

FINAL EDITION

City & State

Hispanic summit offers blunt talk



Staff photo by Mel Nathanson
Melissa Rodriguez of Southwest Elementary School in Durham gets a geography lesson at an exhibit table at the Hispanic Educational Summit at McKimmon Center.

U.S. Treasurer Rosario Marin, other role models encourage and coach Hispanic students.

By Tim Simmons
Staff Writer

RALEIGH — The young Latina wanted to know why anyone would want to help her — a teenager born outside the country who spoke limited English.

U.S. Treasurer Rosario Marin, keynote speaker for the N.C. Hispanic Educational Summit, looked out from the stage at more than 650 students gathered Friday at the N.C. State University's McKimmon Center. In a voice that trem-

bled, she offered a passionate reply and the backdrop for the largest annual gathering of Latino students in the state.

"Someone, somewhere, told you that you can't succeed — and you believed them!" Marin said. "Don't let them get to your brain. Don't make yourself a victim. It is not easy to succeed, but it is not impossible."

Marin's message struck a chord with the students who came from 25 school districts and 70 different schools throughout the Triangle and beyond. She said she remembered begging her mother not to move to the United States. She loved her home and her friends in Mexico, even if her education would

end at grade nine. Once in this country, she was told she would never succeed.

"When I first arrived here and took my first IQ test in high school, it came back with a 27 on it," Marin said. "Now, 100 is considered normal, and 70 means you are considered mentally retarded. People laughed at me, but I remember thinking that all it showed me is I didn't speak English yet."

"Today, I am the treasurer of this country."

Students, some of whom cried during Marin's speech, said it was painfully easy to see themselves when Marin recalled her own ex-

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periences in school. The temptation is constant, they said, to quit school and find a job as soon as they learn even a small amount of English.

"It all sounded very familiar to me," said Nayely Irais, a junior at Broughton High School in Raleigh. "That's how it is in school. Most of the teachers are nice, but you can feel very alone sometimes."

The conference, sponsored by the N.C. Society of Hispanic Professionals, offered students a wide range of topics to discuss, from the consequences of dropping out and the risk of joining gangs to tips on study habits and where to find scholarship money.

In an environment where Spanish and English competed as the dominant language, many students felt free to ask blunt questions. And they often got blunt advice. The students wanted to know how they could apply for scholarships when they had no Social Security numbers. They wanted to know why police and teachers never seem to be around to help them resist pressure to join gangs. Speakers, in turn, offered graphic descriptions of gang life and how unprotected sex can lead to AIDS, syphilis and other diseases.

"And your diet. You drink eight colas a day, and you wonder why

you are overweight and your skin dries out," lectured Eloy Rodriguez, a Cornell University scientist who spoke at lunch. "Let's see how you like that sugar when you get diabetes and they have to amputate your leg."

Most of the students seemed to look past Rodriguez's harsh tone — "He meant well," said Leydi Acosta of North Johnston High School in Kenly — and they focused on the bigger message of staying in school.

Hispanic students have the highest dropout rate of any ethnic group in the state, almost 6 percent a year. Teachers say most Hispanic dropouts are students who never attended elementary school here but enroll in middle school or high school knowing little or no English.

"Those who start earlier do so much better," said Megan Benevides, a teacher at North Johnston High School. "But many who come to us in high school were not in another school before that — maybe ever. Some are here only to learn English, and then they leave."

Sameni Silva, one of Benevides' students, said she has tried to persuade others to stay in school, but it isn't easy.

"What are you going to do? Work at McDonald's your whole life?" Silva asked. "But still they go."

Staff writer Tim Simmons can be reached at 829-4535 or tsimmons@newsobserver.com.

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