

United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510-1304

Floor Statement of Senator Richard J. Durbin

Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act

July 22, 2004

Mr. President, I have come to the floor today to speak about the DREAM Act, an immigration reform bill that the Senate should act on as soon as possible.

Immigration reform is an urgent priority for our nation. There are some who want to ignore this issue, especially because it is an election year. Immigration reform is too important to set aside for political reasons.

Our immigration system is broken. It harms our national security and our economy. It also treats hard-working immigrants, especially immigrant children, unfairly.

In recent months, there has been a lot of discussion about President Bush's immigration proposal. I have some serious concerns about the substance of the proposal, but the President did a good thing by coming forward with it. He reopened the national debate about immigration.

Since the President made his proposal in January, nothing has happened. The proposal has not even been introduced as a bill. Clearly, Congress will not act on it this year.

Congress Should Pass the DREAM Act This Year

But we cannot wait to act on immigration reform. The problem is too urgent. Congress should back up the President's words with action. We should pass the DREAM Act this year.

The DREAM Act is the only immigration reform proposal reported to the Senate floor in the 108th Congress. It is a narrowly-tailored, bipartisan bill that would provide immigration relief to a select group of students who are long term U.S. residents, have good moral character and are pursuing a college education or have enlisted in the military.

I introduced the DREAM Act with the senior Senator from Utah, Orrin Hatch, and I thank him for his leadership on this issue. We are an unlikely political couple, and it speaks

volumes about the urgent need for immigration reform that we have come together in support of the DREAM Act.

The DREAM Act has broad public support. According to a recent poll of likely voters, 59% support the bill, while only 25% oppose it.

The DREAM Act has 48 cosponsors and was reported favorably by the Judiciary Committee on an overwhelming 16-3 vote. If brought to a vote, there is every reason to believe it would pass by a wide margin.

The DREAM Act was reported to the floor last October, over eight months ago. The Senate's leadership should bring the DREAM Act to a vote as soon as possible.

Why is the DREAM Act so important? Because of the extraordinary young people it would help. Let me tell you about two of them, whom I have had the pleasure of meeting.

Diana's Story

Diana was born in Mexico, but raised in Chicago, in my state of Illinois. Her parents brought her to this country at the age of 6. Her father works construction for \$25,000 per year; her mother is a manager in a fast food restaurant who earns \$15,000 per year.

Last year, Diana graduated from high school in the top 5% of her class with a GPA of 4.4 on a 4.0 scale. She is studying to be an architect and she has won first place in a number of architecture contests. Diana is very active in her church and last year she won the national New Leadership Award from the U.S. Catholic Conference of Bishops.

Diana was accepted to Northwestern University, a prestigious institution, but due to her immigration status, was unable to attend. Last fall, Diana became the first member of her family to attend college when she enrolled in the architecture school at an Illinois state college.

Tereza's Story

Tereza was also raised in Illinois; her Korean parents brought her to the U.S. when she was two. Her mother, the family's sole breadwinner, earns \$20,000 per year working twelve-hour days at a dry-cleaner.

Tereza began playing piano when she was eight. She became a musical prodigy, winning the Chicago Symphony Orchestra Youth Auditions, which enabled her to perform with the Orchestra.

I first learned about Tereza when her family called to ask for my help. Tereza first discovered that she was undocumented when she was preparing to apply to colleges. The top music schools in the country had recruited Tereza, but when they learned about her immigration status, most would not permit her to apply. I called the INS to ask for their help and they told me that Tereza should go back to Korea.

Tereza now attends one of the top music schools in the country.

One of her music teachers told me:

I worry that our country, the richest and most blessed in the world, will not permit this very large talent to be developed. We are not such a rich land that we can afford to throw away the talents of our residents.

Overview of the DREAM Act

Due to support from their communities, Diana and Tereza are among the lucky ones who have been able to attend college. However, their futures are uncertain – they could be deported at any time.

Diana and Tereza are not alone – thousands of other young people are prevented from pursuing their dreams by our immigration laws.

They are honor-roll students, star athletes, talented artists, homecoming queens, and aspiring teachers and doctors. Their parents brought them to the United States when they were young children. They have lived in this country for most of their lives. It is the only home they know. They have followed the rules and worked hard in school. Unfortunately, they are undocumented, so their options are greatly limited and they could be deported at any time.

The DREAM Act would help these students. It would permit them to become permanent residents if they are long-term U.S. residents, have good moral character, and attend college or enlist in the military for at least two years.

The DREAM Act is not an amnesty. It is narrowly tailored to assist only a select group of young people who earn legal status. It is unfair to punish these students for the mistakes of their parents.

The DREAM Act would also repeal a provision of federal law that prevents states from granting in-state tuition rates to undocumented students. It would not create any new tuition breaks. It would not force states to offer in-state tuition to anyone. It would simply return to states the authority to determine their own tuition policies.

This is not just the right thing to do, it is good for America. The DREAM Act would allow students with great potential and ambitions to contribute more fully to our society.

Immigrants are Good for America

Diana and Tereza are just like millions of immigrants who have come to this country over the course of our history.

I am the proud son of an immigrant. Over ninety years ago my grandmother carried my mother, then a two-year-old infant, down a gangplank and off the ship that brought them here from Lithuania.

As this poor family made its way through the streets, I am sure someone commented, "Not more of these people." This resistance to new Americans has always been with us.

We need to view immigrants for whom they really are: men and women with the courage to leave behind everything they knew to build a new and better life for themselves and their children.

Immigrants have made us the greatest country in the world. The best and brightest have come here from all over the world, creating a rich diversity that continually renews and drives our society to new heights.

As we mourn the passing of President Ronald Reagan, all Americans should recall his vision of our nation as a shining city upon a hill. Here is what President Reagan said about the shining city and immigration:

If there have to be city walls, the walls have doors and the doors are open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here. ... The city is a beacon ... a magnet for all who must have freedom, for all pilgrims from all the lost places who are hurtling through the darkness, toward home.

Like me, President Reagan was the son of an immigrant. We had very different political philosophies, but President Reagan understood the importance of immigrants to our great country.

Conclusion

I recently received a letter, in support of the DREAM Act, from a group of Americans who lost loved ones in the September 11th terrorist attacks. They wrote:

We will all be safer if we unite against the terrorists and if our immigration system can be made more rational and reflective of our values as a nation.

These brave Americans, who have suffered so much, understand that, as we fight the war on terrorism, we must stand by the ideals that made our country great. We shouldn't deport extraordinary young people like Diana and Tereza. They make

America a stronger country. We should extend a welcoming hand to them by passing the DREAM Act this year.

These young people cannot wait any longer – many of them will have been deported by the time the next session of Congress begins.

For example, four honor-roll students from Wilson High School in Arizona are currently in deportation proceedings. They have lived in the United States since they were toddlers. Under current law they have no options, but the immigration judge who is considering their case granted a continuance to give Congress time to pass the DREAM Act.

The Senate should vote on the DREAM Act. I ask the Senate's leadership to schedule a vote on this important bill as soon as possible.