

**Presentation of the ACI-Arne Duncan Award for Educational Equity**

to

**Ernesto Matias, principal, Wells Community Academy, Chicago Public Schools**

at

**5<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Breakfast**

**The Associated Colleges of Illinois'**

***Center for Success in High-Need Schools***

**Friday, September 25, 2009**

**Union League Club of Chicago**

**Introduction: Axel Steuer, president, the Associated Colleges of Illinois, president Illinois College**

I'm proud to introduce to Ernesto Matias. Ernesto has been principal of Chicago's Wells Community Academy since 2008. As a teenager, Ernesto began to fall prey to Chicago's Puerto Rican gang scene in Humboldt Park until a generous mentor sent him to a small high school in Montana and paved his way for Greenville College. There, Ernesto discovered a passion for teaching under served youth and for ensuring that all children receive the best education possible. Ernesto taught in Montana, Indiana, and Chicago and served as principal at Geraldo Delgado Kanoon Magnate School, in Chicago. A board member for Inner City Impact, the youth organization in which he participated as a child, Ernesto and the Matias family have provided a home for at least 14 foster children, and he was the subject of Randy Peterson's book, *Child of the City*. I am pleased to present this ACI-Arne Duncan Award for Educational Equity to Ernesto Matias and to ask him to say a few words on behalf of all three of our ACI honorees [includes Eliseo Martinez, a preservice teacher studying at North Central College, Naperville, IL, and Maria Zavala, a Joliet teacher and alumna of University of St. Francis, Joliet, IL].

**Remarks: Ernest Matias, principal, Wells Community Academy, Chicago Public Schools**

From Humboldt Park out of the thirteen boys, men in my family, ten have been in prison, three of us not. I'm here with you because of a lot of mentors in my life who cared. You know when I think of ACI and Greenville College that I attended -- the cocoon -- that small family atmosphere where Dr. Schmidt and Mrs. Schmidt would take us into their homes and help us and guide us and, and those first -- that first year there had to go through the enrichment center because my skills were not up to par, but it allowed me that little cocoon to keep working and keep improving on my educational skills. To dream the dream and so kind of like the recipients here can't believe it, that we are here today, and I want to thank ACI and all of you for sharing, this moment with us, and we realize that the work is not done. It continues every day at school.

Equity to me means opportunity -- whether it's monetary or not. Last year, when I started at Wells Community Academy in the first two, three weeks of school, a student came up to me and said, "Are you Mr. Matias the principal?" I said yes. He said, "Well I didn't graduate last year."

I said, "Oh." He says, "But you know I really want to graduate." I said, "Okay, what are you going to do?" And he says, "Well, I'm going to get into night school, so if I get into night school and I bring my grades in will you let me walk?" And I shook his hand and said, "Of course, if you go back to night school, if you get that half a credit I promise you, you will walk with us." And we were at Malcolm X College in our graduation in June and sitting in front of me was Juan and the first person after we were done to come to me was Juan, about 6'2" kid, tears coming down -- "I can't believe you let me do this. You kept your word -- thank you!" And that's what ACI colleges do for a lot of us who go there -- you provide that small atmosphere that says we will walk you every step of the way until you arrive to your destination and beyond we will support you with this wonderful network and many partners that we have present here.

And so I would like to in my short comments -- I wrote some things up... At Wells last year in the beginning of the school year when we were talking about recovery since we're talking about equity, a lot of students were like, "Well how much is it going to cost for recovery classes?" And I realized immediately that because of the economic conditions in our country and in our neighborhoods that my kids weren't going to do it. It's an obstacle for them, and I was thinking free public education, it's free public -- it's free. What Mr. Matias? It's free -- when I told my assistant principal we're doing everything free. What are you talking about? All recovery classes we will not charge -- free. Said okay, now let's go get the kids into our Saturday recovery classes and for the most part they came. When they came to summer school -- well how much are we charging? My AP had already learned -- she goes free? Free -- let's not put that obstacle in the way of our kids because of whatever happened during the regular school year. Let's give them the opportunity to just come to summer school and learn and not worry about the economics of it. And so at our school we do not charge for recovery classes. At our school we do not at this point charge -- and no one's told me I can't do that so I'm sorry that -- because our kids and you know when you hear -- and you know this, when you hear the stories, when you realize all of the obstacles that my kids from Cabrini Green are going through ah, west side, right there in the neighborhood, you realize man it, it -- if I have that then they're not going to come. We need to allow for truly a free education here in the city and at Wells that's what we're doing.

And finally, through some of the contacts with ACI over the years the dream developed of having a teacher's academy and I'm mentioning this because I'm going to need your help. We were granted through CTE and Greg Darnedier helped with this so I want to thank him because when I first came he was still in his position here, and we spoke and he thought man that's a fantastic idea -- let's see what we can do. And finally when we had the final meeting before they determined what we were going to go with Wells you know in the future -- I said why not, why not do the same thing at the high school level? Took a trip to Ft. Lauderdale, Stranahan High School -- they have five high schools that have the teaching academy, and their teaching academy, what we saw -- I took a team of two with me -- what we saw there was a freshman methods class all the way through senior. Their ten hours of community service was spent going to feeder schools and actually teaching so that by the time those kids got done with high school they had forty hours of teaching. When we saw them teaching they were the ones doing -- the student were doing the teaching, the collaborating teacher she was doing work, she monitored, she didn't step in. The kids had an opening and after that they divided about seven or eight students -- divided up with that classroom and were teaching and we took a bunch of pictures

because we couldn't believe it. And then on the next day they brought in college students who had gone through the four years of their urban teachers program and these kids were saying you know when we got to college the methods class were kind of like easy because we had done it in high school. So in conclusion that's what we want to do next year and I would invite anyone who's interested in helping us create a grow your own, and it could be a beautiful extension of ACI. Okay? Thank you very much because my time's up.