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Sandra Del Valle: PANEL ONE - EAST HARLEM GIRLS SCHOOL

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SANDRA DEL VALLE: Although I have been described for the purposes of this symposium as a proponent of single sex schools, I do not view myself in that light. I am neither a strong advocate for or against single-sex schools. I am, however, an advocate for the Latino\Puerto Rican community and particularly for Puerto Rican\Latino children. My work over the past four years has been focused on that community of learners and my biases and concerns flow mostly from that perspective. With the opening of the Young Women's Leadership School ("YWLS")¹ in District 4,² however, I have been asked to formulate a quick opinion on the issue of single-sex schools. For those of you who do not know, the YWLS is a public school for high school girls in the East Harlem area.³

So that the YWLS in District 4 is fixed in my mind as "the girls school in El Barrio"⁴ and the students are not just "girls" but many are

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¹ Jacques Steinberg, *Just Girls and That's Fine with Them, At a New School, No Boys, Less Fussing, and a Freer Spirit*, N.Y. TIMES, Feb. 1, 1997, at A3 (detailing the opening of the Young Women's Leadership School).

² The Young Women's Leadership School opened its doors in September of 1996 in the East Harlem area of New York City on the philosophy that some girls can excel in an all-female learning environment. *Id.*

³ *Id.*

⁴ See generally Philippe Bourgois, *Workaday World, Crack Economy - Breaking Rocks in El Barrio*, THE NATION, Dec. 4, 1995, at 159 (stating that "El Barrio" is another name for East Harlem).

Latinas (40-50%).⁵

From that perspective I evaluate the YWLS on whether it is and ought to be a viable option in education for Latinas. Providing a context within which that option is exercised and any evaluation occurs is essential. Currently Latinos have the highest drop out rate in the country⁶ and in New York City⁷ where we comprise approximately 35% of the public school enrollment⁸ and are 70% of the English Language Learners.⁹ We are alarmingly segregated¹⁰--in fact, Latinos are the most segregated racial or ethnic group in the

⁵See generally Rene Sanchez, *In East Harlem, a School Without Boys: Experiment with All-Girl Classes Taps New Mood in Public Education*, WASH. POST, Sept. 22, 1996, at A01 (discussing the opening of the Young Women's Leadership School and that the first class is mostly Hispanic and African American and from the neighborhood).

⁶BUREAU OF THE CENSUS, STATISTICAL ABSTRACT OF THE UNITED STATES 1996 (116th ed.) (comparing Educational Attainment by Race and Hispanic Origin 1960-1995).

⁷See Nich Chiles & Edna Negron, *Latino School Urged*, NEWSDAY, May 21, 1992, at 41. "While the four-year dropout rate citywide has declined to 17.2 percent, the figure for Latino students is 22.5 percent, the highest of all ethnic groups." *Id.*

⁸See INTERIM REPORT OF THE LATINO COMMISSION ON EDUCATIONAL REFORM, TOWARD A VISION FOR THE EDUCATION OF LATINO STUDENTS: COMMUNITY VOICES, STUDENTS VOICES 1 (1992) [hereinafter TOWARD A VISION] (indicating how Latino's comprised 35% of the students in New York City's public school system in 1991). See also LATINO COMMISSION ON EDUCATIONAL REFORM, MAKING THE VISION A REALITY: A LATINO ACTION AGENDA FOR EDUCATIONAL REFORM (1994) [hereinafter MAKING THE VISION A REALITY] (showing how the Latino student population increased from 25.2% of students in New York City public schools in 1969 to 35.8% in 1992).

