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Alumnus Profile: Welcome Committee

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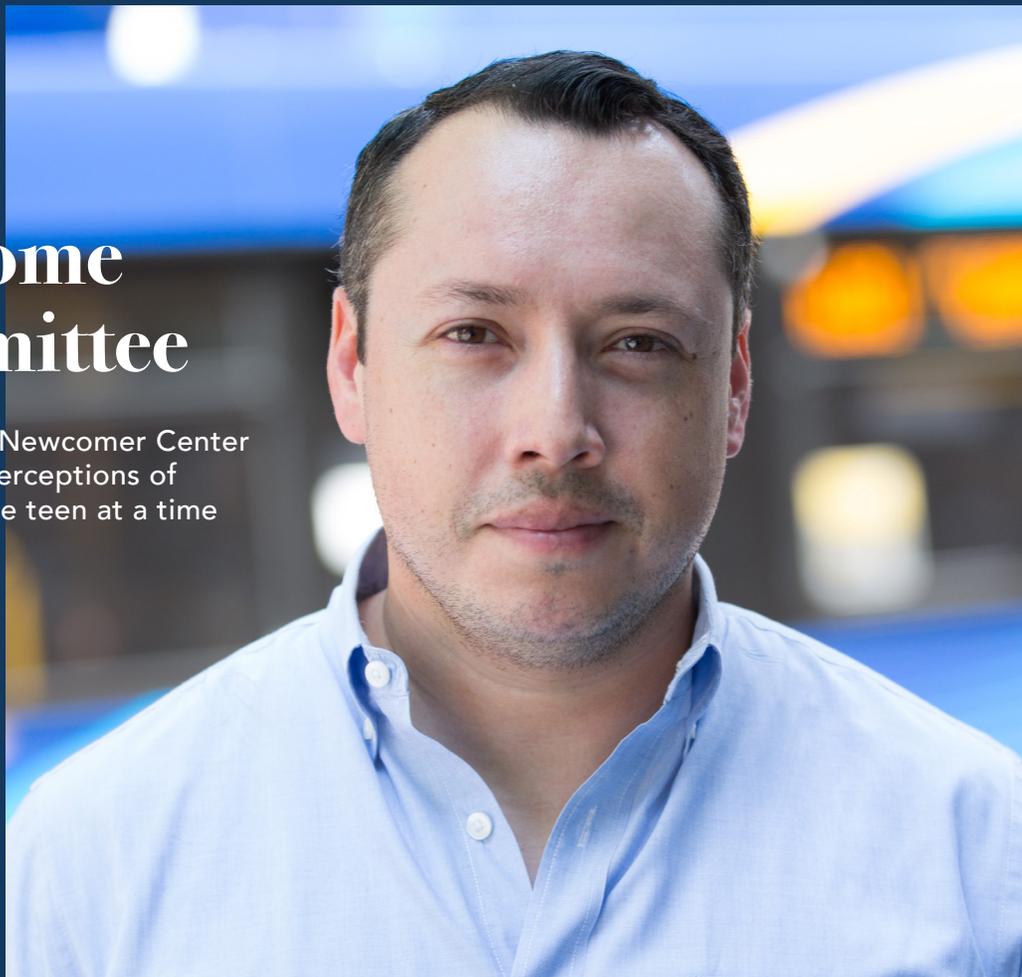
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Welcome Committee

Mario Perez's Newcomer Center is reshaping perceptions of immigrants one teen at a time



The Newcomer Center, an English language learner high school cofounded in 2003 by Mario Perez (EDU '00, MEd '05) in Arlington Heights, Ill., gives its immigrant students and their families an opportunity to be successful in America, and to see themselves as agents for change regardless of language ability. We asked Perez, the school's coordinator and lead teacher, what makes this successful model so transformative.

How does the Newcomer Center work?

Our program is a launching pad for kids who are new to the country, with no acculturation and very little to no English. We feed into four high schools in our district. Students are here for up to two years and receive a full curriculum that includes accelerated math and English studies, and vocational class options. We also do a lot of restorative mental, physical and emotional practices.

Why are those restorative practices needed?

Over the last three years, the large Mexican population in our area has given way to a larger Central American group. We're seeing a lot of unaccompanied minors, kids from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras who have suffered great amounts of trauma in their lives. We have five boys who were victims of human trafficking. They live in a house of hospitality run by a Catholic church. About 75% of our students come from Latin America, but we have 14 countries represented, with seven languages spoken among the students.

It sounds like your teaching might cross over into social work.

We partner with other organizations that have a passion for

helping the underserved in our community. I make sure our Newcomer families have access to affordable health care, food pantries and legal advice. We also visit students in their homes to humanize a very foreign experience for them. They don't know American schools. They don't have advocates. Those needs have to be met before any learning happens. If we don't lessen those affective filters, especially for kids from war-torn areas and destabilized regions, how are they going to learn English?

Do you have a background in multicultural education?

I'm a two-time Fulbright scholar and did their Teachers for Global Classrooms fellowship with a field experience in the Republic of Georgia. I also studied Germany's educational and vocational system for refugee students. I try to find ways to incorporate those ideas into best practices at the Newcomer Center.

Do you relate to your students in other ways?

My parents came to the U.S. from Mexico, initially to provide a better life for my older brother, who has special needs. I'm the first of seven siblings to graduate from college.

How do you reframe the immigration conversation?

By making sure our students see themselves as agents for change. They've tutored AP non-native Spanish students at nearby high schools, made blankets for terminally ill children at the hospital and written letters to Liberation Library, which gives incarcerated youth in Illinois access to literacy. The only way we can combat misplaced ideas of what immigrants are taking is by creating and owning a narrative of how we're contributing.