



# Building a 21st Century U.S. Education System

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## CHAPTER 1

## Education and Freedom

*Rebecca Palacios*

*“Education is our freedom, and freedom should be everybody’s business.”*

*Dr. Hector P. Garcia*

As an early childhood teacher for over 30 years, I have seen support for public education erode through the lack of funding for public education from our elected officials at the local, state and national levels. The late Dr. Hector P. Garcia, a Presidential Medal of Freedom recipient from my hometown, Corpus Christi, Texas, focused on the need for all to have access to a high quality public education. His quote had driven me to understand, especially in my community of South Texas, that an equitable system must begin at birth with family education programs and work through the higher education system.

Public education should provide:

- a fair, equitable means to access education birth through college;
- an integral approach to meet the needs of students, whether they are cognitive, physical, social or emotional;
- a high quality education based on consistent standards across the United States of America for teachers and students;
- a way to sustain the gains of students’ progress through social and economic support systems;
- an opportunity to showcase the opportunities for employment;
- access to higher education opportunities for all students.

I began teaching in 1976 with an incredible first year of support through a Follow Through Program federal grant to our school district. This support included consultants from the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, modeling bilingual lessons and strategies that scaffolded not only student learning, but my learning as well. This mentoring provided for me an important and rare opportunity to build a foundation for what was to come.

In 1987 I was elected to be a Director of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. This pivotal point in my career allowed me to “view” the public school arena through the eyes of the other Directors of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. Discussing policy and practice for the teaching profession in the early years of the Board developed for me a sense of finally understanding the underpinnings of public education and the support that it provides students to advance their learning. However, the epiphanous point of my professional career was going through the National Board process. I understood then, that accomplished teaching is not just what I know and what I am able to do, but what all teachers should know and be able to do to make a difference for each and every one of our students and their families. Public education is what we all do together to create a humane system for all American students.

To begin to turn the tide back to excellence in public schools, birth through college, policymakers working together must sustain public schools and their support programs 100 percent. Too many of our politicians have not supported a fair, equitable means to access education birth through 16. Rather they have purported equity through the guise of “voucher” programs, many of them targeted to minority and disadvantaged children. Charter schools, receiving these students, are not held to the same level of accountability as their public school counterparts and the funding for public education is redirected to these schools. Public school access for all students should remain fair and equitable and offer a variety of school structures that will attract students and will capitalize on their talents and on the expertise of the community and stakeholders.

High standards for teachers and students must continue to be the banner for the public education system across the country. Holding a National Board Certified Teacher certificate meant for me that I must continue to hold myself accountable to the standards throughout my career. This year, I was one of the newly renewed candidates, undergoing the renewal process after 10 years of National Board Certification. National Board Certification and high standards are important in all communities across the country as the standards provide the ways and means for teachers to create and develop pathways for students based on rigor, analysis and reflection. Many disciplines and content area groups have developed standards for students that can guide school systems in developing their own frameworks for excellence and accountability.

High standards for students acquiring another language are as important as reaching high standards for teachers. According to the U.S. Department of Education, one in nine public school students in K-12 settings come from a home where a language other than English is spoken, with this statistic becoming one in four by the year 2025. Teachers must be trained to work with these changing student demographics. As a bilingual classroom teacher for the past 31 years, I have seen the efficacy of effective bilingual programs that have highly trained teachers—those that know how to develop lessons and utilize strategies important in meeting the diverse needs of English Language Learners.

Teachers licensed in their fields must be in every classroom, and leading the way for those teachers should be teachers certified by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. This highly rigorous process is proving to make a difference in classrooms across America, especially with poor and minority students. The curriculum and instruction should be focused on the way that teaching impacts student learning. The curriculum should provide the core knowledge crucial to competing in a global economy and support the development of competitive, competent citizens. Technology should be at the forefront in the delivery of instruction, but should also be an important part of how the students respond in the classroom and how they produce products aligned to future workplace knowledge and skills.

