TESTIMONY FOR THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND THE WORK FORCE

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Presented by: Peggy Reimann, Pennsylvania Migrant Education, Lincoln Intermediate Unit 12 Project Area.

My name is Peggy Reimann. and I want to address you today not only as a representative of Pennsylvania Migrant Education, but also as an educator who has spent the last 20 years developing and implementing family centered education programs . Ten years ago I began to work with Pennsylvania Migrant Education, and I have to say that I have found a home here. I found an adjunct education program with great flexibility, a real tradition of working with families, and a history and structure that fosters a close working relationships with parents. I also found that the migrant community itself was particularly well suited to family centered education programs. In fact, family literacy in many forms has become a cornerstone of Migrant Education in our state since we recognize that parents are often the only stable educational resource in their children's lives. My own work in the field has led me to expand the meaning of family literacy beyond the traditional skills of reading and writing. These are obviously a very important if not critical part of any family centered education program, but they are just a part of the puzzle as we prepare families and children for the world of the 21 century.

My definition starts with what might be called "cultural literacy", the skills of living in this society, in this day and age. This may be everything from how to find good used clothing so children can go to school even when it snows, to how to know what's happening to your child in school. However, even cultural literacy is just a small first step. It is generally recognized that for children to flourish in school today they need a great deal of input from the home - they need to come from a climate of learning and to have parents who actually help them learn. Every one of us who have put our own children through school has spent long hours not only reading to them, but helping them with puzzling math assignments, going over homework, looking through magazines in doctor's offices. Who is to do these essential activities with our migrant children if not their own parents?

We in Migrant Education are aware that we work with one of the populations that is most at risk in this country, a population that is largely undereducated, poor, transient, and isolated geographically and culturally. However, anyone who works with migrant families soon realizes that this is also a community with great strengths, where some of the most important elements for a family centered learning program are already in place and can be tapped into in our efforts to bring migrant children into the educational mainstream. .

In the first place migrant families tend to have strong extended family ties, often as a matter of survival. Fathers are not only present, but working, and often very much in charge. Families travel in groups that may include cousins, grandparents, aunts and uncles. These are families that stick together even when they are far apart. I know this from personal experience. For many years I have made my phone available to the young apple pickers who come into our region. I have watched these young 16, 17 year old boys spend entire evenings tracking their mothers down in some small village in Mexico with only 1 phone for the whole town. They call to see if the money they sent home has arrived. For those of us with adolescent children ourselves, children who seldom call home, except to ask for money, it is quite refreshing to see these young men so far from home, but still so connected to their families.

This is also a community where young children spend a lot of their time with their parents or other adults. And, at least in the Latino community, there is a strong oral tradition. Our migrant children start school having spent much of their formative years surrounded by talkative, expressive, affectionate adults. As we all know these are the very qualities of parenting that form the foundation for the nurturing of language, thought, and self confidence in young children.

Finally there is in the migrant community an old fashioned and very refreshing belief in the American dream - if you just work hard enough and do right you will get ahead, and your children will too. I had this very point articulated to me by a migrant father just recently. He knew, he said, that he would have to do jobs all his life that were way below his capacity and skills, but he was willing to do it because he could see that his three children, would have a very different life from his.

These are the strengths that we use as the foundation for our efforts to bring this all important climate of learning into the homes of migrant children of all ages. There are many ways we do this.

We have made an art form of collecting used children's books for almost nothing, so that we have enough to inundate our children with books and reading material, all of which they are allowed to keep. We distribute literally thousands of books to our children in the course of a year. We carry books in boxes to every home we visit, and encourage children to root through them and pick as many as they want. We mail books to children, using the lure of their own personal mail to give books a special meaning in a child's life. Books also become a link for us with families that have left the region, sending little book packages all over the East Coast.

