March 4, 2013 - Moving Beyond “Good Cop, Bad Cop”: Strategies for Presenting a United Front as Parents (166)

Welcome to Mom Enough.

With your co-host developmental psychologist Dr. Marti Erickson and Erin Erickson, Maternal Child Health Specialist. Brought to you through a partnership with the Minnesota Department of Education and Working Family Resource Center. Content copyrighted by Marti and Erin Erickson; all rights reserved.

Here's my grandma, Marti, and here's Erin, my Mom Enough.

Dr. Marti Erickson: Welcome to Mom Enough. I'm Marti Erickson here with my daughter, Erin, and I'm so honored to have the guest we have today. Hector Garcia, who is an immigrant from Mexico and now is Executive Director of the Chicano Latin Affairs Council, a state government agency created in 1978 to advise Minnesota's governor and legislators on issues of importance to the state's Latino community and to be a conduit to government, private and non-profit sectors for that community. Hector served as vice president of International and Domestic Emerging Markets for Wells Fargo Bank and also executive director of the Minnesota Dakotas Region of the National Conference for Community and Justice. I had the good fortune of getting to know Hector quite a few years ago, 20 years ago or more I think when we were both involved with Success by 6 at the Twin City's United Way and just always had such admiration for the remarkable work that he was doing to advocate for children in our community. So it's a special treat for me to have Hector with us today. Hector's wife is Brianna and they have a son, David, who owns a real estate development company in New Orleans and also Hector has two grandchildren down there in New Orleans, Blaze and Carter Aleixandre. Did I say that right? Okay. Very nice to have you with us here today, Hector, and we invited Hector here today because of an article that he wrote actually, an op-ed piece that I saw in the Star Tribune here in Minnesota, that was really about how to address achievement, the achievement gap in educational disparities and it really touched me. I thought it was a beautifully written piece and it reminded me of the incredible work that you've done for so many years and I just thought that that issue would be one that we really ought to talk about on our show because it's something that touches all of our lives. So thank you for joining us today, Hector.

Hector Garcia: Thank you, Marti, thank you, Erin. It's a pleasure to be here and I look forward to this interesting conversation.

Erin Erickson: So we hear a lot both nationally and here in Minnesota about all sorts of disparities but especially about educational disparities or the achievement gap with various ethnic groups; African Americans, American Indians and Latino students, for example, who are lagging in nearly all measures of academic success. So although Minnesota typically ranks high in the nation on most measures of educational attainment our achievement gap is huge. You know that Latinos in Minnesota are the worst in the nation in terms of the achievement gap and high school four-year graduation rates. So could you tell us a little bit more about this situation and why we all should know about it and have concern about this?
Hector Garcia: Sure, Erin. I think the main reason why people should be very concerned about this is because the European American population in Minnesota as you know is aging and there are a lot of retirees. The workforce of the future needs to be highly educated. There's a Georgetown University study that projects by Year 2018 70% of the jobs in Minnesota will require some college- or university-level type of education. So, meanwhile Latinos are the fastest growing minority in the state and the country between 2000 and 2010 our growth was 75% and we now are close to 300,000 persons in Minnesota. That is a very, very fast rate of growth. Nationwide the rate of growth was 43% and we reached 50.5 million persons in the country. As you know, during the presidential elections the Latino vote was pivotal to the success of President Obama and having a large proportion of the population with very poor education while having such large numbers and impact on the vote is very unhealthy for everybody. Now in the case of Minnesota, since I started this job 3 1/2 years ago, it was a paradox to me that the levels of the disparities were so high not only for Latinos but for African Americans, for American Indians, for Asians, for the poor in education but also across the board disparities in health and housing and incarceration inspire of the huge chunks of money that are invested by Minnesota to address those issues. So it doesn't seem to go together and it all came to a head with this publication by the US Department of Education on Minnesota having the dubious credit of having the worst levels of Latino graduation rates and Latino achievement gap as well as American Indian achievement gap in the nation. So, that has led me and the Latino First Council to reflect a great deal on why that paradox exists and one of the things that I've been trying to convey for a very long time is that our situation reminds of what the World Bank has experienced. The World Bank used to have Joseph Stiglitz, the Nobel laureates, as its head economist, and he's a very thoughtful person, very knowledgeable so said something is wrong here. The west has been investing over $2 trillion since the Second World War in poverty-stricken areas of the world and it's been very unsuccessful; something is wrong. So the conclusion was that on his part that the World Bank was sending out these teams of experts, highly educated, obviously well to do and they were walking to these poverty-stricken areas and they didn't say it but it was implied that they were there to fix them. They obviously didn't know what they were doing but the World Bank team knew and so they were going to show them how to do it. Well, it never worked. It never worked because there was no partnership spirit in the effort. The poor people were glad to receive money but they were not engaged, motivated to work with the World Bank to address the problem. I have a sense that something similar has happened in Minnesota. It's not only a sense I've heard leaders in the American Indian and other minority communities make similar statements that there's no partnership.

