

Latin Builders Association impacting local education with LBA Academy

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For nearly half a century, the Latin Builders Association has helped transform Miami's skyline into a modern and vibrant urban center. In recent years, the organization has been laying a different kind of foundation – one that seeks to transform young lives through education.

Education is the great social equalizer and a way to effectuate societal change. It has the potential to improve lives and empower communities. Nearly 3.2 million students attend 7,000 public charter schools nationwide, and studies show many of them are closing the achievement gap for low-income, inner-city children by allowing families to make the best choices for their future. Education can cure many of the ills that plague our beautiful City. It is also a ticket to success for the middle class.



Students at a science class at the LBA Academy in Hialeah Gardens, the first business charter school established by a professional business association in the U.S.

As a new school year gets underway, we reflect on our important educational mission over the past six years at the LBA Academy Charter High School in Hialeah Gardens, the first business charter school established by a professional business association in the U.S. LBA Academy first opened its doors in 2012 as a bold experiment that sought to educate and inspire a new generation of business and professional leaders. Today, we offer a unique curriculum with core high school courses in construction management, marketing, and a variety of business disciplines, all with a strong emphasis on technology. Our goal is to prepare these students for professional careers in construction and real estate-related fields and motivate them to start their own businesses.

South Florida has been extremely supportive of Latin Builders Association members; LBA Academy is our way of giving back to the community. Our students come from all walks of life and diverse neighborhoods. We are a Title I School, which means that over 80 percent of our students are eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunch. Many are the first in their families to aspire to a college education. Our story is their story.

New students start the school year at LBA Academy with their own dreams. Among them is a young refugee from Guantanamo, Cuba, who has been in the country less than two years. The 10th grader is excited about studying business administration and becoming fully bilingual. Another 10th grader, from Miami Gardens, dreams about becoming an entrepreneur. She urged her family to enroll her in LBA Academy and, according to her mom, was dressed and ready for school before 6 a.m. on the first day of class. Another youngster, a recent immigrant from Ecuador, told his mom, "the LBA is going to help me get into college" after his first day at school. His mother later told us, "I'm so happy to see my son so excited about his education."

The LBA has made a commitment to assist these students by leveraging our organization's resources. Our members serve as mentors and employers, offering students jobs and internship opportunities. Our goal is to continue mentoring these students after they graduate high school and throughout college, offering them job opportunities at companies within the LBA family. One such example of our success in this endeavor: last year's

LBA Academy valedictorian, who graduated with nearly two years of college credit already earned through dual enrollment at Miami Dade College, is now employed at an LBA member company. The daughter of a janitor and bus driver from Hialeah, this young woman aspires to become a real estate attorney.

The Academy offers students and their families additional benefits beyond a solid high school education. We offer scholarships through donations funded by LBA members and businesses. Several Academy graduates have been awarded scholarships from Milner, Hotwire Communications and the Jose Milton Foundation, among others. We invite business and government leaders to the LBA Academy to talk to our students. We also invite students to join LBA business networking events. It is inspiring to see these students, at such a young age, arrive prepared with a crisp elevator pitch about their goals and aspirations. Quite honestly, it has taken me a lifetime to develop some of the connections these students have already built.

As we plan for the future, we hope to add a vocation component to our school, making it a place where students can train to become highly skilled workers, much needed in today's labor market. We envision a school where those pursuing vocational careers study with the same honor and pride as those studying business management. The idea is to create a better opportunity for all students, regardless of their talents and goals.

We call upon other business and community-based organizations to create educational centers for the betterment of this magical place we call Miami. We stand committed to act as mentors to any organization taking on this challenge. We can all make a difference by investing in our most precious resource — our children!

Bernie Navarro, Chairman Emeritus for the LBA Academy, is President of Benworth Capital Partners, a private equity firm located in Miami. Established in 1971, the Latin Builders Association is the largest Hispanic construction association in the United States.