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## Transcript of NCSET Conference Call Presentation

# The Escalera Project: Taking Steps to Success

presented by:

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**Ms. Johnson:** Good afternoon and welcome to the teleconference entitled “Escalera Project: Taking Steps to Success.” I’m Donna Johnson, a research fellow with the National Center on Secondary Education and Transition. Today we’re highlighting a speaker who will be featured at our 2005 National Leadership Summit, which will be held June 14-15 in Washington, DC—Eduardo Garcia.

Mr. Garcia is the Director of the National Council of La Raza (NCLR) Center for Latino Economic Opportunities. He oversees NCLR’s workforce development projects and programs. These include projects in healthcare, transportation, information technology, retail, construction, and housing. Mr. Garcia is also the lead NCLR staff for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation-funded early college high school projects in which students graduate with a high school diploma and 60 college credits. He is also responsible for the Pepsico Foundation-funded NCLR Escalera Project: Taking Steps to Success, a career development high school program that seeks to increase the number of Latino youth who graduate from high school and attend college, which he will be talking about today.

Mr. Garcia has served as a consultant to numerous educational and governmental institutions including the University of Wisconsin Graduate School of Education, the University of Miami Spanish Family Guidance Center, the Legislative Office of Research Liaison of the Pennsylvania State Legislature, the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare, the Wisconsin Department of Health and Social Services, and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. He received his Master of Public Administration Degree from the Graduate School of Public Policy and Analysis and the Institute of Public Administration of the Pennsylvania State University.

**Mr. Garcia:** Thank you for the kind invitation.

Perhaps I can start by telling you a little bit about who we are. The National Council of La Raza is the largest affiliate-based Latino organization in the country, with over 300 affiliates in over 40 states (including the District of Columbia) serving about four million Latinos who are receiving direct services from one of our affiliates on an annual basis, and the number seems to be growing every year. NCLR has been in existence for 35 years, initially known for its work in civil rights and advocacy, then expanding to educational programs, health programs, workforce development programs, and community development programs.

- In the area of housing, we are the largest Latino housing development corporation in the country. We capitalize about half a billion dollars helping affiliates and other organizations in developing low-income housing, office buildings, and schools.
- From the workforce development standpoint, we create national programs that can be replicated with our affiliates, national corporations, or our partners, both on our corporate board of directors and other national corporations who seek to gainfully employ Latinos within their corporate structure for career development matters and entry-level positions.
- In education, we are part of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation Charter School Program allowing us to fund over 40 charter schools and 12 early college high schools, which we’re very proud of. We’re creating high schools where students will graduate with 60 college credits. We’re in the forefront of that effort with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. There are 90 charter schools that are a part of the NCLR af-

affiliate family lending us a wealth and breadth of experience and expertise within our affiliate base.

Now we're looking at the Escalera Project, which was one of our programs, designed to help Latino students stay in school, graduate from high school, go to college, and develop career interests. We saw from our own work with our 90-something schools that Latino students often needed the opportunity to be involved with the corporate sector with their high school education. The reason was to be able to begin to develop career interests, to explore careers, and to tap into the wealth of our corporate community—to bring them into the schools so that students can benefit from leadership opportunities and internship opportunities and be able to define themselves as capable and able to succeed in the future world and further on after their education into the corporate world. We needed to make that tie-in to the corporate world and the job environment, something that was found in very few places, for corporate society to be brought into the schools for the benefit of students and, in the long run, their career development.

Escalera was developed as a best-of-the-best program. We selected one of the finest consultants on youth development and youth career development who is part of the National Youth Employment Coalition, collaborated with the Pepsico staff, our affiliate base, and other consultants to design the Project. The Project, even though it was designed as an after-school program, is not a textbook curriculum. It is a framework by which schools can engage students and corporations and develop curricula not only to attract students, but also to engage students, making sure that they will be successful in their career development in school and beyond.

