

Handout 1.2

History of Aspira

In 1961, [Dr. Antonia Pantoja](#) and a group of Puerto Rican educators and professionals created ASPIRA (which means “aspire” in Spanish), to address the exceedingly high dropout rate and low educational attainment of Puerto Rican youth. They were convinced that the only way to free the Puerto Rican community from poverty and to promote its full development was by focusing on the education of young people, and developing their leadership potential, self-esteem and pride in their cultural heritage. This was the best way—they believed—to ensure that youth would become not only productive members of society, but leaders in the development of their own community. ASPIRA conveyed in its name the expectation that Puerto Rican youth could succeed if they dared to aspire.

After extensive research on youth, ASPIRA founders developed a process for leadership development that remains the core of all ASPIRA activities: [The ASPIRA Process](#).

Since its formation over 47 years ago, ASPIRA has grown from a small nonprofit agency in New York City to a national association with statewide Associate organizations in Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Illinois, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania and Puerto Rico, with its National Office in Washington, D.C.

With community-based offices across the country, ASPIRA has over 1,200 staff members that work with over 50,000 youth per year. ASPIRA’s local offices also work with over 5,000 parents each year in parental engagement. Since its founding, ASPIRA has provided over half a million youth with the personal resources and support they need to remain in school, enter college and contribute to their community.

In the last four decades, students from diverse cultural backgrounds have been involved with ASPIRA. While still mainly a Puerto Rican organization, ASPIRA now reaches out to all youth, across cultural and ethnic groups