

## Alvaro Huerta: Teachers make positive contributions

By Alvaro Huerta

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As a product of inner-city public schools and elite public universities, I want to add my two cents in the national debate concerning public school teachers. While I attended poor and overcrowded LAUSD schools, I must say that if it wasn't for the help of several teachers, in addition to my late parents and, currently, wife Antonia, I would not have received advanced degrees from two of the best universities in the world: UCLA and UC Berkeley. This includes receiving a B.A. and M.A. from UCLA and forthcoming Ph.D. from Berkeley.

Now, I must say that I too am troubled with America's inner-city public schools. Raised in East Los Angeles' Ramona Gardeners housing project, I am the first one to admit that I didn't receive a rigorous education to prepare me for the academic demands of the university. While I excelled in mathematics throughout my early education, when it came to reading and writing, the public school system failed me. Like countless Latino and African-American students living in America's barrios and ghettos, I graduated from high school lacking the critical reading and writing skills needed to compete against highly prepared undergraduate students from privileged upbringings.

I am not exaggerating when I say that I only read one book and wrote one, two-page paper throughout my K-12 schooling. It's no wonder that, many years later, I am still fond of John Steinbeck's classic novella, "The Pearl." Learning from my late Mexican mother's inner-drive to succeed, I eventually taught myself how to read

and write at the university level while completing my undergraduate studies at UCLA. Unfortunately, this was not the case for most of my childhood peers, where success meant graduating from high school - a lofty goal that escaped most of them.

That being said, I don't think it's fair to put the entire burden of America's dysfunctional public school system on school teachers. While we can all agree that the bad teachers need to find a new profession, there are many great teachers who have dedicated their lives to educating inner-city students under difficult working conditions.

Too often, for example, teachers without the support of aides must work in overcrowded classrooms with limited instructional supplies and equipment to address the needs of their students, especially those with special needs.

In a global city like Los Angeles, where Latinos constitute 75 percent of LAUSD's student population, teachers often work with students who come from working class and immigrant backgrounds, where the parents lack the human capital and financial capital to adequately support their children outside of the classroom. How can we expect parents to help their children with their homework when the parents



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themselves lack the educational training to help them in the first place? Since many of these parents don't have the financial resources to hire private tutors, like privileged parents from the Westside, many of them have no choice but to rely on the public school system to prepare their children in a highly advanced and competitive society.

This is where influential teachers can make a difference in the lives of individual students. In my particular case, given that my parents lacked formal education and never learned English in this country, I benefited from several teachers who inspired and prepared me to pursue higher education. This includes Ms. Rose at Murchison Elementary School and Mr. Wong at Lincoln High School.

Like Lucille Ball, Ms. Rose had red hair. She went the extra mile to help her sixth-grade students without patronizing us - all poor kids from the projects. For instance, when I completed the assigned math curriculum from the grade level book, she brought me a middle school algebra book and reviewed it with me after school. She also took a few of us on an annual fieldtrip, paid from her own pocketbook, to her Big Bear cabin.

This was the first time any of us left our blighted neighborhood for a weekend getaway to the mountains. This helped open my eyes to the beauty of nature - void of the freeways, railroad tracks and polluting factories that surrounded the projects.

In addition to Ms. Rose, Mr. Wong, my ninth-grade math teacher, helped me cultivate my mathematical and analytical skills that became my ticket out of abject poverty. Mr. Wong, or Louie, as he preferred, not only made math fun, but he also boosted my self-confidence by allowing me to grade the class tests and homework assignments. Ignoring the standard "teaching-to-the-test" approach found in public education, Louie instead posed mathematical problems for us to solve in small groups and

individually in front of the entire classroom.

While it takes more than recounting anecdotal stories about the great teachers in our lives to improve public education, it's important that we stop to reflect and learn from the successes and best practices to improve the system. In reality, the problems that we face in our broken public education system needs to be examined more holistically and systemically from the amount of money invested per pupil to the infrastructure of inner-city schools to the pedagogical approach used in the classroom to the importance that decision makers give on educating young people from all racial, class and social backgrounds. Only then, can we find complex solutions to a complex problem.

In the meantime, it's time to stop scapegoating public school teachers and to start appreciating them for their positive contributions to society.

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