⁹See also FACTS & FIGURES, ANSWERS TO FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENT STUDENTS AND BILINGUAL/ESL PROGRAMS (1995-1996) (compiling information on bilingual education in New York City). In New York City 68.3% of the Limited English Proficient Students were Spanish speakers for the 1995-96 school year. *Id.*

¹⁰See Gary Orfield, Harvard University Graduate School of Education (1993) reprinted in Rivera-Batiz and Santiago, Carlos, *Puerto Ricans in the U.S.: A Changing Reality* (National Puerto Rican Coalition, 1995). In 1991, 73% of Latino students were attending schools that were between 50%-100% minority as compared to 66% for African-Americans. *Id.* Interestingly, New York was the most segregated state for Latino students with 58.1% of the Latino students attending schools that were 90-100% minority. *Id.*

country¹¹ and are over-represented in the worst performing schools in the state.¹² In District 4 where the YWLS is located, there are 4 SURR schools¹³ and Latinos/as comprise 65% of the school enrollment of the district.¹⁴

Despite commissioned studies done on the national and local levels,¹⁵ Latino education achievement rates have continued to be dismal.¹⁶ On almost every indicator Latinos are doing terribly from the highest drop out rates,¹⁷ to the least likely to be enrolled in early

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² See generally TOWARD A VISION, *supra* note 8, at 2. In New York City, Latino's are "likely to attend underachieving schools." *Id.* Latino's are likely to attend New York City's poorest and most overcrowded high schools. *Id.* at 3.

¹³ See Kimberly Schaye, *Fix 'Em Or I'll Close 'Em; State Ed Comish Targets 45 Schools*, N.Y. DAILY NEWS, Nov. 23, 1996, at 7, 10 (stating "SURR" stands for schools under registration review).

¹⁴ District 4 reports that approximately 65% of its students are Latinos/as, 34% are African American and 1% are other. Telephone Interview with Dorothy Petrilak, Director of Bi-lingual Studies, District 4 (Dec. 22, 1997).

¹⁵ See *infra* note 16.

¹⁶ See Pedro A. Noguera, *Ties that Bind, Forces that Divide: Berkeley High School and the Challenge of Integration*, 29 U.S.F. L. REV. 719, 721 (1995) (advancing that college-prep classes are composed of mostly white and middle class students, while remedial and non-college classes are composed largely of non-white students); see also Daniel Gonzalez, *Fund Will Aid Latino Students; One College Student Will Benefit Each Year From The New Aurelia Crespo-Carlos Lavezzari Latino Americano Scholarship Fund*, POST STANDARD, Jan. 9, 1997 ("Latinos have the highest dropout rate of any group in N.Y., according to the State Education Department. In 1994-95, 9,659 Latinos, or 7.5 percent dropped out of public schools in New York. The dropout rates for other students were 6.2 percent for African Americans, 5.2 percent for natural Americans, 3.3 percent for Asian Americans and 2.5 percent for Whites."); see also, Pedro Noguera et al., *Factors Influencing Patterns of Academic Achievement Among Latino Students (1994)* [hereinafter Noguera et al. *Factors*]; see also Ann Bancroft, *State Reports Declining High School Dropout Rate*, S.F. CHRON., May 29, 1991, at A12 (discussing that Latinos students are more likely than white students to leave school prior to graduation).

¹⁷ See generally, Gonzalez, *supra* note 16; see also Noguera et al. *Factors*, *supra* note 16, (advancing that college-prep classes are composed of mostly white and middle class students, while remedial and non-college classes are composed largely of non-white students); see also Bancroft, *supra* note 16, at A12 (discussing that Latinos students are more likely than white students to leave school prior to graduation).

childhood programs,¹⁸ to the lowest number receiving advanced degrees or PhD's.¹⁹ Even when Latinos/as graduate high school, they are less likely than white counterparts to have completed the "new Standards Curriculum"²⁰ of four years of English, three years of math, science and social studies²¹ and less likely to have taken geometry, Algebra II, trigonometry, chemistry, physics,²² but more likely to have taken remedial math.²³ Recently, there has been more rather than less cause for alarm.²⁴ The most recent data reflect a growing rather than shrinking gap between the attainment of Latinos/as and whites.²⁵

For Latinas, the issues and the data, when available, are more complex.²⁶ Unlike white females from a high socio-economic status,

