



Padres Unidos  
Jovenes Unidos

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## **Building Youth Leaders Padres Unidos/Jovenes Unidos Denver, Colorado**

Lalo Montoya, a student at North High School in Denver, used to skip a lot of school. It just didn't seem that the teachers or counselors at North expected much from the school's predominantly Latino students. Lalo's perception is justified by the numbers: a 2004 study showed that only 38% of Latino students entering North as freshmen graduated four years later. In 2005, only 2.8% of Latino students passed state math tests. At the same time, between 2000 and 2004, Denver Public Schools had a 71% increase in the number of student referred to law enforcement. Most of those referrals were of African American and Latino students.

Montoya began hanging out on the edges of Denver's gang culture. A couple of times, he dropped out of school completely to get a job and help support his family. But they'd always encourage him to return to North, and he would.

When Lalo expressed curiosity about some friends' involvement in a youth organizing group called Jovenes Unidos, they invited him to join them at a weekly meeting. Lalo remembers that it was raining that Saturday morning, and he didn't really want to go. But his friends arrived to pick him up and urged him out the door.

"[The meeting] opened my eyes," says Lalo, four years later. "It's really easy to not care – to just stay home like I wanted to. It's really easy to not think about community – to always think just about yourself."

Lalo Montoya was inspired and nurtured by Jovenes Unidos (Youth United). The group is affiliated with Padres Unidos (Parents United), which has organized for 15 years in Denver and nationally for equality and justice in education, immigration and health care.

Padres has a track record of fighting for – and winning – broad systemic change. In 1996, the group forced Denver Public Schools to comply with federal standards on bilingual education. They led a three-year campaign that, in 2000, established the nation's first dual language Montessori school. They played a significant role in defeating a statewide "English-only" ballot initiative in 2002 – the first such initiative in the country to be defeated.

In 2004 Jovenes Unidos emerged, with a campaign to demand intervention and reform at North High School, the school Lalo Montoya attended. Jovenes members interviewed over 700 students – half the student body – to identify key issues of concern. The students prepared and released [The North High School Report \(link\)](#) which included the results of their survey, research on the school's lack of educational resources and opportunities, and a comparison between conditions and expectations at North and those at wealthy suburban schools. Jovenes presented a comprehensive plan for reform, and compelled the creation of a 70-member committee to oversee the redesign of the school. In 2007, they won an order from the Superintendent of Denver Public Schools for a comprehensive restructuring of North.

The success of Padres y Jovenes Unidos is rooted in their knowledge of and respect for the history and traditions of social movements. They build leadership that understands the social and political context of working in a state increasingly populated by new immigrants, yet host to a strong conservative core that maintains control over many of the state's policy-making bodies. Jovenes Unidos gives young people the tools to make sense of what they see and to strategically explore solutions.

It is this grounded approach to organizing, as well as Padres' impressive record of significant accomplishments, that led the Edward W. Hazen Foundation to support Jovenes Unidos in their multi-pronged "Freedom to Learn" campaign beginning in 2003. The campaign is based on the idea that education is a right, not a privilege. All students, regardless of race, income, or immigration status, deserve a high-quality education and have the right to attend quality schools, be prepared for college, and succeed.

Lalo Montoya encountered the organization's dynamic process at his first meeting on that rainy Saturday. The young people sat in a circle, and each had the opportunity to ask questions or make a statement. Lalo wasn't accustomed to hearing young people get beyond complaining to discuss *why* things were happening and what to do about it. After a couple of meetings, he was hooked.

"You could see him getting involved really quickly," says Pam Martinez, co-director of Padres Unidos. "He's not a shy guy. He started jumping right into the conversation."

And into action. One of the issues Jovenes leaders have tackled as part of "Freedom to Learn" is the oppressive and racially inequitable use of discipline by Denver Public Schools (DPS). In late 2004 and early 2005, with the help of the Washington, DC-based Advancement Project, parents and students interviewed school personnel and juvenile court judges, looked at codes of conduct from other school districts and analyzed Denver's implementation of its disciplinary procedures. Their work exposed the inequitable impact of Denver Public School disciplinary practices on students of color.

After the results of the research were published (["Education on Lockdown: the Schoolhouse to Jailhouse Track"](#) (link) Padres y Jovenes Unidos began to lobby for a new disciplinary code, a reassessment of the role of Denver Police officers in the

schools and the implementation of restorative justice programs in Denver's middle and high schools. By the end of the 2006-07 school year, Jovenes had won a pilot restorative justice program in six schools, and had collaborated with the district on the first draft of a new discipline policy.

Another focus for the group has been the multiple barriers to college access for documented and undocumented immigrant students. They are working towards the passage of state and federal laws that would allow immigrant students to pay in-state tuition at public colleges and would provide a road to documentation for students graduating from high school and attending college. At the same time, Jovenes is demanding that all Denver schools implement a college-prep curriculum that assumes all students are headed for higher education. In 2004, Padres developed a program to provide 40-50 student members of Jovenes each year with academic and counseling support, assistance in exploring college options and navigating admissions and scholarship opportunities.

Lalo Montoya has become one of Jovenes Unido's most confident student leaders. "It was kind of intimidating at first – talking to authority figures," remembers Lalo. "But I got better and better at it each time."

What's more, he began to attend classes regularly. And he began to encourage other students to stay in school and to look ahead to college. Lalo graduated from North High School on time in 2005 and began attending community college in Denver that fall. Now, in addition to his studies, Lalo is organizing young people at Lincoln High School through Jovenes Unidos. "He's very intentional about it," remarks Martinez. "He's got all the qualities of a great leader himself, but he focuses on developing others."

Through Jovenes Unidos, Lalo Montoya and other Latino youth like him have found not just a reason to stay in school, but the ability to recognize systemic oppression, understand how they are affected by it, and to chart a course for change.