LATINOS AND THE NATION'S FUTURE

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FIFTEEN

ON THE POWER OF EDUCATION
AND COMMUNITY ACTION

Ernesto Cortés

One of the nation’s most distinguished community organizers, Ernesto Cortés, comments on the status of Latinos in the educational process, on the nature of education in a “democratic culture,” and the function of the public schools in this context. Most importantly, he describes telling examples of community effort in typical school systems. Mr. Cortés’ meditations grow out of his decades of experience as a community organizer in the Midwest and the Southwest, notably in his native city of San Antonio, where he founded, in 1974, the church-based organization COPS (Community Organized for Public Service). The establishment of a COPS network over the following years culminated in the formation of the Southwest IAF (Industrial Areas Foundation) Network. One of the most successful of the network’s initiatives is the Alliance School Initiative, dedicated to engaging communities in school restructuring and reform. Cortés is currently Southwest Regional Director of the IAF, the widely known nonprofit organization founded by the late Saul Alinsky.

Nearly a quarter of a century ago, the National Commission on Excellence in Education announced that we were A Nation at Risk. Therefore it may sound hackneyed to say that our nation is at a crossroads with respect to public education. Yet at the time of their report, far too few of us
were aware of the intersection of economics and demographics with the crisis of education.

Today the Baby Boomers represent one of the most educated cohorts in U.S. history. They are the beneficiaries of the GI Bill and the programs of the Great Society, and investments in their education and training led to a period of unprecedented prosperity. However even if none of the Baby Boomers retired, we would be on the verge of a tremendous gap in the labor market simply because not enough workers have the education and training necessary for the jobs being created by globalization and technology in the twenty-first century. And the Boomers are, in fact, retiring.

They will be replaced by the fastest growing and youngest ethnic group in the United States: the Latino population. Luckily for these young Latinos, the retirement of the Baby Boomers is going to make millions of well-paying jobs available. Unfortunately, however, our current system of education and training is failing to prepare this younger generation for the jobs that will become available as the retirement population increases, as well as for the new high-wage jobs being created in today’s economy.

Our labor market and our tax base are on the brink of needing an enormous influx of well-educated, well-paid workers, and Latinos represent the largest available pool. In Texas alone Latinos are projected to increase from 29 percent of the population to 42 percent over the next twenty-five years. Within the 18- to 24-year-old population, 83 percent of the growth will be Hispanic. As we have seen in other chapters, nationwide, Latinos will represent 25 percent of the population by 2050. Not only will our labor market depend increasingly on this population to fill high-skilled jobs that cannot be outsourced, the Social Security and Medicare programs will be dependent on workers earning higher average wages in order to sustain services for the increasing number of retirees. A full quarter of the U.S. population is expected to be over the age of sixty by 2030. The high-skilled, high-wage jobs from which the Boomers retire will also require higher levels of education than at any other time in our nation’s history. Princeton University Professor Marta Tienda reminds us that while it is the case that the promotion of minorities in higher education has risen, given that they also represent a larger proportion of the population as a whole, “there have been no real net gains in over two decades.”

While more Latinos are taking the SAT and enrolling in college than ever before, the numbers are still far below those of their counterparts. Average SAT scores of Latino students are higher than those of African Americans, but currently only 31 percent of Hispanics have some college or a degree, as compared to 44 percent of African Americans and 57 percent of Anglos. The number of
Hispanics taking Advanced Placement Exams has increased by .137 percent since 1999, but nationwide the high school dropout rate for Latinos remains more than double that of African Americans and nearly four times that of Anglos. Foreign born Hispanics are more than twice as likely to drop out than their native-born Latino counterparts. It is obvious that while an increasing number of Latino students are preparing for and entering college, we cannot significantly increase the rates of higher education among the Hispanic population overall without first getting them out of high school.

Notwithstanding the importance of better educating not only Latinos, but all children, for our economic well-being, a high-quality education is in fact a prerequisite for the health of our democracy. A good education is more than literacy and numeracy; it equips people to be able to consider another’s moral universe and recognize the common humanity that we all share. The real challenge facing our educational leadership is one of developing the capacity of all of our institutions—not just our schools—to be attentive to the moral formation of the members of our society. Beyond educating and providing services and spiritual guidance, how do these institutions form people who understand the responsibilities of citizenship and what it means to be another’s neighbor rather than just a member of our family, our clan, our tribe, or our community.

