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January 19, 2012

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave., NW
Washington, D.C. 20502

Dear President Obama:

On behalf of the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials (NALEO) Educational Fund, I urge you to express a clear and unequivocal commitment to policies that will promote the full engagement of Latinos and all Americans in our nation's democracy when you deliver the 2012 State of the Union address. The NALEO Educational Fund is the nation's leading non-profit non-partisan organization that facilitates full Latino participation in the American political process, from citizenship to public service. Our constituency includes the more than 6,000 Latino elected and appointed officials nationwide. Our Board and members include Democrats, Republicans and Independents. We believe you can take an important step toward strengthening our democratic process by addressing the following four proposals in the State of the Union address, and adopting them as part of your policy priorities for the year:

1. Eliminate unfair barriers to full Latino participation and fair representation in the electoral process;
2. Support appropriate levels of funding for the Census Bureau;
3. Pursue comprehensive immigration reform and other fair and humane immigration policies; and
4. Promote policies that address the economic challenges faced by the Latino community

1. Eliminate unfair barriers to Latino participation and representation

The NALEO Educational Fund estimates that at least 12.2 million Latino voters will cast ballots in the 2012 elections, an increase of about 33 percent from 2008.

www.naleo.org

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Through our non-partisan efforts to mobilize Latino voters, we have learned about the obstacles that Latinos face when they attempt to cast ballots, and we believe that there are continuing efforts to create insurmountable barriers for the Latino community. For example, in 2011, eight states passed new restrictive laws requiring voters to show photo identification to cast their ballots, and three of these states imposed burdensome proof of citizenship requirements on voters. These requirements create significant obstacles for Latino, elderly, and low income voters, and are often used to harass or intimidate Latino voters.

In some parts of the country, new redistricting plans are threatening the political progress of the Latino community. In Texas, which gained four Congressional seats largely as a result of Latino population growth, the legislature enacted maps that ignored that growth and would violate Latino voting rights. In Los Angeles County, the Board of Supervisors failed to approve a plan that would provide fair representation for Latinos.

In addition, in October 2011, the Census Bureau announced that 212 jurisdictions are now required to provide language assistance to Latino voters under Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (VRA), including areas with emerging Latino populations, such as the metropolitan Washington, D.C. area, the Midwest, and Utah. The language assistance requirements of the VRA help ensure that all U.S. citizens, regardless of linguistic ability, are able to fully and fairly exercise their right to participate in the electoral process.

We urge you to ensure that the Department of Justice (DOJ) vigorously enforces the VRA to combat unfair voting requirements and challenge illegal redistricting plans. We also believe the DOJ must carefully scrutinize jurisdictions' implementation of the VRA's language assistance requirements, and provide them with the information and resources necessary to comply with those requirements.

2. Support appropriate levels of funding for the Census Bureau

Funding for the Census Bureau is a constitutionally mandated, wise, and necessary investment in the effective governance of our nation and preservation of our democratic ideals. An accurate count of our nation's population is critical for fair apportionment and redistricting. In addition, the Census Bureau's work provides data essential to ensure the prudent distribution of valuable government resources at a time when state and local governments face significant fiscal challenges. Adequate funding of the Census Bureau's work is essential to begin planning for a cost-effective 2020 decennial census; to conduct the Economic Census and maintain the reliability of the American Community Survey (ACS); and to continue to implement a supplemental poverty measure. With the U.S. population constantly changing, it is vital that we do not deprive our nation of this timely and accurate data that is critical for our representative democracy and our nation's prosperity.

We believe that FY 2011 and FY 2012 budget cuts in Census operations have already reached the very minimum levels necessary to preserve core statistical programs and ensure the continued reliability of data vital for public, private, and nonprofit sector decision-making both now and in the future. We encourage you to restore funding for the Census Bureau as proposed by your administration in the FY 2012 budget, or at a minimum to protect the FY 2012 funding level in the coming fiscal year.

We also understand that you are requesting authority to eliminate the Department of Commerce and combine its core functions with other federal agencies. We hope that you will articulate your vision of how this reorganization will affect the Census Bureau, which is currently housed in that Department. We also urge you to ensure that this restructuring places the Census Bureau in a federal Department which will effectively promote its policy priorities and further its mission.