¹⁸ In response to low early education enrollment, former President George Bush signed "an Executive Order aimed at improving the educational achievement of Latinos" Sue Ellen Christian, *Funds For Bush Order on Latino Students at Issue*, L.A. TIMES, Oct. 9, 1990, at 19. The order will specifically attempt to "promote early childhood education." *Id.*

¹⁹ See *Immigrants and Cohesion*, ORANGE COUNTY REG., Jun. 17, 1997, at B8 ("While 63% of Asian's expressed interest in earning advanced degrees, only 22 % of Latinos and 24% of Mexicans said the same thing."). But see, Jose Novoa, *At Times the Problem is Economics, Not Racism*, L.A. TIMES, Sept. 28, 1997, at M2 ("There are more . . . Latino . . . lawyers and judges, scientists and engineers, accountants and executives than ever before.").

²⁰ See generally, Beth Hutchinson, *New Standards Pose Challenge For Students*, BUFFALO NEWS, Aug. 22, 1996, at 4B (advancing that the new academic program consists of four years of English, three years of math, science, and social studies). This curriculum stands to be challenging to incoming freshmen. *Id.*

²¹ See Karen W. Arenson, *CUNY Calls Class of 2000 Best Prepared Since 1970*, N.Y. TIMES, May 21, 1997, at 1, 3 (advancing that the new curriculum consists of preparatory math, English, social studies, and lab sciences, well beyond public school requirements).

²² *Id.* at 3.

²³ See Pedro A. Noguera, *Educational Rights and Latinos: Tracking as a Form of Second Generation Discrimination*, 8 LA RAZA L.J. 25, 28 (1995) (advancing that Latino students in particular are disproportionately concentrated in low ability classes).

²⁴ See *infra* note 25.

²⁵ See ANTOINETTE SEDILLO LOPEZ, *LATINOS IN THE UNITED STATES: LATINO LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION: COMMUNICATION AND THE DREAM DEFERRED* 95 (1995) (stating how there is an attainment difference between Hispanic children and Non-Hispanic White children).

²⁶ See *infra* notes 27-29 and accompanying text.

poor Latinas tend to do better at school than poor Latinos on traditional measures of achievement like drop-out rate,²⁷ grade retention²⁸ and enrollment in advanced placement courses.²⁹ But apparently there is little research done on the intersection of race or ethnicity (especially Latinas), gender and socio-economic status and the role these factors play in educational achievement.³⁰ Apparently, African-American girls and Latinas are more likely to have been "pinched, touched, or grabbed in a sexual way in school."³¹

While the Latino population is growing in number³² and becoming more diverse in New York City,³³ there is an incredible invisibility of Latino students when it comes to high stakes decision-making and policy making.³⁴ In the spirit of education reform, dozens

²⁷ See generally, Angela Cortez, *Latina Students Search For Power*, DENVER POST, Nov. 4, 1995, at B-01 (discussing an awareness in the Latina population of the educational obstacles to Latinas). See generally, Pamela Martineau, *Mariposa Project Gives Latina Girls Confidence to Soar*, SACRAMENTO BEE, Jan. 21, 1997, at B3 (showing the awareness among Latina's that they are not favored to go to college).

²⁸ See generally, Susan McGee Bailey & Patricia B. Campbell, *Gender Equity: The Unexamined Basic of School Reform*, 4 STAN. L. & POL'Y REV. 73, 84 (1993) (discussing the education girls receive and how well it prepares them for work and economic independence). Girls tend to get better grades and stay in school longer, but boys perform better on standardized tests. *Id.*

²⁹ See TOWARD A VISION, *supra* note 8, at 3 (discussing how 60% of Latino students in New York City's high schools that have a majority Latino population were reading below grade level).

³⁰ See Karen Mellencamp Davis, *Reading, Writing, and Sexual Harassment: Finding A Constitutional Remedy When Schools Fail to Address Peer Abuse*, 69 IND. L.J. 1123, 1157 (1994) (asserting that girls are more severely affected than boys by sexual harassment). See generally, TOWARD A VISION, *supra* note 8, at 2 (discussing piecemeal how Latino students are segregated in schools where students are from minority and low socio-economic backgrounds).