I would like to assert that far too much of modern education, and indeed modern life, is about demanding answers to questions or solutions to problems, when often the real issue is overlooked or “assumed away.” Rarely does anyone ask: Is this the right question? What’s behind this question? Is it properly formulated, or have we rushed to judgment without considering all the factors? At the classroom level, because schools lack a well-developed culture of inquiry and argument, students learn to conduct searches on the Internet to find information about the questions other pose rather than puzzling through the dimensions of the situations they encounter to determine for themselves which questions are relevant and meaningful. On a larger scale I would suggest that without first grappling with the deeper question of why education is so crucial to the sustenance of modern civilization, we cannot begin to have a genuine debate about the details of what happens in our schoolrooms, on our campuses, and in our legislative bodies.

Our culture’s emphasis on the answers at the expense of the questions is reflected in the narrowness of the vision of many of our schools. In most circumstances our schools do not draw on the intuitive ability of students to argue or persuade one another (or their parents). Our schools do not build on the natural inquisitiveness of children by teaching them to form hypotheses and then test them out. Instead educators and administrators respond to our natural desire
for certainty and order. Today the tendency is to warehouse kids and bombard them with facts and figures—teaching "the truth" or "to the test."

Now as philosopher Alfred North Whitehead reminds us, there is nothing necessarily wrong with teaching "to the test" if in fact the test adequately reflects the complexity, nuance and depth of the subject matter, and if the person writing the test is the one doing the teaching. In fact, part of being a good teacher is knowing how to evaluate the relationship between teaching and learning, part of which is writing good tests and making challenging assignments. Unfortunately, the conditions laid out by Whitehead are not met by today's standardized testing regime.

Our anxiety and fear of uncertainty drive us to teach our students to live in intellectual, cultural, and political silos that leave no room for ambiguity, relationality, or engagement. From this perspective everything is black or white/true or false in a binary world of artificially constructed polarization. This thinking reflects the structure of our institutions, which are in many cases so intent on maintaining the status quo and transmitting the existing culture that they forget their role in cultivating human potential and preparing students for lives in a society undergoing constant change.

The desire for certainty and the unwillingness to embrace ambiguity in our culture have led to a system of education that is focused on instruction rather than teaching and on compliance rather than creativity. It ignores the role of teaching as a performing art, in which the practitioner must be entrepreneurial, creative, and willing to take risk. If teaching is a craft, then the craftsperson embraces the variety of materials and their different natures, while still caring deeply about the outcome of every project. The emphasis on instruction and standardization also ignores the practice of genuine learning as a time of discovery in an environment that encourages the testing of ideas and concepts and acknowledges that sometimes a test results in a negative outcome, which is in itself an opportunity for educational growth.

Real teaching and learning is based on the understanding that intellectual capital is more than mere information; it is the ability to analyze and reflect. We have to be prepared to teach students the wonder, awe, and beauty of the U.S. Constitution, while also recognizing it as a deeply flawed document that ignored women, property-less men, and the horrors of slavery. Teaching (as opposed to mere instruction) should transmit the value of and appreciation for a culture, while at the same time preparing students to challenge it and to learn from its shortcomings. These may seem like contradictory charges, but as Jerome Bruner reminds us in *The Culture of Education*, they are in fact both truths. Bruner cites them as antinomies—"pairs of large truths, which, though both may be true,
nonetheless contradict each other." Educators at times seem unwilling to embrace this dual purpose because they are uncomfortable with the ambiguity it creates. And Bruner acknowledges that such an approach complicates teaching and learning: "Education is risky, for it fuels the sense of possibility."10

Education is also complicated because it does not occur in isolation from other issues. An examination of what happens in the classroom addresses only one aspect of a child's educational experience. All too often we operate on the presumption that when children enter school they are "ready to learn." Obviously this is not the case if they are hungry, sick, homeless, scared, or have uncorrected vision problems. Other impediments to learning include but are not limited to: dangerous intersections, crack houses, high-sulfur home heating oil, and inadequate sanitation systems. Richard Rothstein cites countless studies in his book Class and Schools (2004), which document specific challenges to educational achievement that are directly linked to socioeconomic status rather than to traditional "education" concerns. For example, he cites the fact that student mobility has been linked to academic performance and that 30 percent of the poorest children had attended at least three different schools by the third grade, in contrast to only 10 percent of middle-class children.11

In no way do I cite these factors as an excuse for public schools that are not achieving adequate standards of education. Rather I intend to remind the reader that this is not the problem of a single institution, an individual, or even groups of individuals. We know, for example, that poor children are not the only ones whose circumstances outside the classroom can have an impact on their academic performance, because we know that the path to literacy begins with the strength of a rich oral culture and tradition. Conversations and stories provide young children with a context for the written word. For older children and adults, the ability to tell a well-crafted story is the prerequisite for a good argument. In his portrayal of John Quincy Adams in the movie Amistad, Anthony Hopkins makes the point that in all his experience in arguing before the Supreme Court he has learned that the person who tells the best story wins.12 Logic and relevance are important, but storytelling is essential.