We began this project at Garfield High School, of *Stand and Deliver* fame, and we figured that if we were going to try something out, we might as well try something in an inner city school that had some notoriety to it. Garfield High School has about a 65-75% dropout rate for the freshman year. The program was designed for second semester juniors and seniors meaning that we knew that there were going to be significant issues that the students would be behind educationally. Quite frankly, we didn't realize exactly what that meant.

After the initial assessment of the first class at Garfield High School a little over three years ago, we quickly surmised that almost about a third of the incoming class for the Escalera Project, which will stay small at about 16, were not scheduled to graduate from high school because they were so far behind academically. We needed to develop an intensive and rigorous after-school tutoring program that went through the summer. The first task was to deal with their academic deficiency before we could go on to the other foundation skills.

While that was going on, they were acquiring research and computer skills such as Excel, Word, and PowerPoint. They needed to acquire skills where they could participate in demonstrations to their corporate partners showing that these skills have been learned. They were also required to participate in self-evaluation examinations to develop and identify their potential career interests. That led to internships at the participating corporations from hospitals, attorneys, and architects.

The program was geared to first identify the needs of the students in that school and then address those specific needs. That is why it is a framework program and not a dedicated textbook curriculum. The program needed to be adaptable to what the defined needs were of the students and adaptable to the resources that were available not only within that school, but within that community. The resources available in our initial program in Los Angeles at Garfield High School were different than the resources available in the second program in Chicago. Some of the challenges were very different and we were working with a different population of students at both of those initial sites.

The program was made to be adaptable and to make sure that resources could be identified and applied at a local level with a small formation of a national program and still guarantee that there is a basic sound structure that requires the attainment of specific demonstrated skills. We conducted a very extensive proposal process through our affiliate base, initially in Los Angeles where we have 19 affiliates, and a host of affiliates both at our charter schools and affiliates at our other programs in schools, specifically after-school programs. The initial affiliate, Multicultural Area Health Education Center of Los

Angeles (MHEC) didn't have their own school, but had after-school programs at Garfield High School. They pioneered this program with us and were very successful in identifying resources from both the school and the community.

While there was funding available for staff for the project, the program did not originally provide all the funds for all the necessary contingencies. For example, we didn't understand the need for extensive tutoring and those funds were, actually, required from corporate resources. Transportation was an issue, acquired from contributions and corporate resources from the community. A lot depended on the ability of the local organization leading the project to be able to work within their community and to be able to tap resources locally within the community. That was the program design. It was not an error. We understood that we had to have very strong partners who understood and worked well within their communities and were respected in order to realize this program, because the program depends so much on the ability to identify and utilize resources to bring to fruition the complete program.

The program is intensive; it is what we call at some points or another a boutique program. It was a very expensive program where initially it had to cost about \$7,000 per student. That came down to about \$3,800 per student for the year.

We have learned since then that we need to not only start the program earlier—for example, tackling the issues of second semester juniors presented a number of significant issues that almost overwhelmed the program at the very beginning. What we decided to do was to backtrack the program. These skills need to be acquired and can be acquired much earlier on in the high school process. We believe as far back as the freshman year in high school we can begin to engage students and corporations in the local community for this program. We have shifted that emphasis from second semester juniors and seniors back to sophomores and freshmen. That is currently how the program is being run.

Another lesson that we learned was that, because the structure of this program was not one that was the textbook curriculum, it wasn't adaptable. It made it very easy for teachers to want to be able to infuse some of the skill acquisition activities within

the classroom. Now we would like to move from an after-school program to begin to work with our affiliate schools to develop what we call Escalera schools, schools where we will infuse the career development and youth development practices of Escalera as early as 6<sup>th</sup> grade. We have begun to realize the disadvantages faced not only by Latino youth, but also by so many other youth in this country in schools that are overwhelmed. This intervention needs to begin as early as possible in the lives of the students.

