

Biography of Ernesto Cortés, Jr.

Ernesto Cortés, Jr. is the co-director of the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) which provides leadership training and civics education to poor and moderate-income people across the US and UK. Cortés has been instrumental in the building of over 30 broad-based organizations whose hallmark is the development and training of ordinary people to do extraordinary things. He is the executive director of the 30 organizations of the West / Southwest IAF.

He formally launched this work in 1974, starting with the Communities Organized for Public Service (COPS), the nationally recognized church-based organization of San Antonio's west and south side communities. This work has since expanded to include organizing projects across *ten* states including Texas, California, Nevada, Arizona, Louisiana, Nebraska, New Mexico, Iowa, Oklahoma and Mississippi. Over the years, these organizations have leveraged billions of dollars for poorer communities including \$700 million in infrastructure improvements in the *colonias* (areas of Texas which lacked basic drainage systems) in the 80s and 90s, \$2.8 billion in *increased* public funding to equalize school funding in Texas in the mid-1980s, and in recent years, \$15 million in state funding for workforce development projects equipping underemployed adults with job training options. Millions more have been invested (and saved) in community level infrastructure, healthcare reform and housing.

Aided by Cortés' imagination and skill, the West / Southwest IAF organizations have produced impressive results in the area of job training. By building the capacity of constituents to create the political will to mobilize for hard monies, IAF organizations have built ten independently operating labor market intermediaries: Project Quest in San Antonio, Capital IDEA in Austin, Project ARRIBA in El Paso, Project VIDA in the Rio Grande Valley, JobPATH in Tucson, NOVA in Louisiana, Skills-Quest in Dallas, Capital IDEA-Houston, Arizona Career Pathways in Phoenix, and Project IOWA in Des Moines. The graduation rates of these projects consistently outpace those of the community college with which they partner, transforming over 12,000 adults into knowledge workers equipped with needed skills in high demand fields. MIT economist Paul Osterman has also documented the results of living wage campaigns in Texas finding they raised the wages of 10,000+ in the Valley plus those in Austin and San Antonio.

Cortés also envisioned and launched the Alliance Schools strategy – a much lauded initiative to engage communities of adults in public education. Identifying and training parent and community leaders to change the culture of their schools, the Alliance Schools have been successful in building a broad base of support for public education, both locally and statewide. The success of the Alliance schools in raising test scores by building a culture of collaboration has been well documented, most recently by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform.

The work of the West / Southwest Industrial Areas Foundation, pioneered by Cortés, has been written about extensively. Cortés has been awarded honorary degrees from Princeton University, Rutgers University, Southern Methodist University, University of Houston and University of St. Edwards in Austin. In addition to being the recipient of the HJ Heinz Award in Public Policy and the MacArthur Genius Award, Cortés has completed multiple fellowships at the JFK School of Government at Harvard and MIT's Department of Urban Studies and Planning (Martin Luther King Jr.). In 2015, as a Stewart Fellow in Religion, he co-taught a course on Religion and Power in Grassroots Democracy at Princeton University. He is a graduate of Texas A & M University.