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Land and Water Traditions at the Core: The Importance of Community-Based and Community-Created Multicultural Education Models in New Mexico

Virginia Necochea, PhD

Center for Social Sustainable Systems (CESOSS)

Abstract

For far too long has community been left out of major discussions surrounding educational reform in the state of New Mexico. Judge Sarah Singleton's ruling in *Martínez/Yazzie v. State of New Mexico* (2018) opens up an opportunity for various stakeholders to offer alternative models in addressing the need to provide a 'sufficient education' to students who continue to be marginalized and underrepresented across the state. This article presents three educational models that are community-based and community-created—*Cultivando Nuestro Futuro* Leadership Institute, *Macehualli* Framework for Leadership Development, and the *Ciclos de la Tierra: Cultivando Querencia* through *Mutualismo* and Social Justice Framework. Since 2011, the Center for Social Sustainable Systems (CESOSS), a small nonprofit in the Middle Rio Grande region, has been developing educational models that are founded on Indigenous/Native philosophies and that strive to connect young leaders, families, and community members to the importance of protecting and preserving land and water traditions in New Mexico. It is imperative that educational leaders include the voice and expertise of families and community-based organizations in addressing the recommendations as set forth in the lawsuit findings. The models presented here can offer ideas on how to incorporate transformative multicultural education models into K-12 education.

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Introduction

Over the last several decades, if not more, there is an increasing trend to categorize New Mexico's education system as deficient and lacking (Nott, 2018; Stych, 2018). There are plenty of yearly statistics that point to educational deficiencies across the state. From continuously ranking at the very bottom in education and lowest in overall child well-being, New Mexico is consistently ranked worst in education and top in child poverty (Nathanson, 2019). For many in the field of education, these rankings point to major inadequacies and inequities that exist for the majority of children of color across the state. This being especially true for Native American, Hispanic/Latino, special education and low-income students, and English language learners (ELL). Numerous discussions, conferences, and convenings have taken place where educational experts, academics, administrators, teachers, etc. have debated on these pressing educational issues. But, without support from the state's Public Education Department (PED) and political administration, any type of educational transformation was challenging at best.

But, after years of continued debate and stagnation, a major court ruling took place that finally created an opening for what can potentially be transformative changes in the New Mexican educational system (Torres-Velásquez, 2017; Martinez and Yazzie Consolidated Lawsuit). In 2019, First Judicial District Court Judge Sarah Singleton issued her final ruling in what has become known as the *Martínez/Yazzie v. State of New Mexico* (2018) lawsuit (Gudgel, 2018). Judge Singleton found that the state had been in violation of students' constitutional rights to what is considered a 'sufficient education. The rulings order the state of New Mexico to provide students with what is considered a quality education that 'sufficiently' prepares them for college or a career path. In essence, the rulings as issued by Judge Singleton, state loud and clear that this practice of offering less than sufficient education to the most marginalized children of New Mexico will no longer be tolerated. The *Martínez/Yazzie v. State of New Mexico* (2018) lawsuit opens up vast opportunities for change, especially in the arena of more critical and transformative education models.

During this pivotal moment, it is imperative that multiple stakeholders in the realm of education, with families and communities at the forefront, develop models that integrate culturally responsive teaching that reflects the history, languages, cultures, and traditions of the people who call New Mexico home. Local perspectives and the wider community must be

included in this move towards educational transformation and must be primary authors in the development of new educational models that will truly incorporate the lives and experiences of New Mexican students.

This article aims to highlight community-based educational models that put New Mexican land and water-based traditions at the core. Often time, community is excluded from major decisions made in education, from policy to curriculum to teacher preparation (Warren, 2005). What the *Martínez/Yazzie v. State of New Mexico* (2018) does is to create an opening for community to lead in educational efforts across the state. Given this historic, game-changing moment in New Mexico, community must become a leading force in the education of their children across the state.

In this article, three examples of community-based and community-created educational models are presented that speak to the importance and need for including land and water based traditions in the education of young people in New Mexico. These are the *Cultivando Nuestro Futuro* Leadership Institute, the *Macehualli* Framework, and the *Ciclos de la Tierra* Framework and Garden Program. All three of these educational frames and programs were created by the Center for Social Sustainable Systems (CESOSS). CESOSS is a small, grassroots nonprofit in the Valle de Atrisco, a community that is often referred to as the 'South Valley.' The South Valley is an immensely special community that includes rural, semi-rural, and urban spaces. Despite urbanization and encroachment, the South Valley has retained major agricultural traditions and is a place that continues to see an increase in small farming efforts thanks to several organizations and community members dedicated to revitalizing farming and land-based traditions (Colton, 2018; Paradox, Holmes, Demouche, & Skaggs, 2014).