Unfortunately, there is growing evidence that the vast majority of children, regardless of wealth and income, regardless of ethnicity, spend an increasing amount of time in front of the television or the computer rather than in conversations with adults. These one-way systems of transmission might provide visual or auditory stimulation, but they do nothing to engage the child in practicing his or her own oral abilities that "provides the foundation for literacy."13 In fact, according to Stephen Miller in his new book Conversation: A History of a Declining Art (2006), all Americans, both children and adults, are confronted by
a growing force of electronic gadgets from television, radio, cell phones, computers, movies, BlackBerries, and the Internet, which impede conversation at every turn. Even when listening to talk radio shows, or “ersatz conversation,” the audience has no conversational role, only a passive one. The fact that this is an issue for middle-class and upper middle-class households as well as for poorer ones speaks not only to an increase in the working hours of all Americans, but also to the sociological phenomenon of increased isolation and withdrawal from public life.

Hannah Arendt makes the point in *Men in Dark Times* that human beings have an inclination in times of crisis to retreat into themselves, to seek the comfort of that which is familiar, and to withdraw from public life. We become preoccupied with preservation and withdraw from the public square. While she does not criticize this survival instinct on its face, she wisely draws the connection of the power vacuum it leaves behind to the rise of demagogues who both prey on fears and anxieties and take advantage of the absence of participation in public life to create oppressive regimes. Specifically she cites this as a factor in Weimar Germany, which led to the rise of the Third Reich. I would submit that to the extent that we are not teaching the argument culture either in our schools or in our democracy as a whole, we are in fact reinforcing this dangerous inclination to withdraw from public life in “dark times.”

The phenomenon becomes self-reinforcing in that schools do not prepare students to argue, and as adults they then withdraw from debate, which in turn creates a culture that does not value the very tradition on which democracy is based. There is no democratic culture without public education. As far back as the 1830s free public education has been promoted as a “crucible of democracy, a blending of all children to function from a common set of values.” We have to understand that when we give up on public schools we give up minimally on one of the most important pillars of democracy—and maybe on democracy itself.

Our commitment to a constitutional democracy is predicated on the belief that there will be conflict—conflict not only between the branches of government, but between groups of organized citizens, intermediate institutions, corporations, etc . . . the only question is how those conflicts will be resolved. The role of debate and argument is present throughout the system of democratic politics, but is particularly embodied in the judiciary branch. The courts require a sophisticated culture of argument; judgment is rendered only after the consideration of the merits of the arguments of both contesting parties.

Notwithstanding these institutions and checks and balances, a democratic culture requires not just a Constitution, but also the habits and practices of
empathy, engagement, deliberation, negotiation, confrontation, and ultimately—compromise. Saul Alinsky used to say that if one word defines democracy it is compromise. Good judgment again comes into play in determining the difference between the compromise of half a loaf of bread (which is still life-giving) and the compromise of Solomon—half a baby (which is a corpse).

Daunting though it may seem, the Supreme Court of the United States has given only one institution the charge to teach the habits and skills requisite for a democratic culture—the public school. Chief Justice Earl Warren clearly outlined the civic mission of the public schools in the Court’s 1954 ruling:

Today, education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments. Compulsory school attendance laws and the great expenditures for education both demonstrate our recognition of the importance of education to our democratic society. It is required in the performance of our most basic public responsibilities, even service in the armed forces. It is the very foundation of good citizenship.17

However it was never intended that the schools perform this task alone, but rather that they were embedded in a network of overlapping institutions such as churches, synagogues, settlement homes, unions, neighborhood associations, lodges, clubs, and mutual aide societies. The assumption was that the mutual engagement of the public schools with all these institutions would underpin what we now call civil society (or social capital).

It is in these networks of institutions that adults developed the skills of attentive listening and understanding, which undergird the culture of argument and deliberation. It is in these kinds of conversations that people get to know one another’s story, and thereby develop a deeper understanding of alternative points of view. In the early 1980s, for example, when the Texas Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) Network was organizing to support a new education finance and accountability system, one of the biggest stumbling blocks for the network was the issue of funding for bilingual education. Members of some of the more middle-class Anglo contestation involved in the network thought bilingual education was a strategy which kept students from learning English and becoming “more American.” It was only through conversations and engagement (27 small group meetings in one congregation alone) with those who had experiences different from their own that a common understanding emerged. The respectful contestation that resulted in the emergence of that common understanding made the congregations ready allies to fight with the parents and the schools to fully fund bilingual education statewide. Today leaders of the organizations are actively recruiting classroom teachers’ aides with the potential for and interest in becoming certified bilingual teachers, and connecting them to the labor-
market intermediary institutions created by the IAF organizations to prepare adults for high-wage jobs with benefits and a career path.  

