Needed: Leadership for Liberation
A Global Portrait Painted in Shades of Brown
By Leonard A. Valverde

Societal leadership in general and educational leadership in particular, in all parts of the world, requires persons of high moral character with ethical values that favor people of color. The United States and other countries throughout the world are in desperate need of leadership that results in social justice. As part of the growing socio-economic mandate to provide meaningful opportunity to the low social economic/typically people of color populations in the U.S., South America, Africa, Europe, the Far and Middle East, formal education is the starting point. In the U.S. education sector, a parallel need is for educational leaders who can produce systemic change. In other countries, the need is for persons who can re-define and/or re-invent schools for indigenous student populations and for in-migrating students from foreign countries.

What are the primary forces calling for enlightened leadership across the world? One force is the natural evolution of any country's development, at whatever stage the country might be. Examples include: (1) societies developing stratified classes, (2) societies moving from autocratic to democratic governments, (3) societies moving from a small rich/large poor population to an ever growing middle class, and (4) societies moving from a restrictive climate to expanding opportunities. A second force is the demographic shift that takes place, (i.e., previously numerical minority groups are becoming the majorities of tomorrow), as the global populous grows. A third force is an emergent global economy that promotes more interdependence and mobility among the workforce and greater cooperative relationships among countries. An additional force is an ever-increasing global migration of people that calls for different models of assimilation, particularly in schools.

While these four forces, and the many others not mentioned here, are open to different interpretation, weight of importance and possible consequences by others, I chose to give them meaning of relevance, magnitude, and outcome, due to my growing up as a member of a discriminated minority group, (i.e., second generation American of Mexican parents in East Los Angeles). In addition, this short essay is the result of 35 plus years as an educator in various roles throughout the continuum of K-12 public schools and higher

education institutions. This comprehensive domestic view is augmented into a global perspective by way of my travels and formal review of education in at lease nine countries.[1]

Ethical leadership: Striving for ideals

My reality is formulated by experiencing life as a Chicano[2] even though I was raised with traditional Mexican American family values. Because of my formal study and interpretation of social history, I adopted the identity of Chicano. As such, my thinking was shaped by the common societal forces faced not just by Mexican Americans, but by Puerto Ricans, Central Americans, and other Latinos living in the United States. Some of the common societal forces experienced were segregation, discrimination and exclusion or limited opportunities. I endured the same negative injustices, inequities and barriers that my African American, Native American and Asian (Chinese, Japanese and later Vietnamese) brothers and sisters did. All of these socio-economic forces were manifested in public schools. The poor treatment of students of color in public schools is well documented in the educational literature. I refer the reader to just one, the seminal work of Thomas P. Carter, called *Mexican Americans in Schools*: *A History of Educational Neglect*, (1970).

Many educational studies, mostly examining black students in the United States, revealed that public schools (K through college) did fail and continue to provide a lesser educational experience for most students of color. While there are many reasons given for this banal state of affairs, one theme is embedded as a major cause: the lack of moral leadership within society. Elected public officers passed laws denying persons of color equal opportunity and treatment. Public officials allowed mistreatment and injustices to take place throughout society, in the work place, in the legal system, in housing, essentially in all forms of public life. Heads of public agencies, like courts and schools, either closed their eyes to inequities or knowingly instituted unfair practices. They acted more as managers of repressive institutions than as executive officers with power to stop these unwarranted and detrimental acts. As such, minority populations were kept down and disenfranchised from rightful opportunities. Ethical and moral leadership was absent in most agencies, but particularly in schools and colleges.

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[1] Over my educational career, I have traveled to learn about education and social developments in China, England, France, Germany, Kuwait, Italy, Israel, Mexico and Peru.
[2] In the 1960s, during the Civil Rights Movement, the term Chicano was defined as a person who defied established social norms, demonstrated against unfair institutional practices, expressed "radical" ideas and was an activist.

But lest we narrow our scope of interest to just the U.S., similar occurrences were and are transpiring in other countries. Almost every country that has identified a minority population, usually an indigenous group like the various Indian tribes in North, Central and South America, or aborigines in Australia or New Zealand, has this phenomenon in play. To overcome this negative social condition, or even keep it from advancing, we need leaders who abhor discrimination of any kind, who have values and act from a set of principles that liberate oppressed populations. Such leadership is called enlightened, egalitarian, or democratic.