³¹ See AAUW EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION, *HOSTILE HALLWAYS: THE AAUW SURVEY ON SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN AMERICA'S SCHOOLS* 22-25 (1993).

³² See TOWARD A VISION, *supra* note 8, at 1.

³³ *Id.* at 5. (showing an overall increase in the Puerto Rican population and other Hispanic Americans from 1969-1992).

³⁴ See generally SEDILLO LOPEZ, *supra* note 25, at 124-39.

of new schools are opening up every year³⁵ that have little knowledge about how to best serve Latino students³⁶ and particularly, English language learners.³⁷ The New York State Board of Regents issued a new policy which requires the passing of Regents Comprehensive Exams³⁸ without taking into consideration the need for translating the exams³⁹ and for qualified bilingual personnel to teach the subjects.⁴⁰ Even the decision on whether to designate a New York school as “failing”⁴¹ is based on the achievement of students on standardized tests that have not been normed⁴² an may in fact be inappropriate measures for ELL's⁴³

Issues for Latinas, especially newly arriving students,⁴⁴ converge with cultural and linguistic issues. Such concepts as “self-

³⁵ See generally MAKING THE VISION A REALITY, *supra* note 8.

³⁶ *Id.*

³⁷ See Pam Belluck, *Learning Gap Tied To Time in the System*, N.Y. TIMES, Jan. 5, 1997, §1, at 5 (noting that schools with immigrant students may only have one or two teachers who speak their native language thereby making student adjustment more difficult).

³⁸ See Raymond Hernandez, *Regents Agree to Consider Translated Tests*, N.Y. TIMES, Apr. 29, 1997, at B3. New York State Education Commissioner, Richard P. Mills, has made passing Regents exams a graduation requirement. *Id.*

³⁹ *Id.* Presently, the Commissioner has proposed translating the Regents exams into New York State's most commonly used languages. *Id.* See also Raymond Hernandez, *Pataki Opposes Translating Regents Exams*, N.Y. TIMES, Apr. 30, 1997, at B3 (noting that New York State Governor, George Pataki, disagrees with Education Commissioner Richard Mills' proposal to translate Regent exams).

⁴⁰ See Belluck, *supra* note 37 and accompanying text.

⁴¹ *17 in Peril*, N.Y. TIMES, Oct. 17, 1995, at B3 (noting that the criteria by which public schools are placed on a “poor performance list” is based on achievement test scores in math and reading, attendance records, and drop-out rates for older students).

⁴² See Peter Applebome, *Imperfect Measures; Tests, Too, Have Their Failings*, N.Y. TIMES, May 4, 1997, §4, at 1. New York's Education Commissioner believes that English-only Regents exams do not fairly test the measure of skills of immigrants. *Id.*

⁴³ *Id.*

⁴⁴ See generally Antonio J. Califa, *Declaring English The Official Language: Prejudice Spoken Here*, 24 HARV. C.R.-C.L.L. REV. 293 (1989) (noting a study that demonstrated how the age of Hispanic teenagers affects their assimilation into American culture and their grasp of the English language).

esteem,” “self-concept,” and “leadership,” prominent in discussions about programming for girls,⁴⁵ have meaning and implications that can vary with the cultural context.⁴⁶ For example, “reticence cannot be immediately equated with low self-esteem; respect for elders’ authority should not be confused with a lack of leadership potential and a reluctance to work autonomously or outshine others should not be attributed to overdependence on others.”⁴⁷

On the national scale, lack of Latino educational attainment has been attributed to a variety of factors from inequities in school financing,⁴⁸ to unsafe learning environments,⁴⁹ lack of linguistically appropriate education,⁵⁰ school segregation,⁵¹ lack of Latino staff,⁵²

⁴⁵ See Steinberg, *supra* note 1. The founders of the Young Women’s Leadership School in East Harlem hope girls will build self-esteem and leadership skills in an all-female environment. *Id.*

⁴⁶ See generally Cornelius Riordan, *Single-Gender Schools: Outcomes For African and Hispanic Americans*, 10 RES. IN SOC. OF EDUC. & SOCIALIZATION 177, 182 (1994) (noting that Hispanic youth are faced with different pressures because of their culture).