Frequently even the relationships inside schools benefit from the engagement with networks of other institutions. Robert Cordova, principal of Harmony Elementary in the Los Angeles Unified School District, initially saw his work with the congregations and unions of One-LA IAF as a way to deflect the concerns of parents onto different institutions. However once Cordova began to have conversations with and be mentored by other institutional leaders in his community, he began to see himself not just as a manager of crises, but as an educational leader in a network of institutions with a broader vision for the transformation of his school and community. He began to see the benefit of working with people outside the walls of his campus and started thinking of parents as assets rather than liabilities. Today parents hold positions of responsibility on the campus' core leadership team alongside educators and classified employees. Harmony has also begun organizing Achievement Academies to identify and develop additional parent leaders, as well as equipping them with the academic content knowledge necessary to participate more fully in their children's education.

The attention of One LA-IAF to this type of formation and transformation grew at least in part out of similar relationships forged on campuses working with the Texas IAF network throughout the state. In just one example, teachers and parents developed new relationships at Zavala Elementary in Austin in a context which, on the face of it, appeared to have little to do with education, yet led to concrete improvements in student success. In 1991, a meeting between Zavala parents and teachers about test scores and student achievement had reduced teachers to tears. Parents were angry; teachers felt attacked. Through individual conversations with parents and teachers, organizers with Austin Interfaith (the local IAF affiliate) uncovered a common concern: health-care for the students. Teachers identified poor health conditions as one of the factors related to student achievement; parents mentioned the two-month waiting period at the local clinic as their first concern. When the city announced that the clinic would be closed for the removal of asbestos and mold, organizers posed the question: Why not provide immunizations and other basic preventive services for students on the campus itself?

More than 200 parents and teachers came together to strategize about the possibility. For many it was the first time they had witnessed both sides working toward a common, concrete goal. The health department agreed to the proposal, but the school board hesitated in the face of a vocal minority from outside the school community who raised the question of whether school-based health services opened the door for reproductive health services (condoms for kindergarteners!). At a December school board meeting, sixty parents and twen-
ty teachers stayed well into the night to testify on behalf of their common agenda. Leaders from Austin Interfaith’s religious institutions spoke in favor of the proposal as well. The board’s favorable vote was unanimous.

Parents and teachers at Zavala had been transformed through their engagement with one another and their common struggle to secure health-care for their children. They went on to organize a new curriculum for the campus, creative after-school programs, and a science-intensive program designed to help students achieve admission to a science magnet junior high school. The Young Scientists program was particularly noteworthy in that it required the school board’s permission to keep sixth grade students on the elementary campus rather than busing them across town to a middle school, and it could only serve a portion of Zavala’s fifth grade. Despite the fact that only a minority of the campus’ fifth grade students would directly benefit, hundreds of teachers, parents, and other Austin Interfaith leaders made their arguments before the school board and ultimately secured members’ support. Austin Interfaith leaders went on to organize similar collaborative efforts in nearly twenty schools throughout the district.

More than fifteen years later, a study conducted by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform found that the school and community organizing work of Austin Interfaith “contributed to increased student attendance, improved standardized-test-score performance, and higher graduation rates and college going aspirations . . . ” The neighborhoods and campuses organizing with Austin Interfaith during the study were 40 percent Hispanic and significantly poorer than other Austin Independent School District schools and surrounding neighborhoods. More than one-third of families and students were English-As-Second-Language learners, and one-fifth were born outside the United States. Some 27 percent of adults lacked a high school diploma, compared to an average of 13 percent in other parts of the district. Despite these challenges, the Annenberg Institute found that Austin Interfaith’s involvement in schools predicted higher rates of student achievement, and “broad improvement across three core domains of school capacity—school climate, professional culture, and instructional core.” Annenberg researchers also documented effects on collaboration and trust among teachers and a sense of school commitment, which have been identified as critical to the development of a successful learning environment.

