practices. Key issues, such as second language

acquisition or assessment of culturally diverse children must be central to these learning activities.

Frequent and meaningful interactions with coworkers that are culturally diverse also provide indispensable opportunities to strengthen cross-cultural caregiving and education skills. Diverse teams of caregivers and teachers create systems in which know-how can be shared, and this in turn facilitates providing competent support, instruction, and services, without generating an artificial match of client and provider along the lines of race and culture. Diverse *professionals* and diverse *clients* create more *worldly* formative settings and prepare children for the multicultural world they are expected to live and work in.

Administrative authorities within schools and child care centers must make every effort to mitigate the impact of shortages of minority administrators, teachers, and caregivers, through effective recruitment and retention programs. Barriers such as inadequate compensation or insufficient and inaccessible supply of training opportunities also need to be addressed creatively. Poorly charted or unrealistic pathways to professional mobility are also major causes for the loss of talented caregivers and teachers. No training and credentialing program can be expected to succeed without equitable upward-mobility opportunities.

For both mobility and capacity building, it is essential that *articulation* agreements with higher education and other credentialing entities be established, so that early childhood professionals can receive recognition for the experiences and knowledge they have. This would allow these professionals to reduce the cost and time commitments of formal, out-of-the-field experience. Work settings can ease this process by creating more meaningful systems of work classification and assessment.

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### ■ The Sharing of Know-How Through Technical Assistance

Technical assistance should instill in teachers and caregivers an appreciation for the diversity of the families they serve. The shape of early childhood programs and services depend on policy, legislation, training, curriculum, and other tools and processes. Technical assistance should be grounded in the life of communities so that it can carry the wisdom and will of the community to all early childhood settings and contexts.

Technical assistance professionals can also fill the need for permeable organizational strata, providing timely information and effective techniques across specialized interventions. Our leadership should work to make this service accessible and affordable to all who work with young children and their families, especially when cultural gaps need to be bridged between providers and culturally and linguistically diverse families.

### ■ Expanded Roles for Higher Education

Caregivers, teachers, social workers, and pediatricians must be informed about

change and growth of communities. Higher education should produce professionals that are informed and capable of serving a diverse body of children. But even after degrees and other credentials are conferred, early childhood workers need opportunities for continuous learning, if they are going to effectively reach all children in their care. We need to create organizational cultures with expectations and opportunities for continual and relevant professional development.

### ■ Increasing Public Debate and Grounded Public Policy

This unfolding dialogue also points to a great need for public debate that promotes collective, societal valuing of early care and education. Civil authorities and other community leaders should encourage broad communication on relevant issues. Researchers, the press, and other communications entities should become involved so that communities are more informed and cohesive. Communities must address the lack of affordable and accessible early care and education by creating the conditions that facilitate identification and implementation of solutions to these challenges. Media

campaigns should signal to families that their early care issues are understood and valued.

Along with informing society at large and helping to reset priorities in humane ways, the media must call for the development of funding structures that address the specific needs of immigrant and low-income populations. Children in these communities are often in the greatest need for early interventions. In many communities, serving the needs of young children will require creating viable businesses and supporting the professionals that can provide these services. Without powerful communication throughout society, through the media and other means, the needs of children will remain marginal to the concerns of the civic and business leaders without which society's resources cannot be effectively marshaled.