

# FROM THE GROUND UP

a publication of STUDENT ACTION WITH FARMWORKERS

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## Immigrant Student Legislation Helping Undocumented Students Achieve their Dreams

### National Overview

From the National Council of La Raza

Every year, high schools around the country graduate a significant number of talented immigrant students, many of whom have grown up in the United States, attended the same elementary and secondary schools as native-born students, and excelled at the same academic requirements as their classmates. Like their U.S. born classmates, these students share the same dream of pursuing a higher education. Unfortunately, they lack access to the state and federal financial assistance and in-state tuition rate available to their U.S. born peers, making it virtually impossible for these students to afford a college education. In effect, through no act of their own, they are denied the opportunity to share in the "American Dream."

To address this discrepancy, several bipartisan bills were introduced during the 107th Congress. In the Senate, Senators Orrin Hatch (R-UT) and Richard Durbin (D-IL) sponsored the "Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act" (DREAM Act). In the House, several bills were introduced as well. Among them was the "Student Adjustment Act," introduced by Representatives Chris Cannon (R-UT), Howard Berman (D-CA), and Lucille Roybal-Allard (D-CA). If enacted, both bills would facilitate access to postsecondary educational opportunities for Hispanics and other students in the United States who currently face barriers in financing a college education. They would also allow hardworking immigrant youth who have long resided in the U.S. the chance to adjust their status, enabling them to contribute fully to our society.

See overviews of the respective bills on page 5.

For more information please contact Melissa Lazarin (202.776.1751 or mlazarin@nclr.org).



Aidil Polanco Ortiz speaks to a group of migrant students visiting UNC-Chapel Hill. Photo by Luis Velasco

- ❖ In 2000, the Urban Institute estimated that 50,000 to 65,000 undocumented students graduated from high school in the U.S. yearly.
- ❖ The high school graduation rate for migrant children is 50%.
- ❖ The college participation rate for dependent family members 18 to 24 years old from low-income families in North Carolina is only 19.6%.
- ❖ North Carolina leads the US in uneducated young Hispanics 10-28.
- ❖ 47% percent of Hispanics in North Carolina between the ages 16 -19 are not enrolled in school and lack a high school diploma.
- ❖ The average in-state tuition at a North Carolina public university is \$2,299 and \$891 at a community college. The average out-of-state tuition is \$10,500 and \$3,600, respectively.
- ❖ The average salary for an undocumented farmworker is \$5,000 a year.

### Sources from this issue include:

www.saf-unite.org	The Urban Institute
www.postsecondary.org	Immigration & Naturalization Services (INS)
Raleigh News & Observer	National Council of La Raza (NCLR)

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## SAF

is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization whose mission is to bring students and farmworkers together to learn about each other's lives, share resources and skills, improve conditions for farmworkers, and build diverse coalitions working for social change.

### SAF Staff:

Ramiro Arceo, Education Director  
Esteban Echeverria, Apprentice  
Laxmi Haynes, SSC Coordinator  
Libby Manly, Program Director  
Luis Velasco, Documentary Coordinator  
Melinda Wiggins, Executive Director

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Send an email with the word "subscribe" to <farmworkers-request@duke.edu> to receive SAF's weekly Action Alerts about legislation affecting farmworkers, farm labor campaigns, job opportunities, and campus events.

### For more information or to submit articles, contact:

Student Action with Farmworkers  
1317 W. Pettigrew Street  
Durham, NC 27705  
919-660-3652; 919-681-7600 (fax)  
www.saf-unite.org

### From the Ground Up Editor:

Esteban Echeverria

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## Supporting the Educational Aspirations of Migrant Youth in NC

By Esteban Echeverria, SAF Apprentice & Lobbyist

While the majority (three-fifths) of adult foreign-born farmworkers are married and have children, only 50% live with their families. Though most of these family members remain in their country of origin, many are beginning to join their family in North Carolina. With this increase in family reunification, we may see an influx of students attending public schools in North Carolina. Since at least 50% of farmworkers are undocumented, many of their family members may be unable to obtain legal permanent residency as well. The INS recently released a study estimating that North Carolina's undocumented population had climbed to over 200,000 in 2002, up from 26,000 in 1990. According to the Urban Institute, the current number of undocumented students graduating annually from high school in the U.S. is estimated to be between 50,000 and 65,000.

