

Latino Leaders Speak

Personal Stories of
Struggle and Triumph

Edited by
Mickey Ibarra & María Pérez-Brown



Susan Castillo

State Superintendent of Schools
State of Oregon

May 16, 2007

Susan Castillo is an Oregon politician who served as the Superintendent of Public Instruction from 2003 to 2012. A Democrat, she also served as a senator in the Oregon legislature from 1997 to 2003. Before entering politics, she pursued a career in broadcast journalism, first for Oregon Public Broadcasting and later for KVAL-TV in Eugene. Upon her resignation as superintendent to pursue an opportunity in the private sector, the position was eliminated as an elected office.

Castillo was born in 1951 in East Los Angeles and grew up in southern California with her large extended family. Her grandparents were first-generation immigrants to the United States from Mexico. Her father became a deputy sheriff. Castillo's mother dropped out of school in the eighth grade and spent much of her life working in a factory, an example that Castillo later cited as primary in her own advocacy of education as a route to opportunity.

Castillo's journey from a self-described "mediocre student" and college drop-out to becoming the chief administrator of public education, overseeing more than half a million students in 1,200 schools, proves that it is never too late to pursue your passion and be highly successful. Like many first-generation Latino students whose parents can't really provide the guidance they need to pursue higher education, Castillo found an amazing mentor in a woman who was her boss and saw something in her and encouraged her to achieve success.

I was a mediocre student. I was unmotivated and a daydreamer. I doubt many of my teachers would even remember Susan Castillo. But today, I'm Oregon's Superintendent of Public Instruction. I oversee a public-school system with well over half a million students and 1,200 schools with an education budget topping \$6 billion. America, what a country, huh?

I'm a West Coast Latina, born in East L.A., the grandchild of Mexican immigrants. My dad was a sheriff's deputy. My mother worked in a factory. She left school in the eighth grade. She always encouraged me and my brothers to earn a living with our brains rather than with our backs, as she did. When I was a toddler, we moved to a mostly white middle-class suburb because my parents wanted us to have opportunities that we would probably not get in the Los Angeles neighborhoods that they grew up in. I went to high school in the late '60s, a pretty crazy time to be a teenager. But I wasn't a big rebel because my dad was a police officer so I couldn't get into much trouble.

The one demonstration that I did take part in was a little sit-down at school to protest the school administration's objections to the rock group Steppenwolf performing at our school. Remember *Born to be Wild*? That was us. Anyway, that was pretty much the extent of my radical student activism: one sit-down strike.

After I graduated, I didn't really believe that college was for me. My parents made sure, of course, that my brothers and I did complete our high school education. But in my household as I was growing up, we didn't have conversations about what university I was going to be going on to. No one in my high school talked to me about going to college or even about the possibility of college. I did, however, enroll in a junior college. I took a few classes and dropped out. I lacked clear direction like a lot of people in their late teens and early twenties. A few years later, I moved to Oregon and was working in the secretarial pool at Oregon State University. I was what you'd call a late bloomer. Then

my life took a sharp turn when I got assigned to work as secretary to an amazing woman named Pearl Spears Gray, who at the time was the head of the university's affirmative action program.

Pearl was a wonderfully dynamic, outspoken African-American woman. She was a fearless and tireless advocate for justice. She moved people and institutions with her courage and intelligence. I was pretty much in awe of her every day. Pearl saw something in me that most of my teachers probably missed. She saw potential. Pearl was my mentor. She encouraged me to go to school and earn my degree. During a time in my life when I didn't know what I wanted to do or be, Pearl believed in me. At that point, that was all that I needed.

I want to emphasize the important role that we play as leaders in mentoring others and how powerful those words, "you have potential," are when you say them to someone else. "Let me help you set high goals for yourself. You can be successful in college." Those words can change someone's life. Pearl's words certainly changed mine.

As a student at Oregon State, everything changed. I was motivated to hit the books—eager to learn. I loved it. I was like a sponge. I earned my degree and started my journalism career as a news reporter for a local television station in Eugene, Oregon. I was feeling quite content with my broadcasting career, covering the State Legislature, state government and education issues, when I was approached about becoming a state senator. I spent so many years covering politics from the outside with a reporter's objectivity, but I also wanted to try to make a difference in the public policy arena.

When I decided to do it, I can remember sitting at home in front of my computer, writing my first political speech about the major issues and where I stood on them, as well as telling my story of family and background. As I looked at the first draft, I could barely get through it because I became very emotional. I was sitting there in front of my computer and just crying. I was just sobbing, and I didn't understand why I was so emotional.

And then it hit me at that moment: I was fulfilling the dream of my grandparents. They came to this country with very little. They worked. They struggled. They strived to make a living and to raise families. They really believed that this is the land of opportunity.