Issues addressed were not only issues of language and literacy, but other personal disadvantages that the individual had. The program was made to be able to define what those were, then create and address those problems with defined solutions, then be able to evaluate the progress made on those solutions that were created, and then make sure that an effective program was being designed for each student. It was not a program designed to deal with a class of students, but to ensure that each student was successful in acquiring the necessary skills and in overcoming their own individual barriers, whether they be academic or others.

We also had a number of the family members of the Escalera students involved in the program who themselves were facing economic, employment, or literacy barriers and were helped by the staff of the program in meeting some of those challenges, especially parents. That was critical to this program, because there had been some initial resistance from parents who didn't understand. This is not new to our schools, certainly. Certainly, Garfield is not one of our schools with parents who have a problem understanding and defining success for their children. If you are a child who has parents, uncles, and aunts who have low-income jobs in the community, you don't understand how it is that you can start to climb up the economic ladder and how you break in to higher-income positions. How do you begin to define potential goals you may be able to design for yourself, because opportunities will open for you based on your experiences and your knowledge and your ability to take control of your life and succeed.

Many of our students across the board were by and large coming from families where the parents did not hold professional positions. Their parents' expectations, in many cases, was not that their sons

and daughters would graduate from high school and pursue a college degree and work for a corporation. The parents, in many cases, had to be brought in, too, as a partner to ensure that they understood that this was simply a matter of assisting their son or daughter to succeed in life, and that it was not a personal threat to the family.

We had some examples in one or two cases that I remember fathers, specifically, talking about the daughters saying, “We don’t need her to go to college. We need her to help with the family chores,” or “We need her to take care of her younger brother.” How do you begin to overcome those issues? You need to call up the parents and bring them in and say, “What are the issues that you’re facing that we can help you with? Is it education or is it getting a job?” And that was one of the strengths of this model, is that the model was based on the program being run by the community-based organization that either had a school within the community-based organization or was in a school providing direct services. The strength of the community-based organization was that they would provide wrap-around services not only to students, but also to identify issues facing the family and assist those family members with those particular issues that are preventing them from succeeding or are creating stumbling blocks for their sons’ or daughters’ success.

It becomes a much larger issue—it’s not just an education issue, corporate issue, or community-based solution issue. It is a multifaceted attempt at identifying problems that are within the family, either for the students or for the parents, and then being able to draw from the community the resources to present the solutions to those problems. Because one of the things that we decided very early on is that they needed this to be a holistic approach at creating an intervention to help students succeed, but that intervention ends with the students. They really needed to include the family as a whole.

The Escalera Project has been very successful. We drew up a series of 34 criteria that we call the Escalera Evaluation Protocol—data that would be collected and benchmarks that needed to be met in order to define the success that each student was having and the problems encountered and then, based on those, identifying what intervention

needed to be created to address the specific problems of each individual student. So it’s a program that has been very deeply documented, not only the problems but also the resources created, and also the attainment of the students.

As I said before, we started with a class a third of which was not going to graduate from Garfield High School. We ended with a class where every student graduated from high school, every student attended college, and now 80% of the students have gone on to college on scholarships. The initial year, we had Pepsico who funded the original Escalera program, the Pepsico fund, we had one of our students compete at the national level for Pepsico nationwide Diamond scholarships and was one of eight recipients. Another student, the second year of our program, received a \$100,000 scholarship to a university.

We understand that the intervention works. We have seen the success of the intervention, and we’re trying to adapt this intervention so that many more students can benefit across any number of schools without having the high cost per student that this initial Escalera Project has had as a pilot program. We look forward to working with an affiliate base of approximately 90 schools.

We’re now working with seven other schools in developing the Escalera program as part of the day-to-day curriculum. So if it’s civics classes, you will have Civic Engagement, which is part of the Escalera project. In English classes, you will have presentation skills being developed. We’re trying to embed the actual foundation skills that are a part of Escalera into the day-to-day curriculum whereby the teachers are really reinforcing the fact that students need to develop these skills that are going to be lifelong skills. They’re not just skills for the job; they’re not just skills for school. But these are skills that will help them be successful along whatever endeavor they choose to follow.