Austin Interfaith and One-LA are only two examples of broad-based IAF organizations organizing to change the culture of public education and improve student achievement around the nation. These examples highlight the potentially transformative nature of relationships between schools and other community institutions, the networks of which have produced well-documented improvements in academic achievement, teacher morale, and so forth. At their best
these networks of institutions are developed into broad-based constituencies that also support the tax increases and bond elections necessary for investments in public education more broadly. To the extent that networks of people and organizations remain focused on more traditional kinds of support for public schools—guest speakers, volunteers, and fundraising events—the unintended consequences of these relationships are that their voluntary dimensions allow us to indulge in the belief that public education can be sustained on the cheap. This belief was further reinforced by the fact that, until recent decades, the public schools had a virtually captive labor market from which to draw.

In the past, gender discrimination meant that teaching was one of the few professional paid-employment options widely available to women. In short, it was a buyer’s market, and schools benefited by being able to pay relatively low wages to dedicated teachers. Fortunately for women those labor market conditions have changed, providing a wide range of opportunities for educated professionals. Unfortunately public schools have not had the resources to be able to respond to the change in market conditions, to wit: increasing salaries and benefits in this more competitive labor market.

At the same time, the rise of the high-stakes testing regime has robbed teachers of much of the power to determine what goes on inside their classrooms and on their campuses. This hierarchical system does not value the collegiality and mentoring relationships that are central to the social dimensions of teaching. Educators draw dignity and meaning from collaboration with their colleagues, serving as a source of learning to peers rather than only to students. The lack of professional recognition evinced by lost autonomy and deficient wages has made it increasingly difficult for public schools to attract and retain highly qualified, creative, competent educators.

Recent decades have also witnessed the deterioration of the relationships among schools and the other mediating institutions in their neighborhoods and communities. The mediating institutions themselves have experienced a decline, as economic pressures have forced adults to work longer hours, leaving less time for voluntary associations. At the same time, the testing regime has left teachers and principals with less time and energy to invest in relationships outside the campus. The absence of these relationships—of an external constituency that cares about the success of the school—leaves the campuses short of both human capital and the financial capital generated by taxpayers demanding a greater investment in public education.

Given the demands of a twenty-first century economy and a growing population of Social Security recipients, it is in our national self-interest to invest in education and to educate all children. There has always been a debate about who
should be educated in America. Thomas Jefferson’s proposal for a public school system in Virginia excluded women, slaves, and farmers. Of course Jefferson’s commitment to maintaining a small, agrarian economic system didn’t require the economic growth fueled by universal education. As America’s leaders began to recognize both the potential and the challenge of a much more diversified economy, education took on more significance. By the 1840s, Henry Clay’s American system required expanding investments not only in infrastructure throughout the nation, but in education as well. As the manufacturing industry was fueled by the Civil War, the westward expansion, and the emerging Common Market, the demand for immigrant workers increased and the need for a universal common school became self-evident.

Today a small but vocal minority argues that the children of undocumented immigrants should be excluded from our school systems, just as they argued against educating African Americans, Catholics, and a host of other minorities throughout the history of the United States. As my good friend Steve Levy has often said, from an economist’s perspective alone it is in our self-interest to educate children no matter whether or not their parents have papers. Countless studies have documented that a well-educated workforce is more productive, earns higher wages, pays higher taxes, and requires fewer government services, as well as generating economic growth through both production and consumption. The coming intersection of demographic shifts and labor market demands facing our economy and tax structure has led University of Southern California Professor Dowell Myers to suggest that we must rejuvenate what he calls the “intergenerational social contract”: investing in the education of an “ethically different younger generation” today knowing full well that we will be dependent on them in our retirement.24

Education is about creating the wherewithal for a democratic politics, and our political practices and processes should be educational. Ideally they reinforce and sustain one another in a democratic culture. As Cass Sunstein suggests in his book The Second Bill of Rights, beyond the rights explicitly protected in the Constitution, there are also Constitutional Commitments, which flow out of the expectations of our democratic society.25 Whereas the right to an education is not guaranteed in the Constitution, it is an explicit Constitutional Commitment: why guarantee a set of rights and liberties unless you presuppose that citizens will be sufficiently well-educated to understand them? President Ulysses S. Grant understood this instinctively when he encouraged Congress to pass a Constitutional amendment guaranteeing a free quality public education to every child in the United States in 1875. His exhortation that, “free public education lay at the root of the nation’s liberty”26 clearly indicates his belief that education
is a prerequisite to freedom. The fact that the language of his proposed amendment created the right to an education for “all children, irrespective of sex, color, birthplace or religion,”\textsuperscript{27} is a reminder of the lessons he drew from the institution of slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction: as a nation we are inevitably interconnected. Or, as Benjamin Franklin so adroitly stated: “We can all hang together or we can all hang separately.”\textsuperscript{28}