



ESL MiniConference

Does That Banner Yet Wave? Supporters of Immigrant Rights Work Against Nationwide Bias

There is no denying that there is a lot of immigrant bashing in today's America. Several of the Republican candidates for president were really way out there with rhetoric that seemed to whip up lots of emotion in the early straw polls and debates. Prominent journalists like Lou Dobbs know their audience only too well, and rarely allow actual debate to occur on this topic.

One refreshing outcome of the primary season in both parties is that the candidates still standing are three of the least reactionary on this issue.

On the Carolina TESOL listserv in recent days a member posted an appeal for political action to stop an anticipated bill in the North Carolina General Assembly which would "bar all undocumented students from attending colleges and universities in the North Carolina state system," possibly including community colleges. The UNC system itself is against the bill, as are a number of groups that are coming together quickly in the state to work against its passage: the Migrant Farmworkers Association, the North Carolina Council of Churches, El Pueblo, Hispanic Professionals, and others. A petition by the [Coalition for College Access](#) was made available online for North Carolinans to register their opposition to the proposed legislation.

Here in Kansas, where I live, Kansas TESOL and a number of other groups across the state successfully lobbied in early 2004 for our state legislature to pass a bill allowing undocumented Kansas residents who have attended high school in the state and graduated from a Kansas high school to pay in-state tuition at the state's institutions of higher education. This bill has withstood several concerted efforts by mostly out-of-state anti-immigrant groups (especially F.A.I.R.) who have failed in the political arena as well as in court to prevent implementation of this reasonable law which our governor rightly touted as in the long-term social and economic interests of Kansas.

But perhaps the most active and well organized group working for equity and fairness on behalf of undocumented immigrants is [Nebraska](#)

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Appleseed. Here is an excerpt from their recent "Appleseed in Action" e-mail:

As the legislative session came to an end for 2008, Nebraska Appleseed and its community allies celebrated the defeat of several immigrant-related proposals that would have harmed Nebraska's communities and been detrimental to Nebraska's future.

Unfortunately, such state-level attempts to "crack down" on immigration have become far too common around the country, despite evidence that immigration has a net positive effect on U.S. job creation and state economies, and despite evidence that these measures divide communities, foster discrimination, negatively impact local economies, cost states millions in taxpayer dollars, and often violate the U.S. Constitution.

Among the bills and resolutions which went down to defeat thanks to testimony and lobbying by Nebraska Appleseed and allied groups were: a bill that would have created a costly and redundant new bureaucracy for checking immigration and citizenship status in determining eligibility for public benefits; an effort to repeal a Nebraska law similar to the Kansas law allowing undocumented high school graduates to pay in-state college tuition; a bill that promised to open up a flood of lawsuits by absolutely anyone against Nebraska businesses that hire undocumented immigrants, and indirectly discriminate against U.S. born and work-authorized immigrants as well; a law that would have encouraged local police to sign up with Homeland Security as immigration agents, threatening to jeopardize public safety by making immigrants afraid to seek out police to report crimes or provide information; and a bill that would have attached a special tax to money sent by immigrants to their families in their home countries, whereas, according to the Nebraska Appleseed newsletter, "in fact 90% of immigrants' income stays here in the U.S., benefiting local communities and economies."

"We hope that next year's legislative session reflects the common sense policy making that happened this session in response to these bills," explained the organization in its e-mail. "We will also be working hard, in conjunction with an interim study, to bring creative new ideas to promote integration and make the most of the asset new immigrants represent to the state."

During this heated time in the national debate over immigration, and in the midst of a slow-down or recession that seems to be the result of reductivist rather than constructivist thinking among political leaders

who set the tone, it is heartening to observe the positive results of efforts by groups like [Nebraska Appleseed](#) to reflect the core values of these great United States of America. Hopefully, candidates and the next round of leaders will take a cue from their sensible approach.

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