While the public education system can meet many cognitive, physical, affective and social needs, many students now come to school with other issues that the school is under-equipped to handle: substance abuse, sexual abuse, family violence, behavioral issues, illiteracy, and homelessness. One issue that I have found has the greatest impact on our classrooms is the lack of support and resources for our students with emotional needs. Inclusive programs, while positive in many ways (I myself work in a proactive inclusion program with the Preschool Program for Children with Disabilities in our dual language pre-kindergarten program) has not allowed for professional development for teachers, help for students and families in emotional crises. The students in our class-

rooms that act out, run away, or are depressed or violent are especially in need of support. Our public school system, due in part to a lack of federal and state support, has not looked at better ways to serve students with multiple emotional issues. Instead, we “look the other way” and do not have a consistent nationwide plan to deal with children with emotional issues.

Support for these students must be organized through public schools where students and families can access medical support, social and welfare workers, family education programs, agency referrals and work assistance programs. I have seen examples of thriving school communities: Families come to school and can check out books and materials from the public library, can attend GED classes in the evening, can meet with social workers while their children play at the city recreation center gym— co-owned by the school district and used during the day for public school physical education classes and at night by the city. Student cognitive gains may be better supported if students’ needs are being met emotionally, physically, socially. Collaborations across city, county/parish, and state governments for this purpose would be a better way to spend the decreasing tax dollars.

As these collaborations increase, stakeholders must take part in public school opportunities set up to inform the students about employment and career opportunities. The many facets of our changing world and the way that needs are met through media connections, technological connections and advances and increasing communications must be opened up to our students. They need to take advantage of opportunities to discover interactive medical communities, distance learning and other less costly and prohibitive learning mechanisms for higher education. Students in south Texas will be able to learn about the advances in veterinary science, perhaps, with students from Washington, DC and San Diego, watching a surgical procedure performed at the London Zoo. Other employment opportunities in the local community and beyond should be part of the education provided in our public school system, with a placement component opportunity partnered with higher education and public and private enterprises.

Higher education should be a visible partner in the nation’s public schools, seeking to align standards with PreK-12 schools and providing collaborations in all fields. Placements of student teachers and professors in the schools already exist in many locations including mine. A professor with a field-based class meets with students for half of the day and the other half of the day, those students are assigned to classrooms based on their certification choices to teach mini-lessons under the supervision of the professor and a clinical teacher. Examples of these types of collaborations exist in public school systems now and include encompassing music students in music classes, supporting technology programs for computer science majors, and dual credit programs.

The key, I believe, to a successful public school system would be to include the above components and create viable links with all stakeholders at the local, state and national levels. The more links and connections that we can make with the “real-world,” the greater the gains for our nation’s students. American students then would have an equal opportunity to access an educational system that is consistent throughout the nation and would allow them to compete in a global economy.

One of the most difficult tasks for me as a pre-kindergarten teacher is thinking of ways that I can prepare my current students to be the graduates of the year 2021. With our world changing so rapidly, the impact I make must not be what is vogue now, but what will be. I must remember to prepare my students to discover and think, explore and create, and dream and believe. Our public education system, with all of the components I mentioned, will be expanded to create a place where

our students will need cognitive resources to apply, analyze and evaluate new systems that have not been invented.

A system that would produce these results would be one that would have all stakeholders involved in strategic planning to utilize the latest research on school leadership, school accountability, student assessment results, teacher quality, professional development, current and future demographics, policy decision needs and collaborations. One source could be the National Governor's Association that could help make the changes systemic among policymakers at the local, state and national levels. I have also seen changes made through the commission of reports by private foundations. These recommendations make a definite impact on schools and systems.

Now is the time to plan for this strategic and bold step among those silent voices that have let others dictate what is best for American education and have allowed others to erode our public education system. To make a difference, we must let our votes be counted at the polls and elect representatives that will continue to fund public education as it should be funded. Funding needs to come through direct appropriation to our public schools through local, state, and federal funding. Our dwindling budgets are felt at the classroom level every day. Everyone speaks of lowering taxes but no one speaks for our most silent constituents: our nation's children—those who cannot vote. As an early childhood advocate, I believe we must begin funding at the early childhood level with universal preschool for all our children. We need strong public education advocates to be the leaders in our state houses and our nation's Capital. We must be vocal in advocating for a quality public education system for all—one that does ensure freedom, the freedom to learn in a well supported public education system—that should be everybody's business.

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