Improving the quality of the education of farmworker children has always been a priority for SAF. SAF interns have been working in education placements for 10 years; over fifty *Into the Fields* interns have worked with migrant youth. *Project Levante*, SAF's school success program for migrant youth, became a formal program staffed by a full-time employee in 1997. In recent years SAF has increased its focus on education. SAF partners with the North Carolina Migrant Education Program to assist individual counties to support the leadership development of migrant youth and to plan an annual statewide conference. There are currently 48 counties in North Carolina that have a Migrant Education Program.

SAF established a scholarship at North Carolina State University for students whose family has been employed in farm work. While SAF encourages students to finish high school and attend public universities and community colleges, many students have uncertain immigration status and therefore are faced with the economic reality that makes matriculation to higher education impossible. For students whose parents earn an average of \$5,000 annually, paying a tuition rate that is five times

higher than their native born counterparts effectively closes the door to college.

One recent development in SAF's attempt to support the educational aspirations of farmworker children has been its participation in the national DREAM Campaign to support federal bills (DREAM Act in the Senate and HR 1684 in the House) that would grant in-state tuition at public universities and community colleges to the children of undocumented parents. Both bills would also allow qualified students to adjust their immigration status. SAF joined the national DREAM Campaign this year as a member of the planning committee and held a volunteer day in Durham, North Carolina on April 12 to coincide with the DREAM National Day of Action. Both bills have been recently re-introduced in this session of Congress and need our support to make sure they are more successful this time around.

While SAF remains confident in the progress of the DREAM Campaign, our work at the state level with migrant youth requires us to explore avenues to assist youth here and now. The success of California, Texas, New York, Utah, and most recently Illinois, Oklahoma, and Washington inspired us to take this issue to our state legislature. SAF's interest in developing a successful strategy for North Carolina's youth led to a partnership with El Pueblo, Inc., a statewide Latino advocacy organization. By collaborating, we were able to garner support to introduce a bill that would grant undocumented students the right to attend our public universities and community colleges at the in-state tuition rate.

Senator Eric Reeves introduced Senate bill 987 with bipartisan support and sponsorship. S-987 widens the current requirement for consideration of in-state tuition rates to enable any student who has attended a North Carolina school for four years and earned a high school diploma or GED equivalent from a North Carolina institute to pay the in-state tuition rate at NC universities and community colleges.

*Continued on page 4*



## My American Dream

By a high school Senior in Eastern North Carolina

Many people talk about the American Dream, but not everyone has a chance to achieve it. It is easy to dream, but sometimes, even though you work as hard as you can, there is something interfering with your ability to achieve your goal.

In my case there was and there are a lot of obstacles. The first one was learning the English language and understanding the culture. It was something I had to do; I did not have an option. It was not easy, because when I came to North Carolina I was 16 years old and I had been speaking my language for many years. For that reason it was harder for me to learn another language. To learn English, I had to study very hard. Sometimes I felt so sad that I did not want to go to lunch and instead stayed in the classroom listening to English CDs. Sometimes when I had to write essays for homework, I wrote them in Spanish and my cousin translated them to English. Little by little, I learned what I know today. Although I do not speak English well, I have now defeated that obstacle.

The change of culture is another big obstacle. I remember that when I was in my home everything was good because there were people just like me, but whenever I was outside of home it was a very different thing. The people were different, they spoke a different language, had a different culture, everything was different. The cultural shock was one of the hardest things. Although I have almost gotten this obstacles out of my way, I still have to work on it.