Educational leadership: Transformational

Since the 1980s, when schools were found failing to provide adequate instruction to middle class and suburbia (but 20 years after finding the same with low income students), school reform swept across the U.S. The accountability movement initiated by the government turned into high stakes testing. As a consequence, schools did not improve nor change for the better. Instead school administrators *tightened the screws,* trying to get students to score higher on standardized test after state departments joined the movement by raising the achievement standards and lowering state financial support. In many respects, schools find themselves in a worse situation now than before. While society has been advancing and the change cycle ever-accelerating, I see schools off-track, wrongly directed, and slow to change.

Hence, schools desperately need leadership that will work to get wrongheaded government restrictions reduced. Now is the time for school officials to be change agents, not managers of the status quo. Persons are needed that will be risk takers (work against the forces that prevent schools from meaningful restructuring). We need leaders who will transform schools to prepare our growing multicultural student populations for a global economic and international life style. In short, the world is changing rapidly due to advances in science and technology, so schools must not just add new technology into classrooms nor continue to add more information into its curricula. No, schools have to be transformed drastically. Systemic change is needed and new paradigms must emerge. Schools that learn are needed! (Senge, 2005)

One new paradigm must address the use of labels which have become far too harmful for students. The *Students at Risk* label has excused educators from working with the most needy, to actually give up and abandon students who are now the majority

student population. For students of color, the *at-risk* label represents the same old *deficient thinking*. What is needed is new thinking based on assets, such as the *Kids at Hope* mental framework (www.kidsathope.org). All students are teachable; the question is how and by whom. While the *No Child Left Behind* phrase is in tune with the current paradigm, the response is wrong. Instead of higher standards and constant testing, we need to place this ethical educational responsibility and societal moral purpose into a school structure that permits them to flourish. Instead of heeding the call by social movement leaders of Martin Luther King and Cesar Chavez to make the U.S. live up to its ideals, school heads have lost their way, laboring to be better technicians, to make schools more effective. So besides school leaders practicing transformational leadership[3], they must also use soulful leadership (Bolman & Deal, 2001) Educational leaders must be protectors of human rights, be advocates for deprived communities, be spokespersons for disenfranchised, and be defenders of student rights. In short, educators must come to care and learn about each person and his/her family, not just about the student and achievement.

International leadership for liberation

One of the global hallmark trends of the 21st century is population migration (United Nations, 2002). Large numbers of people (175 million) are migrating, not just across neighboring borders, but across continents and even across hemispheres. As a result, nations have to assimilate students who speak languages different from the country's native language. Equally, there is a mismatch between the student's culture and school's culture. The cultural incompatibility produces unnecessary conflict within the student's mind and between teachers and students, as well as school and homes.

This in-migration, coupled with the inferior schooling provided to indigenous populations mentioned earlier, relegates new populations to less-than second-class citizens. All of the above is the result of Victorian thinking, imperialism, and traditional class structures. Countries in South America[4] (Hawley, 2006) are just now beginning to break away from dictatorships and leaning toward socialism. In Australia, New Zealand, Africa, and Mexico, the focus of concern is how to include fairly oppressed native populations. In China and Russia, autocratic government is yielding (however so slightly) to opening-up society and decentralizing power. As a consequence, school personnel in these countries will

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[3] K-12 public schools are not the only U.S. segment that needs to be transformed, also the higher education community is beginning to attend to this agenda. See *Taking the Raines*, 2003.
[4] The South American countries are Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Venezuela and Mexico.

have to practice leadership that liberates, following the example of Nelson Mandela of South Africa.

Due to technological advances and its influence on the lives of people, the world is getting smaller or, in the view if Thomas Friedman, *The world is flat* (2005). At this point in the world's history, there is a global reordering taking place. This transformation of society is a strategic opportunity for educators who want to broaden the existing knowledge borders and advance the understandings and practices of leadership. At this moment in time, researchers have a unique opportunity to gain global insights into the education and development of multi-dimensional persons who can empower individuals and create social conditions that value diversity.

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Leonard A. Valverde is Professor of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies and Executive Director of the Hispanic Border Leadership Institute at Arizona State University, USA. He has been a vice president for academic affairs, a college dean, department chair and held administrative/supervisory positions at the K-12 level.