⁴⁷ *New Voices*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (National Center For Immigrant Students, National Coalition of Advocates for Students).

⁴⁸ See OUR NATION ON THE FAULT LINE: HISPANIC AMERICAN EDUCATION, PRESIDENT’S ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE 41 (1994) [hereinafter OUR NATION ON THE FAULT LINE] (finding that the equal disbursement of government education funds disadvantages Hispanic communities because they typically generate less property taxes to support their local schools).

⁴⁹ *Id.* at 53 (arguing, among other issues, that safer schools are ones in which “staff members are held accountable for physical and verbal violence toward students, and in which complaints of physical or sexual abuse of students are investigated and acted upon quickly.”).

⁵⁰ *Id.* at 46. The report suggested that the lack of bilingual education is politically motivated because this form of education is perceived as somehow threatening to American values. *Id.* The General Accounting Office (GAO) in 1994 stated that “the bilingual method is the most effective [tool] for non-English speaking children.” *Id.*

⁵¹ See Orfield, *supra* note 10.

⁵² See OUR NATION ON THE FAULT LINE, *supra* note 48, at 44. Hispanics accounted for more than 12% of the U.S. public school population in 1993-1994. *Id.* However, Hispanic teachers comprised less than 4% of the teacher population, Hispanic counselors made up 2% of the total population, and Hispanic administrators constituted only 4% of all public school administrators. *Id.*

misplacement of students in restrictive special education settings,⁵³ or a lack of parental involvement.⁵⁴

The creation of alternative schools usually occurs within one of two contexts: either launched to solve the problems of students who are considered “at risk”⁵⁵ or begun for education reform purposes linked to innovation and creativity.⁵⁶

The most important of the various reports done on Latino underachievement recognize that the majority of an ethnic population⁵⁷ cannot be considered “at risk,”⁵⁸ that certainly the labels of “traditional student,” “alternative,”⁵⁹ “at risk,”⁶⁰ or “LEP”⁶¹ have

⁵³ See *id.* at 48 (arguing that even when a student is found to be erroneously tracked in a special education program it is nearly impossible to track them back to mainstream classrooms).

⁵⁴ See *id.* at 52 (stating that the school is to blame for not involving parents in the education process).

⁵⁵ See, Karla A. Turekian, *Traversing the Minefields of Educational Reform: The Legality of Charter Schools*, 29 CONN. L. REV. 1365, 1393 (1997) (discussing the Colorado Charter School Amendment which defines an “‘at-risk’ pupil to mean a pupil who, because of physical, emotional, and socioeconomic, or cultural factors, is less likely to succeed in a conventional educational environment”).

⁵⁶ *But see id.* at 1393. Here the author compared “at risk” students and “talented and gifted” students to show that the two are similar in that neither group thrives “in the more ‘conventional’ educational environment.” *Id.*

⁵⁷ See Deborah Ramirez, *Multicultural Empowerment: It's Not Just Black and White Anymore*, 47 STAN. L. REV. 957, 960 (1995) (stating that “projections indicate that early in the twenty-first century, Latinos will be the largest group of color in the United States.”).

⁵⁸ See Turekian, *supra* note 55. See also, OUR NATION ON THE FAULT LINE, *supra* note 48, at 55 (stating that Hispanic students are at risk because of inadequacies in the education system).

⁵⁹ See Larry W. Hughes et. al., *Desegregating America's Schools*, at Appendix B: Glossary of Terms (1980) (describing students unable to function in a traditional learning setting).

