



*Republican Senators are laying the groundwork to oppose Judge Sonia Sotomayor's nomination to the Supreme Court. Among the straws at which they grasped was a critique of Judge Sotomayor's membership on the board of Latino Justice Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund. Their charges are unfounded. Not only do they demonize the role of organizations at the vanguard of the fight for civil rights, but they apply a double-standard to Judge Sotomayor's nomination.*

### **Public Interest Law & the Fight for Equality**

Public interest law groups make up a critical part of the American legal story. For decades, these organizations have fought for the advancement of civil rights and the promise of equal justice under law. The most celebrated case in Supreme Court history, *Brown v. Board of Education*, happened because of the dedication of NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund lawyers like eventual Justice Thurgood Marshall. Groups like the Mexican American Legal Defense Fund, the Asian American Legal Defense Fund, Legal Momentum, PRLDEF and many others have fought tirelessly to protect the interest of all Americans and advance the march of civil rights progress.

Some of PRLDEF's most notable achievements are in advancing fundamental American freedoms, including the right to vote and the right of children to receive an education:

*Torres v. Sachs*<sup>1</sup> is a landmark voting rights case that resulted in greater enfranchisement by making bilingual ballots available for all New York City elections. Similar actions followed in other states and in 1975 the Voting Rights Act was amended to ensure voting right for all linguistic minorities.

*Aspira v. New York City Bd. of Educ.*<sup>2</sup> resulted in the groundbreaking Aspira Consent Decree which compelled New York City to expand its bilingual education programs and to increase the number of Spanish-speaking teachers in its employ. School districts in other cities soon implemented comparable bilingual programs in order to ensure equal opportunity access to education for all students.

### **Background on PRLDEF<sup>3</sup>**

“In 1972, when the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund began its work, Puerto Ricans had no voice and were almost totally excluded from participating in public life. From the courts to town councils, from boardrooms to classrooms, Puerto Ricans were simply invisible.

Three young attorneys— Jorge Batista, Victor Marrero and Cesar A. Perales—decided to establish an organization that could challenge the nation's barriers and provide Latinos with the legal resources to overcome the obstacles that frustrated their dreams and limited their lives. In 1972, in a non-descript office on Second Avenue, PRLDEF was born.”

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<sup>1</sup> 381 F. Supp. 309 (S.D.N.Y. 1974).

<sup>2</sup> 1973 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 15252 (S.D.N.Y. 1973).

<sup>3</sup> [www.LatinoJustice.org](http://www.LatinoJustice.org).

## **Bio on Cesar Perales, Current PRLDEF President and General Counsel**

Cesar Perales' record of government service has been extraordinary. He was nominated by President Jimmy Carter and confirmed by the US Senate to serve as Assistant Secretary in the Department of Health and Human Services. As Commissioner of the Department of Social Services under Governor Mario M. Cuomo he managed New York State's largest budget. He went on to serve as Deputy Mayor of New York City during the administration of David N. Dinkins. After leaving public service, he went to the Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center as Senior Vice President. The Community Health Care system he developed for that hospital during his tenure has received national recognition.

Cesar Perales was one of three young lawyers that saw the need for a civil rights organization to protect and promote the rights of Latinos in the Northeast. By 1972, they had organized a board of directors and raised sufficient funds to open the door of the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund with Cesar as its Executive Director.

Under his leadership, PRLDEF initiated a flurry of lawsuits over the next two years that would establish the right to bilingual education, strike down civil service requirements that kept Latinos from public employment and eliminated barriers to government benefits for non-English speaking applicants. PRLDEF sued the government of Puerto Rico to force it to enforce the guarantee of decent working conditions of migrant workers sent to farms of New Jersey and other parts of the United States. The organizations national impact was felt in 1975 when the Congress amended the Voting Rights Act to include the right to bilingual ballots-a right established by PRLDEF in the New York courts in 1973.

Mr. Perales went on to government service but in 1981 responded to the Board's request that he return to PRLDEF. Within six months PRLDEF was at the forefront of litigation to get the Justice Department to block the election of the New York City Council until the lines were redrawn in or nondiscriminatory manner. The subsequent court ordered halt to the elections was perhaps the most dramatic application of the Voting Rights Act in the North.