I also faced obstacles in some classes. When I came here I had finished 10th grade in Mexico, but when I enrolled in school here they put me in 9th grade. As a newcomer I could not take English I, literature class. I told one of the teachers that I wanted to graduate in the least number of years possible because I lost two years.

The teacher told me, "but you don't speak good English; you are going to fail." I told him, "If I fail, at least I tried." I was placed

in English I, and the big surprise was that I passed it and the *End Of Course* exam that even many American students fail. I passed with an 86 - the second highest grade in the classroom.

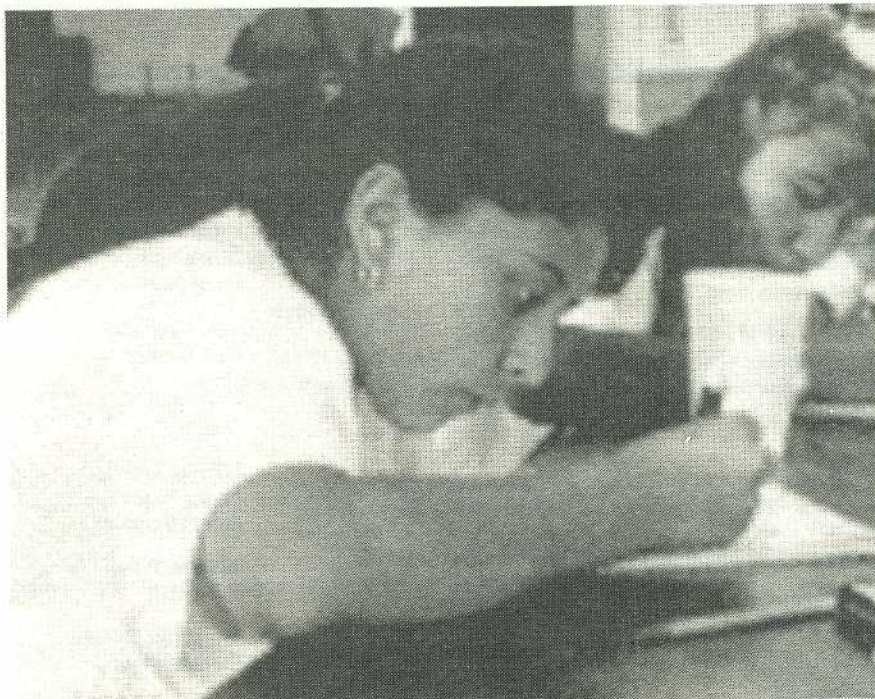
My teacher recommended me to take Honors English II. I was very nervous because it was my first year learning English. Taking an honor class where everybody is smart was very hard for me. Also my math teacher recommended that I take Honors Advanced Math. That year was a real challenge because I tried to recuperate the year that I lost by taking English II and English III in the same year.

Now I am in 12th grade. Though I have almost finished high school, something else is stopping me from my goal. I want to go to college and continue on to medical school. I like to help people, and I think that the medical field is the one where I can help the most by keeping the people healthy. The sad part is that this time defeating this obstacle does not depend on me. I have all the courage and the desire I need to achieve my goal. The obstacle

that is stopping me is that as a non-legal resident in the U.S., I cannot go to a university or get the money that I need to go to college.

It is really sad that now after all of this terrorism in America, many people are developing hatred against immigrants. It is understandable; even I feel afraid of terrorism. But there are good people that want to do good things in this country.

I still love my country, Mexico, but the reality is that I now live in America. And I love this country. Every time I listen to the American hymn, I get really sad and really emotional because although I love this country and want to be "one in a million and not one of a million," I can't do it. This is America and it is the American Dream to work for what you want, but sometimes it is just impossible. As John F. Kennedy said, "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country." America is a free nation made by immigrants from different parts of the world. I am an immigrant who wants to serve my new country.



Migrant student busy at work, Duplin County, NC. Photo by Chris Johnson