Dr. Marti Erickson: Well, that's a big statement. What would a partnership look like?

Hector Garcia: It would start I believe by sitting down and talking very honestly, not offensively but honestly, about the situation of putting aside political correctness, putting aside the fact that we're all concerned about not offending each other but the children and our future are suffering and, therefore, there has to be a very honest conversation to say, okay, this doesn't make sense, can you explain to me why it's happening and how we can change it. Then really getting into the design of a program jointly because what I've observed when I started in this job is we would be invited to meetings where we were told we the leaders in the communities we got this great plan for you and we'd like for you to sign up on it. That doesn't bode well for a partnership.
Everybody, not everybody but the leadership on all sides need to sit down and say we're jointly going to draft design the program that has a hope of solving the problem and start in early education and pre-school not in high school, by then it's too late. Most of our kids are lost by the time they get to middle school. They start dropping out, they're discouraged. I have theories in that regard that might be helpful if you want me to tell you.

Dr. Marti Erickson: I'd love for you to talk about that. I think the people who are listening are to a large extent parents with young children, they're parents who care about their own kids and they care about the kids that their children go to school with, they care about our future workforce, you know, let's talk about that and what it really means for all of us as parents.

Hector Garcia: I think what is evident now is we're all in the same boat because you cannot have such a large population of minorities and American Indians and poor continue in this direction without bringing down the overall rankings in education of the state. That's becoming evident, you know, the same statistics the US Department of Commerce has us as number 29 in overall graduation rates in the country.

Dr. Marti Erickson: That's shameful.

Hector Garcia: Yes.

Dr. Marti Erickson: That's really shameful. We used to be a beacon of progress.

Hector Garcia: Exactly.

Dr. Marti Erickson: And excellence in education.

Hector Garcia: How do we get back up there? I think that these canaries in the mine can actually save us in many other ways not just in education. I think it's a signal that something is wrong with the system. Therefore, we shouldn't look at it as something threatening but rather inviting us to reflect and find solutions and not be overwhelmed by the challenge. I believe that there's solutions. For example, Torch [phonetic] Program in Northfield in 6 years was able to bring the graduation rate of Latinos from 35% to 100%. So, it's doable.

Dr. Marti Erickson: So what did they do?

Hector Garcia: They did a number of several things all of which are listed in the study that we recently finished in December of 2012.

Dr. Marti Erickson: And we link to that on our website.

Hector Garcia: Right.

Dr. Marti Erickson: So people can check that out.

Hector Garcia: So you can read it in detail but I'll tell you briefly some of the things that made it work. There is this partnership spirit in Northfield that goes from the mayor, from the council, city council, down to the parents and the students and the college mentors. They're all into it, you know, it takes a village kind of thing. That is in my opinion what's making it work. They're doing things because they believe that they can succeed and they have succeeded and they're all in it together to make it work. Now it's hard to make that happen in a larger environment such as the
Twin Cities, but I think it can be localized and it is doable and I particularly like the fact that they start early. They start with the parents. See, 40% of our population are immigrants. Now it's not the same situation as the ones that existed in the early 20th Century when Europeans were the immigrants and the American population had about 6% had high school studies. Today over 90% of Minnesotans have a high school degree or a high school diploma and some of the new arrivals have a very low level of education, perhaps 2nd, 3rd, 4th grade; not all, you know, I came with a college education, I spoke English and French, very different from what many of these new immigrants experience. So the chasm is very different, you know, it's not the early 20th Century.

Dr. Marti Erickson: And our jobs today demand a whole different set of skills than the jobs at that time.

Hector Garcia: Right.

Dr. Marti Erickson: We've gone from the Industrial Revolution to the Information Revolution and beyond.