Here I was getting to live that dream. I have to tell you that that was a powerful, profound moment in my life. It is at the core of what drives me in the public service work that I do today, because everyone should have an opportunity to live the dream. That's what motivates me.

As the first Hispanic woman elected to the legislature in Oregon, I had something to prove. I worked very hard, diving into issues spanning policy, farm worker rights and environmental protection. I served on the Senate Education Committee and felt a strong connection to helping our schools. A few years later when Democrats were looking for someone to run for school superintendent, which is a state-wide elected position in Oregon, I went after it and won. I'm now in my fifth year on the job after winning re-election. I've tackled all sorts of issues and have had my share of arguments and controversies. But from the start, my top priority has always been closing the achievement gap for poor and minority students.

Across this country, you see poor students, you see minority students—millions of them—lagging behind in reading and math, failing and dropping out of school and missing out on that dream. For too long, society and schools wrote off these kids as unable to learn or as unreachable. There have been plenty of excuses. There was plenty of blame to go around: poverty, crime, drugs, dysfunctional families. Well, I don't believe in making excuses, especially when it comes to our kids. I believe in taking responsibility, and that is the work of closing the achievement gap. That's what it's all about: taking responsibility for our children.

By far, the biggest, fastest growing demographic of kids is Hispanic. More than one out of five school children in this country is Hispanic. That's more than a 50 percent increase since the

early 90s. Now, Oregon is not California or Texas or Florida, but like many states, we are experiencing a boom too. Today, Latinos represent 15 percent of our students in Oregon. We're expected to double our numbers by 2020. Nationally, Latino students are more likely to come from poverty. Three out of four Latino kids qualify for free or reduced school lunch. Latinos don't do as well on reading and math tests. They're more likely to drop out and less likely to go to college. When you add the number of other English-language learners, about five million kids across this country, it's plain to see that we've got our work cut out for us in America's schools.

But here is the good news. Nationally and in Oregon, we are beginning to narrow the achievement gap. Make no mistake, we have a long way to go. We're not where we need to be. But we are making slow, steady progress. We need to approach this work with a sense of urgency all across this country.

The most amazing thing, at least in Oregon, is that we did make progress on this issue during a time when our state budget was in a serious downturn and schools were being forced to make devastating cuts, eliminating programs and increasing class sizes. Now money isn't everything, or else we wouldn't have been able to make the progress that we have been making. But adequate funding is very important. We have to make sure that our schools in Oregon have reasonable class sizes and can offer our kids quality art and music programs, as well as those twenty-first-century skills that they need to be successful.

So how is it getting done? Well, there isn't a magic formula. There is no textbook with step by step instructions about how you close the gap. But I can tell you what's working in Oregon, at least when we look at our successful schools and the work that they're doing. Everything begins with high expectations for what students can achieve—all students. Just because a child lives in poverty or his parents are too tired from working three jobs to help with homework, it doesn't mean he's not smart or that she can't learn. Do you do everything you can to help that

child cope with the challenges he faces outside of school? Absolutely. But do you lower your standards because you feel sorry for that child? No way.

Let me tell you about one of our wonderful principals in Oregon. Her name is Endelia Schofield. She's the principal of W. L. Henry Elementary School where three out of four kids are Latino and most come from poverty. She has this call and response thing that she does when she visits with her students. She asks them, "What's your job?" The kids call back, "To learn." Then she asks, "So when you grow up, you can go where?" And all these beautiful kids answer, "College." I just love that because most of these kids' parents never graduated from high school. These kids are already thinking about going to college. That is the American dream right there.

Next, you invest in early childhood education. I believe that public education is vastly underfunded in this country from preschool all the way to higher education. If you want to make a smart long-term investment with a big payoff in the future, you spend on preschool, full-day kindergarten and extra help for our first graders so that these kids, when their brains are still developing, learn how to be learners and get their schooling off to the strongest possible start.

Schools also need to do a better job getting parents and communities involved. You sometimes hear that culture and language throw up barriers that are difficult to overcome. A lot of parents don't have much schooling themselves or the experience with the system has left them feeling wary and burned. That all may be true, but we cannot give up, because all parents at heart want what's best for their children.

Schools need to get more creative about reaching out, offering afterschool programs, night classes and social events. We need more training so that our teachers know how best to educate kids from diverse backgrounds. All teachers want their students to succeed. We need to help them do that. I also believe that schools need to be more entrepreneurial about coordinating

what they do with local governments, nonprofits and businesses, big and small. There are resources out there. We just need to do a better job of tapping into them.

Finally, you need accountability. I talked about teachers holding high expectations for kids. Well, we need to have high expectations for our schools too. We have so much data now to track how students are doing. We need to press for progress. Not everything that goes on in a classroom can be captured on a spreadsheet, but you do need to know how you're doing, whether you're a school, a teacher or a student.