Once children are hooked on books, we begin a training program for parents - how to use pictures and conversation to teach your child to read (our younger children). With our English speaking parents we also have a program to show them how to turn their older children into fast and skillful readers. We have found that if you bury children in books, and work with parents to get them reading, it is possible to get children up to the ages of about 10 or 11 to read regularly for pleasure. We have also found that it is perfectly possible for parents who do not themselves read to make this happen.

I recently got a call from a father in Kansas to tell me that his son was first in his class in reading. Five years ago when I first met this father, he took me aside and told me that he could not help his son prepare for kindergarten because he and his wife only had a couple of years of education themselves. In the next two years I visited this family perhaps 3 or 4 times annually, bringing books every time and sitting down with father and son. I showed the father how to do a pre reading exercise we call "pointing and naming." We also sent books by mail every month to this family, and spoke to them regularly on the phone. At one point we taught this father several card games to use to help his child learn math facts. Two years later, shortly before they left the region, I was visiting the trailer and the family proudly showed me the book shelf they had had to build for their son so that the toddler in the family couldn't get at his books. She already had her own small shelf with books on it. Shortly thereafter this family moved to Kansas and called with a

new address and phone number, so they could keep getting books in the mail. And now they wanted to let me know that their boy was first in his class in reading and had begun to teach himself to read Spanish..

Our second tool for working with distant and transient families is the telephone. The migrant phone has become an "educational hot line". Just in the last few months calls came in from Florida (A girl who had passed through the area five or more years ago during apple harvest called just to see how I was doing and to tell me she had graduated from high school.), from North Carolina (A mother wanted to ask me to explain a report card and help her talk to her child's teacher about homework.) two calls from the neighboring county (A girl who used to be in our program wanted help with her algebra homework, and a formerly migrant mother "couldn't think of who else to call" when the school threatened to expel her 12 year old son.) As you can see, we have found the phone to be a particularly cost effective way to continue to give families educational input long after they have left our region. .

Perhaps our most important tool for family learning is a training program for parents themselves in how to work with their own children. This curriculum, meant specifically for in home use, teaches parents the art of working with a child one on one. It uses carefully worked out math games, book related activities and an approach to helping children with homework. It is designed to be used by any parent, *even those with little or no English or reading skills.* We have just begun to collect data (grades and test scores) on the academic achievement of children who work through this material with their parents. Anecdotally we are seeing an effect. In one community of about 30 school age children, all from Central American families who arrived in this small central Pennsylvania town three years ago speaking no English, we have been pleased to see that so far no children have been left back, only two are in the special education system (and they arrived here already in the program), and of our last year's crop of kindergarteners, more than half were at grade level or above by the end of the first year.

Finally I would like to say a few words on our approach to teaching English as a second language, ESL. Like most migrant programs we try our best to hook our families into already existing educational programs. We link them up with local literacy councils and with adult education programs. However we have found that often these programs do not meet the needs of our shy, uneducated mothers - the very parents who need English the most to be able to participate in their children's education. Intimidated by

the school like atmosphere of more formal instruction and particularly by a reliance on written materials, they quickly drop out. So we run our own classes with our own curriculum, in the home. Kitchen table ESL, so to speak. These classes include (1) what we call "listening exercises - training to foster the ability to hear English and pick out important words (2) games that teach language and math at the same time for parents and children to play together and (3) a set of patterned speaking exercises that center around the kitchen and food - again that parents and children can do together.

Since I am here today to address the House Committee on Education and the Workplace, I would like to end by pointing out that we in migrant education are working with people who are on the very bottom rungs of the work force. Migrant agricultural work is often the first step for a family into the American economy. It makes a great deal of sense, both economically and socially, to give these people the tools to upgrade themselves and their children. Family literacy programs are by far the best way to do this, the lynch pin of acculturation, as one of our site directors put it.

Finally, I would like for a moment to address the issue of educational strategies for the 21 century, and the important role that family centered education programs have to play in any discussion of the shape of the hi tech education of the future. It is through family centered, parent implemented education programs that we will be able to provide children with the kind of personal, individualized input that is such an important part of the educational process, particularly for children at risk.