

October 6, 2006

Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger  
State Capitol Building  
Sacramento, CA 95814  
VIA Fax: 916-445-4633



**Re: Immigrant groups denounce Governor's statements regarding Mexican and Asian immigrant assimilation**

Dear Governor Schwarzenegger:

We the undersigned write to object to your recent comments made in Los Angeles' Chinatown urging Mexican immigrants to learn English, U.S. history and make more of an effort to assimilate into the "American fabric." Your statements reflect a troubling lack of awareness of both the history and current state of affairs of California's immigrant communities.

First, it is irresponsible and inaccurate to overlook the significant contributions immigrants, and in particular Mexican immigrants in California, contribute to the "American fabric." Mexican immigrants have a multi-generational and rich history of labor, civic participation and cultural work in this State. Today, immigrants from Mexico and all over the world come to California to toil in fields, factories, restaurants and hotels. They do so often under exploitative conditions and at significant risk to their health and safety. Immigrant labor is in fact what holds the fabric of California's economy together.

Second, in accusing new immigrants of lacking an interest in learning English, you mis-represent the nature of language barriers and fail to recognize government responsibility and interest in fully supporting language acquisition. All Americans, including immigrants, fully understand the importance of mastering English. There is no doubt that English is the language of business, the language of government, and the language of all opportunities in this country. Although English proficiency is a life skill, there is a dire shortage of public funds dedicated to English as a second language classes. Despite long waiting lists for ESL classes and large class sizes, today's immigrants learn English as quickly as previous groups. According to the 2000 Census, of the people who report speaking Spanish at home, 72% report speaking English "well" or "very well." The research on the second and third generations consistently shows adherence to the three generation pattern that immigrants have followed for more than a century. For example, a recent report on language assimilation by the Lewis Mumford Center for Comparative Urban and Regional Research at Albany found that the second generation is largely bilingual; 92% of the Hispanics speak English "well" as do 96% of the Asians, though most also speak another language at home. By the third generation, the pattern is English monolingualism. The study also finds that even recent high immigration levels have not changed the pattern. Today's immigrants are adopting English as fast as – or faster than -- previous cohorts.

Third, a newcomers' embrace of American is not always reciprocated. Your comments made from LA's Chinatown --an immigrant enclave established because of restrictive land-ownership laws and violence against Chinese immigrants - is living proof that an intent to assimilate is not enough to overcome structural barriers to integration. Furthermore, in a state where thousands are denied a drivers' license and thus the basic right to be mobile, your comments strike us as

irresponsible and out of touch with the harsh realities of immigrant life.

Finally, as Governor you have a responsibility to understand and articulate the complexities of the immigrant experience rather than labeling any one community with a racial stereotype. Rather than honor that responsibility, you chose to perpetuate a dangerous myth of the Asian American experience. This portrayal renders invisible the experiences of many Asian American in California who struggle along side other immigrants to make ends meet. Furthermore, in insinuating that collectively Asian Americans have been successful because they are “hardworking” and “smart,” you imply Mexican and other immigrants are neither. As immigrant advocates, we deeply appreciate that the collective good is served not by pitting communities against each other, but by recognizing the common needs and contributions we each make.

We urge you to issue a formal apology and to support an increase in state funding for English as a second language classes, naturalization services and other programs that assist immigrants in participating fully in California's vibrant civic life.

Yours truly,

Luna Yasui  
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Larissa Casillas  
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Cc: Honorable Don Perata, Senate President proTem  
Honorable Fabian Núñez, Assembly Speaker

Honorable Albert Torrico, Chair Asian Pacific Islander Legislative Caucus  
Honorable Marta Escutia, Chair, Latino Legislative Caucus  
Honorable Joe Coto, Vice-Chair, Latino Legislative Caucus