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RAMON C. CORTINES
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Dear LAUSD Family,

I know from 60 years in public education—serving various roles in many districts—there is no calling more precious, more painful, or more beautiful than the work we awaken to each day. Children enter adulthood under our watch, and you equip them with confidence and ingenuity to take on the world. As we gear up for another school year, I want to share with you three lessons I have gleaned from my years in this profession.

The first lesson is: Make your family a *family*.

In the summer of 1932, my parents decided to adopt. Being picky people, they politely said “no” to every infant they were shown at the orphanage. After baby number five, the caretaker said, “If you turn down one more child, you can’t adopt from us.” The caretaker then went and got me: a brown, emaciated boy with sores. My mother hesitated. But my father uttered the magic words that she needed to hear: “Take him, Tenie, we have no choice.”

Growing up, my parents worked very hard to make us a loving, cohesive family. Which is why I was stunned, one day in first grade, when classmates told me I was adopted. The day their teasing started, I came home crying. My parents held me tight, confirmed that it was true, and comforted me with these words: “We *chose* you.”

Many years would pass before I understood the true meaning of those words. Over time, I came to recognize that we have many “families” in our lives: the organizations we join, the communities we live in, and the people we work with are all families. We typically do not get to choose the other members of these families, just like my parents did not choose which baby they brought home from the orphanage. But we all have a choice—and this is the choice that matters—whether we will make our families function like *families*: ones that practice open communication, understanding, and unconditional acceptance. Everyone has felt the difference between a family that exists in the technical sense and a *family* that operates as a loving, cohesive unit. You can walk into some schools in this District and immediately sense that they function like a *family*. And in others, you cannot. I now understand that my parents’ words, “we *chose* you,” meant that they *chose* to put in the time to make our family a *family*.

Everyone in LAUSD—students, parents, staff, schools, local districts, labor partners, the central office, and the Board—is part of a single family. However, we do not always act like a *family*. When we communicate openly, seek to understand each other, and support one another despite our differences, we create a stronger community that can better serve students. When we stop doing these things, our sense of unity atrophies like a muscle. The choice to invest in our unity or to let it wither will determine the success of future generations. Make your family a *family*.

The second lesson is: See the shades.

After college I went to Aptos, California for my first teaching assignment: a class of 44 sixth graders. At first, I felt in over my head. I was, literally, shorter than most of the girls, and with a boyish face I looked embarrassingly similar to my students. But I also felt overwhelmed in a deeper sense. For the first time, I was working with a group that had widely divergent academic abilities and needs. I stayed awake wondering how I could reach every child.

I found guidance in a simple but profound lesson my college speech teacher had imparted. One day he had pulled me aside and asked, “What do you see when you look up?” “I see the sky,” I had responded. “Oh, is that what you see?” he had replied. “What color is it? What shade is it? You should see all sorts of things in the sky.” Let me tell you—that was the last day I ever saw a blue sky. From then on, I saw endless shades of blue. I saw wisps of white. I saw half moons in the afternoon. That habit proved indispensable in my first teaching position. It reminded me to search constantly for the subtleties in my students’ personalities. The more I saw, the more I tailored my lessons to their strengths, learning styles, and interests. As a result, my teaching grew by leaps and bounds.

You are, of course, already familiar with this lesson. We all know the phrase “don’t judge a book by its cover.” And, educators come across different shades of personality every day. As with most life lessons, however, learning the lesson is easy. What’s difficult is remembering to apply it throughout adulthood. Each of us, from time to time, gets locked into how we feel about an individual, or we stubbornly think we know best about a situation.

An effective way to break this cycle is to have a cue in your daily routine that reminds you to think differently. For example, every time you look up and see shades of blue in the sky, you can use it as a reminder that someone or something in your life has shades you aren’t noticing. Maybe it is a shy student who never seeks attention, a coworker who is difficult to be around, or an issue you’ve made up your mind about. Whatever it is, take the time to look closer. Trust me—creating a habit of this will be your key to success. See the shades.

The third lesson is: Grab the next rung.

When I became superintendent in Pasadena in 1972, the district had recently been ordered by a federal court to desegregate its schools. This was the first such mandate in a northern city, and some people in Pasadena reacted harshly. At the board meeting following the order, one board member read a prepared statement, pushed back from his microphone, and resigned. Soon after, the community launched Pasadena’s first ever recall effort to remove the three board members who publicly supported the desegregation order.

While others engaged in politics, I started implementing the district’s new busing plan. On multiple occasions, white citizens plotted to lie down in the streets so buses could not bring students of color to “their” schools. Every time, I arranged for new bus routes and police escorts. I then stood in the streets at 4:00 a.m. to ensure each child made it to school safely. I did this persistently until people realized I would not relent. When that issue was resolved, the real heavy lifting began: teaching students how to embrace diversity and work together. Although we made progress on this over the years, the work was never done. When we got to one rung, we simply had to keep climbing to the next.

In education—as in daily life—pronouncements do not solve problems. Whenever we set new goals, make resolutions, change policies, or reallocate funds; we only open the door for progress and must still do all of the heavy lifting. In Pasadena, the court order and busing plan set the stage for desegregation, but it was thousands of employees’ rolling up their sleeves and working hard that actually made the schools more integrated and equitable. And there were no quick fixes. Before we could even begin to help students embrace diversity, we first had to ensure each bus made it to the right school. Today, I see many initiatives fail because people try to skip rungs as they rush to the top, creating messes that can take longer to fix than the original problem. The fastest way to turn a pronouncement into actual progress is to roll up your sleeves, prepare for heavy lifting, and grab the next rung.

As you climb, do not get discouraged if you get knocked down a rung. Inevitably, there will be times when you make a mistake, need to ask for help, or move more slowly than you would like. Again, there are no quick fixes, especially in the world of public education. In Pasadena, 45 years have passed since the order to desegregate, and the district is still striving to create an equitable education for every student. In my case, I have done this work for 60 years and I still make mistakes and ask for help. The key to success, no matter which rung you find yourself on or how you got there, is to keep pulling yourself up with inextinguishable determination. Always grab the next rung.

As I take this opportunity to reflect on my career and lessons learned, I am filled with great optimism for LAUSD. This feeling comes from the same place that drew me out of retirement and back to this district: the knowledge that every day—throughout Los Angeles—teachers inspire students, principals lead schools, nurses bandage wounds, cafeteria workers feed children, office staff preserve order, maintenance staff preserve buildings, bus drivers get children to school, counselors get them to college, custodians create clean spaces, police officers create safe spaces, and so many others work tirelessly for our students’ success. Collaboratively, you are forming a bridge between the belief that all students can succeed and a world in which they actually do. I am forever grateful to you.

Make your family a *family*. See the shades. And grab the next rung.



Ramon C. Cortines
Superintendent of Schools