When we had selected the initial groups or the initial agencies that were going to be part of this project, we developed a very exacting rubric to gauge who potentially could be a successful candidate to manage this program. We understood that there were a number of things that the group or the community-based organization needed to come to the table with in a number of capacities: youth pro-

gramming expertise, linkage to the school district, linkage to other local support services and corporations, so that we knew what we were looking for. In order for a group to be accepted into the program, they had to demonstrate that they already had the required capabilities and abilities that they could further leverage with this program.

We decided that very early on, because we knew we were undertaking what we already recognized as a difficult task. We weren't prepared for how difficult it was going to be. There were very many lessons learned in this project and we feel that we're applying this now through our entire school base, some 90-something affiliates. Slowly we're working through learning these lessons and encapsulating them and how to inculcate this program within the day-to-day curriculum in the school, what is necessary not only is to be successful academically, but for Latino youth and other youth that have been disadvantaged, for them to realize and to grasp the concept that they have the capacity to be part of this dynamic economy, that they will have the skills necessary to be able to compete on any even field with any other student regardless of where they went to school or what kind of background they came from. That's part of our role at NCLR, to ensure that not only adults but also youth understand that they have the capacity and the ability, given the right circumstances, to succeed. It's our goal to be able to change the schools that we work with, and by inference, other schools, to understand that there is a role that schools are not playing right now—that is, really preparing students for the future.

Many will argue that schools are not even preparing students academically, and that might be the case, it is often the case within the schools. But the responsibility goes even wider—to prepare our students to be able to be competitive in tomorrow's economy, a much wider responsibility, a much wider role than schools have traditionally assumed.

I'm going to take a breather. Are there questions so far?

**Ms. Johnson:** I have a question, Eduardo. Could you talk a little bit about the types of internships that your students participate in?

**Mr. Garcia:** We have internships with banks like Wells Fargo, with attorneys' offices, and with

hospitals for students who are interested in health-care as a career where they would shadow a professional. We had internships with a couple of corporations. Our students wanted to learn about sales, so they would shadow sales representatives. These were summer paid internships that were part of the corporate partnership of Escalera, so a corporate partner had to be willing not only to provide the leadership opportunities of having mentors and coming in and doing workshops on career development, on leadership, on corporate culture, but also pay for an internship opportunity for the student for the summer so that the student was gainfully employed. This became a year-round activity for the students to be involved with in Escalera.

We were afraid of dropout over the summer, so this is one of the ways that we were able to engage students and keep them, not only for the internships, but also gave them an opportunity and a reason to come in during the summer for tutoring and other academic activities to ensure that they were academically up to par.

**Ms. Johnson:** Did the students participate in one internship one summer and then another internship in another summer, or was it consistently over their participation that they participated in the same internship?

**Mr. Garcia:** Well, the way the program was initially structured was that the internship would be the summer between their junior and senior years. The second opportunity they had after they graduated was to participate in the National Council of La Raza annual conference, which is the largest Latino fair of its kind in the country. This year it's going to be in Philadelphia; last year 27,000 people attended the conference in Phoenix. And we have a three-day leadership program where youth from the around the country come in and not only participate in but actually put on workshops on projects that they're working on, on community issues all directed by the youth. This is part of our leader's program at NCLR, so that second summer, the students became a part of the NCLR Leader List Conference at our national conference. That was the second major event of their participation in Escalera.

**Ms. Marshall:** This is Angela Hernandez Marshall with CCSSO. Thank you for your pre-

sentation. I'm wondering if you can just talk a little bit more about two separate issues. One is, you mentioned in the context of describing the design of the program, ensuring that there was an effective program design for each student. There's an implicit personalization there, and I'd like you to touch more on that. And the second issue is really about the evaluation, these 34 criteria that you describe as the Escalera protocol. And I'm wondering if you can talk about that in more detail as well?