When a school is underperforming, we need to understand why and address those issues swiftly, whether that means shoring up leadership or changing the curriculum. And we don't play the blame game. When we see a school that's excelling, that's really reaching for the stars with all of their students, we need to understand what's going on there, too, so we can make that happen in more schools.

In Oregon, I started the Celebrating Student Success event. It's a conference and a banquet to honor schools that are making a difference. I have to tell you that that evening has become the highlight of my year. We've recognized schools from the inner city and from tiny farm towns, and, more importantly, everybody gets together to share on strategies that really work for our kids, getting down to real specifics like how to organize schedules to boost literacy or how to improve attendance. There is so much amazing, innovative work going on in our schools. Too often, we focus on the failures when we have so much to learn from the successes.

I hope everyone in this room will join me, if you aren't already getting involved in what's happening in our public schools, whether that means raising money or awareness, volunteering in classrooms or just being an advocate, because I know what it feels like to be a kid who isn't connecting with school. But I also know the thrill of finally getting it, of discovering a love of learning and how education can transform your life.

Since 9/11 and the Iraq War, education has been set aside nationally. If we really care about this country's future, we need to think big about our schools. Education absolutely needs to be put back at the top of our nation's priority list. Now, insiders talk about education and No Child Left Behind. There's lots of that talk going on right here in D.C., but I can't believe that in both recent presidential candidate debates, whether it was the Democrats or the Republicans, there was no mention of education. That needs to change.

I see three key areas where we need to get to work right away. One of them is calling out a national agenda to build an education workforce that is the best in the world. I have seen it time and again: a great textbook doesn't make a great education. You need quality teachers making that one-on-one connection with students. So, let's get them the quality training and the support that they need to help every student succeed in this 21st century global economy. Let's develop strong leadership in our schools so that those leaders have the skills to create successful learning environments for our students.

Two, let's make sure that our children start school ready to learn. The achievement gap begins before children enter school. So, we need quality preschool programs and parent training to ensure that when kids start kindergarten, they hit the ground running. If not, they're already behind. It's much easier to do well in a race when you're not playing catch-up from the very start.

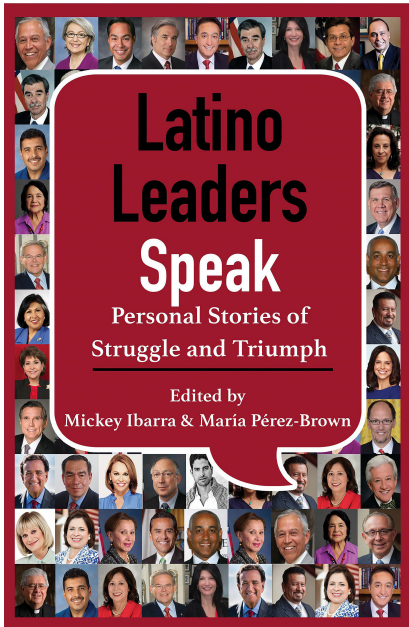
Three, let's make some targeted investments in our middle schools and high schools to help our struggling students. We can help students struggling in secondary school and get them on course to success, if we make the right investments in our secondary schools. I believe that we as a nation can do better by our children than we're doing. I believe all children, no matter what color they are, what language they speak at home or how much money their parents make, are entitled to the very best education, because every child is entitled to the dream.

We can do better, and working together with intelligence, dedication and passion, we will. There are so many students who are late bloomers like me who need that inspiration, who need to believe in themselves and have someone show them the way. It's up to us to provide support to their school and their teachers so that they all have an opportunity to live the dream.

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Personal Stories of Struggle and Triumph

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Originally presented at the Latino Leaders Luncheon Series in Washington, DC, and other major cities, the personal stories included in this book are all by successful Latinos involved in a variety of occupations, from politics and sports to education and activism. Their words will inspire readers of all ages to follow their dreams and help those less fortunate.

“The resonant message adheres to the quintessentially American formula of hard work and persistence in the land of opportunity.”
— *Booklist*

“‘Our stories are powerful and need to be told.’ That simple yet seminal statement in *Latino Leaders Speak* is precisely what makes this book required reading.”

— Patricia Guadalupe,
Contributing Writer, *NBC Latino*
Washington Editor, *Latino Magazine*

Contributors include former Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa; former general manager of the New York Mets Omar Minaya; Chancellor of the University of Texas System Dr. Francisco G. Cigarroa; former U.S. Attorney General Alberto R. Gonzales; news anchor Maria Elena Salina; and many others.

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Title: *Latino Leaders Speak: Personal Stories of Struggle and Triumph* • **Publication Date:** May 31, 2017

Format: Trade Paperback • **ISBN:** 978-1-55885-843-5 • **Page Count:** 272 • **Price:** \$21.95

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