

## **Liberty's Promise**

Of late, we've seen that with the substantial influx of immigrants, particularly from Central and South America, who often had limited or disrupted education in their home countries and frequently enter the American public school system in their late teens, making it difficult for them to meet the school system's graduation requirements by the age of 21. Older than their peers and seemingly behind in school from the start, they most often drop out of school out of frustration (with the challenge of learning English) and resignation (believing that they will never go to college and never get a good job).

Enter Liberty's Promise. We are convinced that these youth, who now see no future for themselves, will become engaged in their education once they see the opportunities available to them. By showing youth that their native language skills are desired and valuable professional assets—that they can get good jobs with their knowledge of Spanish, provided that they learn English—we can give them a concrete reason to take learning seriously and stay in school. It is not enough to conduct a program that aims to offer some life skills with the tacit assumption that nothing much will come of its participants. Young people see right through that. Adolescents need to be told that they can excel, and they need to be around people who believe they can succeed.

With the help of a RMYF Advancement Grant, Liberty's Promise intends to implement a collaborative effort with the Literacy Council of Northern Virginia [also a 501(c)(3) non-profit] to be run in select Alexandria City and Arlington Public Schools that targets these youth, who are currently missing from our regular civics programs. We call our innovative approach Civic Engagement for Beginning English Language Learners (CE-BELL). CE-BELL is a civic engagement after-school program in Spanish that includes an English language learning component. Research indicates that ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) students perform better when they learn academic content in their native language as they acquire English.

CE-BELL will promote language-learning by introducing words or concepts that reinforce the target activity. For instance, during a visit from firefighters, who would explain their role in our community, the language-learning component would be important English words used during a 911 emergency call about a fire. It should be made clear that the objective of CE-BELL is not to make quantum improvements in language-acquisition over the course of a 10-week after-school program. Rather, we intend to create an environment that shows young people the myriad opportunities they have to succeed in America.

We believe that once they see these opportunities, CE-BELL participants will realize that they, too, can succeed. The program will encourage these at-risk youth to think about a better future and to stay in school, a result that will benefit them and those around them.

A RMYF Advancement Grant is essential seed money. With it, we can leverage our requests to local governments and other private foundations for support.