⁶⁰ See HUGH MEHAN, U.S. DEPT OF EDUC., CONTEXTUAL FACTORS SURROUNDING HISPANIC DROPOUTS, 2 (1997) (describing “at risk” as “a new socially based construct” that “emerged to challenge psychomedical representations of dropouts and other underachieving students.”); see also ANNE TURNABAUGH LOCKWOOD, U.S. DEPT OF EDUC., CARING, COMMUNITY, AND PERSONALIZATION: STRATEGIES TO COMBAT THE HISPANIC DROPOUT PROBLEM 5 (1996) (describing “the not-infrequent dysfunctional or destructive home

not served Latinos well⁶² and probably serve no child well if it serves to segregate or marginalize.⁶³

What has been needed for all our children and usually only reserved for our wealthiest is what Latinos need too: an invigorating, relevant, student-centered curriculum,⁶⁴ caring and supportive staff⁶⁵ and high expectations.⁶⁶ Creating a school that also is the center of a community,⁶⁷ that has bilingual staff that is accessible and open to family members⁶⁸ and that takes the academic and civic life of the parents as well as the students seriously⁶⁹ would not only go far toward empowering our children, but would also help transform our

environments” of Hispanic students and the high poverty rate in Hispanic communities as factors that create an “at risk” climate).

⁶¹ Limited English Proficiency (LEP).

⁶² See LOCKWOOD, *supra* note 60, at 2 (recognizing that “popular perceptions” put blame on the Hispanic students, “indicting the student or family for laziness, lack of willingness to assimilate into American culture, and reluctance to learn English.”).

⁶³ *Id.* (condemning “school practices that sort and classify students” and “succeed in alienating students from academic work.”).

⁶⁴ See OLATOKUMBO S. FASHOLA ET AL., U.S. DEP’T OF EDUC., EFFECTIVE PROGRAMS FOR LATINO STUDENTS IN ELEMENTARY AND MIDDLE SCHOOLS 6 (1997) (noting that programs that reform the entire school are the most promising programs for Latino students).

⁶⁵ See LOCKWOOD, *supra* note 60, at 6 (challenging school staff to engage with students in supportive relationships that may be “otherwise missing” from the students’ lives).

⁶⁶ *Id.* at 10 (recommending program and policy changes that “develop, maintain, and continuously evaluate programs that further a sense of personal future for Hispanic students.”).

⁶⁷ See RUDOLFO CHÁVEZ, U.S. DEP’T OF EDUC., A CURRICULUM DISCOURSE FOR ACHIEVING EQUITY: IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS WHEN ENGAGED WITH LATINA AND LATINO STUDENTS 1 (1997) (considering “authenticity from within the community” and “reinvigorat[ion] [of] the curriculum terrain with community, group, and personal historicity” to be pivotal).

⁶⁸ See LOCKWOOD, *supra* note 60, at 10 (proposing the establishment of a “district policy that encourages or requires the hiring of bilingual teachers [who are] respectful of Hispanic language and culture [and who] better communicate the goals and aims of the school to students and their families”).

⁶⁹ *Id.* (emphasizing the need to “target parents and extended families for extensive outreach” in after-school programs that address their needs in both English and Spanish).

communities into true “learning zones.”⁷⁰ Unfortunately, this is not the kind of education that is the norm in our schools and not the kind of education that Latinos are receiving.⁷¹

Based on a review of the curriculum, the handbook of the YWLS and a school visit, YWLS essentially offers a college preparatory education,⁷² utilizes school uniforms⁷³ and appears to involve the students in some aspects of school governance and decision-making.⁷⁴ What role the first entering class, the parents or the community as a whole played in creating nurturing or sustaining the school is unknown. Whether the impetus to create a YWLS was based on the needs of Latinas, or the Barrio population in particular is questionable. Yet apparently, high expectations for academic success is the norm,⁷⁵ the school is small⁷⁶ and there is personalized attention given to every student.⁷⁷

The school is young--only five months old⁷⁸ and will be going

⁷⁰ *Id.*

⁷¹ *Id.* at 1 (finding the dropout rates for Hispanics to be about double those of other Americans).