Hector Garcia: Exactly, but I also think that what these canaries in the mine are challenging us to do is to think, you know, if the system is wrong, it might be wrong elsewhere and I happen to think that it is wrong elsewhere. It's not just in the education of minorities and American Indians but also in the fact that we've left behind some of the democratic principles that made this country as great as it is and we're focusing more on the outward appearances of those results that the country has obtained. So we're focusing on forcing the replication of those results rather than inspiring them by eliciting through democratic principles the commitment, the effort of every individual and every individual student. So, I think while we address in early education and preschool through democratic principles of education those minorities and those American Indian students we can also remind everybody else about democratic principles that everybody should be following.

Erin Erickson: That's right. As you're talking about just the model that doesn't work of people coming in and kind of saying we're going to fix this I mean even if you think about that as an individual if someone were to say, hey, I see you have this problem I'm going to come in and fix it, you just need to do these things that I tell you, you wouldn't feel a sense of ownership or intrinsic motivation to do those things because you aren't empowering, someone is not empowering you to do those things. So I think that is really important to think about even just, you know, on a basic level that, you know, you don't want to be told what to do and how to do it, you want to be engaged in the process and have ownership over it. I think this part of, you know, of really repairing our education system we all have ownership over this because this is how we raise our children and it is a collective issue and we all need to care about it because it affects everyone and we all have an influence through our vote and through our involvement in our communities. So I think we get into this way of thinking where we're so isolated, you know, we're on our computers, we're not engaged and it really does affect everyone. So I think it's hugely important and I'm really glad we have you here to talk about this. One concern that I think people probably have about any sort of change or new programs is how are we going to fund this? Everybody is worried about financing these things. So what do you say to people who think we can't afford to fund things like early childhood education or programs that help to narrow the achievement gap?
Hector Garcia: Very briefly on the first comment that you made I'd just like to add that the people who experience problems because they live the problems have a great portion of the solution. Not all of it; otherwise they would be solving it themselves, but the experience gives them a perspective that people who have not lived the problems do not have and moving on to the question of cost I believe we cannot afford not to invest in early education because of the situations that I've just described and not only for the benefit of the minorities and American Indian and the poor but for everybody's benefit. Now there are ways in which I can demonstrate I believe such as Success by 6 demonstrated when you and I were part of that program, Marti, that if you invest in early childhood it'll be by far less costly in the long run. I can send you plenty of statistics on the difference that it makes to invest in early education whether by 6 or rather in this case maybe by 10 years old, what it costs in comparison to the cost of these kids dropping out of school, getting into trouble, perhaps joining gangs, being put into prison where by the way, you know, are totally disproportionate representation incarceration comes into play. Education is at the core of our unemployment figures, which are higher, of our health figures, which are terrible as well. Housing, incarceration, everything. So, if you compare the two, there's no question that the investment is by far better early on than after the fact, and I believe there are many examples that demonstrate that this is true. For example, Finland, whom I believe we should emulate in many different ways, they 40 years ago decided we've got a mediocre education system, we have a terrible economic situation, let's all pull together and do something about it. So, in 3-4 decades starting in 2000, they became number one among all the affluent nations of the world in education but more importantly they accomplished a reduction in variations between schools and among students beyond any other nation and they did it with less money, they did it with less teaching time, you know, if we have those examples, nobody should be arguing against them.

Erin Erickson: So what did they do?

Hector Garcia: They reflected, which is what I think we're not doing, you know, if you listen to the discussion, it's always about how can we reduce these expenses or how can we increase taxes to cover the expenses? It seems that that's the universal of discussion. Instead of reflecting on what is the core philosophy that is driving our system, what are the things that we are believing in today that we didn't believe in in the early 20th Century when public education received a huge impetuous of investment and support? Then we will get to the root of the problem and work cooperatively instead of this winning at all costs type of attitude that the different participants in the dialogue usually have. I think that there's probably nothing more damaging than what seemed to us an innocuous principle of winning is the only thing. I see that we are now facing the consequences of that very poorly thought out concept.

Dr. Marti Erickson: So talk a little more about this finished model because I think our listeners want to kind of picture this in their minds and I understand what you're saying they reflected and came up with a plan that suited them, their mix of cultures, their economic circumstances, everything about their system. Is this, I heard you talk about the idea of a preschool to 5th grade phase in period focused on equity where graded assessment is not even started until kids get to 5th grade so that everybody is kind of being educated together if I'm understanding it correctly
to learn to both compete but also to cooperate around learning and to really build themselves as human beings through their learning together. Is that a part of the Finnish system?

Hector Garcia: Yes, it is.