3. Pursue comprehensive immigration reform and other fair and humane immigration policies

The time is overdue for our nation to address comprehensive immigration reform – a critical issue for the future growth and prosperity of our nation. The NALEO Educational Fund has adopted principles on comprehensive immigration reform that provide a road map to the work that needs to be done on this important national issue. These principles emphasize the need for immigration policies that ensure our national security and public safety; recognize that immigrants contribute to the growth of our nation; protect the due process rights of all; provide tax-paying immigrant workers and their families an opportunity to earn legalization and eventually U.S. citizenship; and promote the civic integration of newcomers.

In the 2011 State of the Union address, you called on both political parties to work with you on comprehensive immigration reform. We urge you to renew this urgent call to action. A critical component of comprehensive immigration reform is the enactment of the Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act, which would help thousands of talented, motivated, multilingual and multicultural students pursue higher education or a military career. Each year, about 65,000 DREAM Act-eligible students graduate from high school, only to realize that their hard work and academic achievement can go no further. NALEO members, including the more than 2,100 elected school board officials, know first-hand the stellar contributions that immigrant students are making to the economic vitality of our nation and the civic life of their communities. We urge you to redouble your efforts to find a legislative solution to the unfair and devastating situation faced by these “Dreamers.”

In addition, we thank you for your leadership pursuing administrative policies that mitigate some of the serious flaws in our immigration laws, and we encourage your administration to accelerate the exercise of prosecutorial discretion under existing law to prevent or defer the removal of law abiding, tax-paying newcomers.

Additionally, we welcome your commitment to reaffirming that the federal government has exclusive jurisdiction on immigration policy and that a patchwork approach by individual states is not the solution. We fully support the DOJ decision to file a complaint and motion for preliminary injunction against HB 56 in Alabama and SB1070 in Arizona. These state laws and others being proposed jeopardize the safety of all of the residents of the respective states by diverting valuable resources away from pressing local concerns and deterring immigrant cooperation with law enforcement efforts. These initiatives lead to the violation of the due process and civil rights of all Americans, and subject Latinos and newcomers to unfair and illegal discrimination. We urge you to stay fast in your commitment to intervene in state proposals that are in conflict with our nation's Constitution.

Finally, a critical component of our immigration policy is the fees that we charge newcomers who are pursuing their dream of U.S. citizenship. In past years, there have been exorbitant increases which have put naturalization beyond the reach of many legal permanent residents. Based on our unparalleled experience in U.S. citizenship promotion, assistance and research, we strongly commend your commitment to stabilizing the naturalization fee as it recognizes the great benefit that increased naturalization confers upon our nation, and is consistent with the nation's "proud tradition of welcoming new citizens."

In recent years, the administration has requested and Congress has provided limited funding for immigration services that helped secure the stabilization of the naturalization fee. However, in FY 2012, Congress did not provide any discretionary funding for the processing of refugee and asylum applications. In order to forestall future increases to the cost of applying for U.S. citizenship, we urge your continued commitment to actively pursue reforms in the system of financing immigration services, including redoubling efforts to seek appropriated funding to cover expenses that are not directly related to the adjudication of applications for which fees are charged.

4. Promote policies that address the economic challenges faced by the Latino community

Our nation's worse economic downturn in recent history is disproportionately affecting Latino families, who are experiencing severe losses of jobs and home foreclosures. We urge you to promote policies that address these challenges and help Latinos and all Americans pursue economic opportunity for their families and communities.

The nation's Latino population is more than 50 million strong, and Latinos are America's fastest-growing and second-largest population group. Our future prosperity and the strength of our democracy depend on the political and economic progress of the Latino community. We believe the four priorities set forth above will help ensure that this progress continues, and we urge you to articulate them as part of your vision for the country in the 2012 State of the Union address.

President Barack Obama

January 19, 2012

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Should you have any questions about these issues, please contact me directly, or Mr. Max Sevilla, Director of Policy and Legislative Affairs, at 202-546-2536 or msevillia@naleo.org.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Arturo Vargas". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending to the right from the end of the name.

Arturo Vargas
Executive Director

cc: Latino Members of Congress