⁷² See Jacques Steinberg, *Where the Boys Aren't, Schoolgirls Both Eager and Not So*, N.Y. TIMES, Aug. 19, 1996, at B1 (categorizing the Young Women's Leadership School as an all-girls private preparatory school).

⁷³ See generally Jacques Steinberg, *All-Girls School Opens To Muffins and Media*, N.Y. TIMES, Sept. 5, 1996, at B6 (explaining that the uniform consists of a white blouse, blue blazer, and blue skirt).

⁷⁴ See Mary B.W. Tabor, *Planners of a New Public School for Girls Look to Two Other Cities*, N.Y. TIMES, July 22, 1996, at B1 (stating that one of the school's goals is to focus on women's leadership skills).

⁷⁵ See Jacques Steinberg, *Plan for Harlem Girls School Faces Concern Over Sex Bias*, N.Y. TIMES, July 16, 1996, at A1 (explaining that close attention is paid to the creation of an environment in which girls will flourish academically).

⁷⁶ See Steinberg, *supra* note 1, *Just Girls and That's Fine with Them* (stating that 55 girls attend the Young Women's Leadership School).

⁷⁷ See Steinberg, *supra* note 72, *Where the Boys Aren't, Schoolgirls Both Eager and Not So* (illustrating that students receive personalized attention).

⁷⁸ See Steinberg, *supra* note 73, *All-Girls School Opens To Muffins and Media* (stating that the Young Women's Leadership School opened its doors Sept. 4, 1996).

through a process of growth and I'm sure redefinition as the students add their own dimension to the character and growth to the school. The YWLS offers poor Latinas a choice within the public school context, that is, the possibility of a high quality education in the city for a population that desperately needs that choice.⁷⁹ In a system where Latinas do not even have access to science laboratories and advanced academic courses,⁸⁰ a school that provides a rigorous college-minded curriculum⁸¹ is a breath of fresh air.

One of the most obvious questions that I have to answer for myself about this school, however, is whether the creation of an alternative, perhaps more responsive learning environment, essentially blames the victim and not the current school system for its failure to address Latina needs; whether endorsing the creation of new, small, separate schools lessens some of the pressure we must necessarily continue to place pressure on the school system as a whole. Does having a YWLS mean we don't press for sexual harassment to be taken seriously in the rest of our schools? Well, for me the question could just as well be asked whether the creation of dual language bilingual school like the Leadership School in the Lower East Side means that we stop pushing for high quality bilingual education programs system wide.

Of course not. We have one million children in this school system;⁸² all who deserve our very best efforts at educating them. What these alternative spaces prove, however, is that having high

⁷⁹ See *Shut Out of Excellence*, N.Y. TIMES, May 11, 1997, § 4, at 14 (citing a study indicating widespread failure to prepare students for elite public schools).

⁸⁰ See Chris Mitchell, *Mobile Homeroom*, NEW YORK, Oct. 20, 1997, at 16 (illustrating the dismal conditions in which children attend school in New York City).

⁸¹ See Steinberg, *supra* note 72, *Where the Boys Aren't, Schoolgirls Both Eager and Not So* (YWLS is modeled on a private preparatory school).

⁸² See Laura Williams, *Crunch Time Board of Ed Can't Solve 1 Problem: More Kids Than Space*, N.Y. DAILY NEWS, Aug. 17, 1997, at 6 (stating that the New York City school system was 91,000 students over capacity last year).

expectations, a caring staff, strong leadership and innovative programming are indeed possible in a large, urban public school system. More importantly, if successful, they dispel the still current argument that a low socio-economic status is to blame for educational failure.⁸³ Excuses be damned, we can do better and many new schools, new pedagogues, new energy are proving it.

⁸³ See LOCKWOOD, *supra* note 60. "The dropout rate for Hispanic students is highest for low-income students." *Id.*