

ADVOCATE SPOTLIGHT: MOCTESUMA ESPARZA DISCUSSES HIS LIFELONG COMMITMENT TO EQUALITY AND WHY CHARTER SCHOOLS ARE PART OF THE SOLUTION

THE LATEST

April 12, 2022

Proposed Federal Regulations Ignore Students' and Families' Needs

March 29, 2022

A Response to USA Today: Students and Families Deserve Better

March 15, 2022

Charter School Updates in the States, Spring 2022

March 8, 2022

Increases in Charter School Enrollment Share Lead to Student Achievement

March 3, 2022

Survey Finds Charter School Teachers Engaged More Students During Pandemic

BLOG

April 19, 2022

f t



Who Is Moctesuma Esparza?

Moctesuma Esparza was born in 1949 in East Los Angeles to Mexican American immigrants. As he grew up, his family's experiences with discrimination, survival, and perseverance in America were stories that he came to learn like the back of his hand.

Esparza's grandparents lived through the American occupation in Mexico during the war in the 1840s and survived years of hunger, dislocation, and trauma. A few decades later, in 1918, Esparza's father left Mexico for California and experienced the not-often-discussed hostile treatment of Mexican immigrants from the Texas Rangers and American society but he too, survived.

By the time Esparza was a senior in high school, he had cultivated and a group of friends who were similarly sensitive to the deep inequality that Mexican Americans and other people of color faced in America, and they decided to do something about it, launching Esparza's journey of a lifetime of activism.

Walking Out on Injustice in Education

The 1960s were alive with protests for peace, equality, and unity. Between marches to end the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights movement, activism and action were flowing in America, but it was also a dangerous decade for those seeking social justice.

Esparza says, "My friends and I were inspired by leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King Junior and Cesar Chavez, and wanted to continue the unbroken chain of activism." In 1968, after years of brainstorming and organizing, Esparza – now a freshman at UCLA – and his fellow students led the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) Walk Outs where more than 20,000 students walked out of classrooms and demanded equal educational opportunities for Chicano and Hispanic students.

The group of young organizers felt that LAUSD and other districts were not institutionally committed to the success of Mexican Americans. For example, it was normal for teachers and principals to encourage Mexican American students to not attend college and seek a skill in a trade instead of a career. Esparza says that he was inspired by the Bill of Rights, by the Constitution, and the promise of the American dream and knew that he and his friends who looked like him were not included in those promises of American justice and equality.

These historic walkouts changed how Mexican Americans were treated in public schools, led to changes in curriculum, increased Mexican American acceptances to colleges, and more. Mr. Esparza emphasizes that had history lessons included that the founders of the US also included Latinos like Admiral Bernado de Galez whose bravery and strategic victories were key to the success of the Revolutionary War, Mexican Americans would not have felt the shame and marginalization that was a common experience in schools.

Living Through the Lens of Activism and Leadership

Nearly 55 years later, Esparza has only built on his commitment to seeking justice for Mexican Americans and challenging the status quo. Esparza became a film producer to change how Mexicans were represented in Hollywood and media. Best known for his films *Selena*, *Gettysberg*, *Introducing Dorothy Dandridge*, and *Walkout*, **Mr. Esparza says, “My work is an expression of my desire to bring our history to the public so that our children know that we have been struggling and that we have been active in our own empowerment.”**

Changing how a community is represented in the media and books is critically important—nationally and internationally—and it means a commitment to educating the public about Mexican American culture and history.

Though he is a film producer by day, **Esparza says that “seeking social justice has been the bedrock of my career.”** He is able to do this through film production and through more traditional activism. He serves as a trustee and board member across various organizations, including the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools from 2015 - 2020 and commits to serving as a role model for students, parents, and teachers he meets to encourage their activism. He shares his story of the 1968 walkouts and how 20,000 students united to demand change in the country’s second largest school district.

Public Charter Schools Are The Solution

Esparza began his fight for social justice nearly 55 years ago, demanding equal education for all and since then, his commitment to creating change in public education has only grown. When charter schools were introduced in 1991 to fix the achievement gaps that were occurring in public schools across different groups, Esparza quickly became a champion of this new type of public school that was student-focused, locally controlled, and offered curriculums that encouraged all students to go to college and fulfill their dreams in leadership.

Esparza says, “Charter schools do two important things: 1) inspire students to be successes and believe in their potential and 2) create a higher standard of public education, lifting up the education sector for all.”

Esparza emphasizes that the benefit of charter schools is that local community members, parents, teachers, and students are in control. The school board of a charter school is often filled with local leaders, not the school board members who often do not live in the school’s community. This creates an intimate knowledge of what is needed at each school, and accountability for the school to achieve what it promises.

Esparza Co-Founded the Los Angeles Academy of Arts and Enterprise, a charter school that serves students from 6th-12th grade. **He says of his school: “Parents are my boss because they hold me accountable. Teachers have a seat in all the decisions we make as an institution. Our goal is to give the power back to parents and students, and to teachers so that they can feel supported to lead and inspire their students to succeed.”**

And it’s clear that charter schools better serve students of color and economically disadvantaged students – the exact progress Esparza sought in 1968.

Optimism For The Future

Even though progress in education justice is evident, Esparza feels communities are still fighting for the same themes. **Esparza says, “We are still seeking institutional and societal equality, compassion, and opportunity. African Americans, Native Americans, the LGBTQ+ community, Asian Americans – all communities are entitled to the rights laid out in the Bill of Rights and the Constitution and we are still struggling for this.”**

However, Esparza notes that the most profound change is that there is now a willingness to have the conversation about the impact of racism and discrimination – a behavioral and emotional change that he hopes can be nurtured in strong public education options. While Esparza knows that the rollercoaster of life goes up and down, he feels strongly that the arc of history is towards justice and equality for all. He says to all his mentees, **“Own it. Own that you are all Americans and that the American dream belongs to everyone. Seek redress wherever there is injustice. Know that you belong and this is your country.”**