**Mr. Garcia:** The program was designed to effectively provide solutions for individual students. Let me just start with that. As each student comes into the program, there is an evaluation: academic evaluation, career interest evaluation, and other interpersonal needs evaluation. That is where the program really starts from. Based on that, the students are asked what kinds of activities they need for themselves and what kind of assistance they want for themselves in order to succeed both at school and later. So it begins with the very premise that it's student-driven.

This is why we set it up as a framework and not as a textbook curriculum, taking the needs of the students themselves, who very early on said, "We're flunking. Most of us are not going to get through this year." And immediately we ramped up a very extensive tutor-training program where college students were recruited from the local university who came in free of charge to tutor the students after school, on weekends, and during the summer; that was the first step of it. A student-driven design based on the identified needs was the first criteria. And secondly, the specific skills that we wanted the students to take away from the Escalera Project. So as long as those two components are within the project, the design really takes on a very local flavor. It's student-driven, and then our particular benchmarks of what we want the students to take away from this project.

The second, the Escalera evaluation protocol came after. Initially we were really at a loss of how to evaluate, because there was some push-back from Garfield High initially as to what kind of statistics we would be able to get and what they would give us. They did come around and decided that they wanted this to be as successful as possible as an intervention strategy. And then, within a couple of months, we were able to begin to get data. For example, and this

is with the students and their parents signing a waiver to get this information, 10<sup>th</sup> grade transcripts, 11<sup>th</sup> grade transcripts, taped tests, copies of the taped tests or the process tests that were done. We also incorporated a workforce development publishing company that does a lot of work on career inventory tests and workforce tests, which is JIST, I believe out of Minnesota, so we did their inventory. The development of the individual student plan, for example, had to be done within the first 60 days of the students being in the program. There was a job search attitude inventory just publishing and then, 11<sup>th</sup> grade transcript and 12<sup>th</sup> grade transcript. Then we kept track of the number of students graduating in the school, the number of students receiving scholarships, and to what universities they were receiving the scholarships.

We began to collect data on the different areas that we thought we would be able to demonstrate either weaknesses or success of the program, including surveys of the school principal, career center directors at the schools, tutors and mentors, and the corporate staff who were providing internships and training. We began to draw different kinds of information from different sources to be able to evaluate. There were monthly reports to us to ensure that issues were not only being identified, but also were being addressed and ensuring that the resources would be brought to bear to alleviate whatever condition had been identified. It became a very thorough statistics-driven kind of a process out of necessity.

We understood that in order for us to be able to claim for ourselves, if not for anyone else, that we're having an impact, we needed to derive the kind of data that we needed in this protocol to ensure that we can prove to ourselves and to identify the weaknesses of the programs. We did come up with a number of weaknesses. Initially, it was that we were starting this way too late, and that we were placing an incredible burden on program staff and school staff beginning this intervention second semester junior year.

**Ms. Cerpa:** Eduardo, this is Delia Cerpa of the Southeastern General Resource Center. Thank you so much for your excellent presentation. To follow up on the evaluation criteria and the protocol, I'm gathering that there are different sources that you use to do that evaluation. Is there a way that we can

get some of the material or some written documents that we can share with other people? Is there a Web site we can go to and learn more about this?

**Mr. Garcia:** We do have our NCLR Web site, where our Escalera Program is talked about. We don't have that kind of information on that site, but I would be more than happy to make sure that you get these documents, and a list of and an explanation of some of the career inventories and why we used this company. I've worked with them for many years at different programs and I'm really quite satisfied. And I can make sure that you receive the Escalera evaluation protocol.

**Ms. Johnson:** What we can do is, Eduardo, if you would send me the materials to post, I can make sure they're posted on the NCSET Web site.

**Mr. Garcia:** Wonderful. I will, then, make sure of that.

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