Dr. Marti Erickson: So they defer assessment and really just try to bring everybody up to a certain level of competence by 5th grade and then let them go on and do the things that we sort of have to do in a competitive society I guess.

Hector Garcia: They do several things. One, they're highly competitive in terms of preparing their teachers to be the very best. Every teacher in their system has to have a master's degree. They're more respected than any other profession except that of a doctor. So they're highly valued and they are consequentially made responsible to make things happen, but they do that not by turning students into gladiators, which is what we do here.

Dr. Marti Erickson: Yes, we do.

Hector Garcia: But rather by inspiring them and by getting them accustomed to decision making, to working as a team, to having fun while learning, to learn how to both cooperate and compete, not either cooperation or competition. They do it by having a very close relationship between the teacher and the students for years.

Dr. Marti Erickson: So children stay with the same teacher over a period of time.

Hector Garcia: Right.

Dr. Marti Erickson: I've read about this before. I love that concept.

Hector Garcia: Grade assessment is done rarely, but the teachers do an assessment of every individual child to make sure that that child is reaching his or her potential. So they get to know them intimately, they find ways to motivate them, to engage them, and to address problems or shortcomings that they might come to school with by finding solutions ahead of time. For example, in special ed. They invest heavily in special ed in the beginning but then if you compare their cost to those of countries like the US, you see that quickly their costs begin to be reduced considerably while ours escalate and stay very high.

Dr. Marti Erickson: Because we don't identify kids until they're pretty far along and then we're trying to catch up and that costs more money.

Hector Garcia: And then they're locked into the system and into being stigmatized. Interestingly the Fins are able to eliminate the stigma about special education because pretty much anybody that has a problem goes in and then they go out so they take care of the problem and then, you know, nobody thinks very much of it and they pull out. They have for those people who might say, well, it's all Fins in their school that's not true. They have schools that are up to 40% minorities from Africa, from Russia, from Eastern Europe.

Dr. Marti Erickson: All the Scandinavia counties have had such a huge influx of refugees over the last decade or two.
Hector Garcia: Right. So in my opinion, it is the system focused on equity that made them successful. Our system is focused on winning. We produce the highest number of Nobel Prize winners in the world, we also have the top higher education institutions, but along the way we create an enormous number of losers and so because the population of those vulnerable communities is growing by far more rapidly than the European-American population it's not hard to foretell what's going to happen if we don't change the system somehow. I'm not saying there should not be a focus on winning, but at least provide children up to 5th grade as you mentioned with a level playing field. We believe in winning but we also believe in being fair and having a level playing field.

Dr. Marti Erickson: Really important message and before we wrap up, Hector, I wonder if you could just say one more word about investing early in early childhood and in support for parents when the children are still babies and toddlers as well as what we often think about as early childhood education in the preschool period when kids are 3, 4 and 5. I know you were a very successful businessman and successful leader in so many ways, but just one closing word about why we all should be advocating for a strong investment in early childhood, the kinds of things that Success by 6 was really designed to do.

Hector Garcia: Thank you for your comments. I think and this I can also send you studies that have been recently done that if we do not address the potential problems that children show they might have within the first few years of their lives, it'll be too late later to do anything about it. The costs of waiting are enormous by far beyond any investment that we might make in preschool and early education. So, it's a no brainer, you know, do we want to pay the consequences as we are now? We already have the highest population of prisoners in the world, by far beyond any country. It's getting worse. Do we want to continue along those lines or do we want to invest in early education and prevent that from happening? There's already 7 million Americans that are in the correctional system or in prison. It's ludicrous, you know, all the evidence is there. If we only get outside of the scope of that dialogue of either higher taxes or cutting expenses that is so damaging and unreal, we need to look at the situation objectively, as broadly as possible to be able to do something about it.

Dr. Marti Erickson: Well, important words and a call to action. Thank you so much, Hector Garcia, for being with us today. I really applaud you for your long-time work on these issues and glad that you're still a strong voice for children and for our society. So think you for being with us on Mom Enough.

Erin Erickson: Yes, and thank you for listening to this episode of Mom Enough. We hope you'll tune in again next week with Marti and Erin.

Hector Garcia: Thank you.

If you have concerns about your child's growth and development, please talk to your child's health care provider or call 1-866-693-GROW. That's 1-866-693-4769 to talk to a professional and find out ways in which you can get connected to various resources in Minnesota.

Do you think I'll have a show called Kid Enough someday?

[ Background music ]