The mission of CESOSS is to protect and preserve ways of life and traditions connected to land and water (CESOSS, n.d.). CESOSS uses community-based education as a tool in reconnecting families and the larger public to traditional practices connected to agriculture such as the acequias (commonly referred to as ditches), small farming, and irrigation practices. Since it was founded in 2011, CESOSS has been creating educational frameworks immersed in social justice, critical consciousness, and Indigenous philosophies that are used in the training and capacity-building of young emerging leaders. CESOSS takes the position that the community must be proactive and intentional in educating upcoming generations of leaders. It moves away from the practice that leaves the education of its youth and leaders up to schools and

institutions. CESOSS works to create leaders who understand the importance and sacredness of land and water and who will work to protect these resources in their communities, something that is vital for the state of New Mexico given the educational system has largely omitted traditional knowledge and practices from curriculums utilized across all educational levels.

Given this pattern of largely excluding land and water issues within schools and institutions, CESOSS is intentional in creating its own educational models and frameworks that work to immerse and reconnect young adults and the larger public to traditions and philosophies connected to land and water. This work has taken various forms from special events held in the community such as Acequia Talk & Walks and workshops, to educational programs and policy development. The following provide an overview of three of the core models/frameworks dedicated to placing land and water at the core of education.

Cultivando Nuestro Futuro Leadership Institute

In 2013, CESOSS launched the *Cultivando Nuestro Futuro* Leadership Institute as a means to focus on community-based and community-led leadership training and development for young adults from historically underserved communities (see CESOSS website – [Leadership Institute](#)). A major driving force was the need for community to become proactive in the education of its youth and emerging leaders, especially when it came to issues connected to land and water. For far too long have land and water traditions been omitted from general education practices. It was clear that communities could no longer expect or wait, for schools and institutions to teach students about the history and centrality of land and water for people across New Mexico.

CESOSS was also conscious of the fact that in spite of demographic changes occurring across the state and US, there continued to be an inequitable representation of people of color in leadership roles (e.g. city councils, county commissions, legislators, congress members, school boards, administration, nonprofit management, higher education, among many others). What seemed most ironic is that although New Mexico has been officially a Majority-Minority state since 1994, the number of individuals in leadership, administrative, and professional roles do not reflect the demographics of the state. This is not just a problem in New Mexico, but across the US as well (DeHaas, Akutagawa, & Spriggs, 2019; Weindling, 2017).

We clearly understood that our communities were dealing with highly inequitable educational systems across all levels where there was a severe lack of opportunity for students of color to engage in learning about leadership and especially to learn about the importance of protecting and preserving agricultural traditions. We also realized that there was a lack of mentorship available from people of color who held leadership positions and understood the importance and complexity of land and water issues. Without the appropriate guidance and mentorship, future generations of emerging leaders would not be in the position of understanding and maintaining the land and water based assets in our local communities and across the state.

Because of these factors and others, it became imperative that the community take on proactive roles in addressing these pressing issues and in educating/training our own youth and emerging leaders. By establishing the leadership institute, not only were we creating leaders from our own communities, but we were being intentional in reconnecting them to traditions linked to land and water that we considered as integral to our communities.

Cultivando Nuestro Futuro Leadership Institute Overview

One of the primary goals of the institute is to take a proactive role in the development of new generations of leaders in our communities who understand the importance of land and water traditions in the state of New Mexico. A major part of the institute focuses on discussing and analyzing significant issues that impact communities in the Valle de Atrisco (South Valley, NM) and larger Middle Rio Grande region. We refer to the students as Future Community Leaders, or FCLs. We work with FCLs in helping them prepare and execute an analysis aimed at addressing and understanding issues connected to land and water that affect New Mexican communities (e.g. water rights issues; urban acequia infrastructure and governance; urbanization and encroachment; food justice issues; environmental injustices; water management and law, among many others). An introduction to legislation and local policy development is included because we see it as vital for FCLs to understand how local policy development and legislation work, especially in preserving local traditions. It is imperative for them to understand the connection legislation and policy development have to their lives and how in turn there can be positive or negative impacts on communities. It is our goal for FCLs to understand the value of policy development in New Mexico and how it affects the social, economic, political, and cultural development of local communities. It is pivotal for developing

leaders to understand the importance and impact policy has on our local communities. We can no longer afford for our communities and youth to see themselves as detached from legislation and policy development.

Given that CESOSS is firmly grounded in the local Valle de Atrisco/Middle Rio Grande community, both a semi-urban and rural community, we strongly believe in the interconnect-
edness of land, water, culture, and traditions. The deep connections that the community has to land and water are at the core of the institute and across all of our programming and advocacy work.

Our entire curriculum is founded on the *Macehualli* Framework. *Macehualli* is a Nahuatl word that refers to the people who form the basis of a community. Our framework is based on Indigenous philosophies that are utilized throughout the entire Institute and organization. The importance of ceremony and traditions are woven throughout and we utilize a critical approach based on a social justice lens. This means that we approach and introduce every concept with a more critical perspective that teaches FCLs about the inequities that exist in our society. This is done so that FCLs understand that we do this work so that we become leaders who are not only aware of the injustices and inequities, but that understand and can analyze the underlying and complex structures in place that perpetuate and uphold oppressive systems. This in turn will help FCLs make decisions that work to create change and not remain complicit with unjust practices and structures.

It is our goal to help FCLs understand that there are alternative forms of leadership and activism that take place in our communities. We want FCLs to break from the typical Western notions of what it means to be a leader. We want to encourage our FCLs to understand the problematic notions behind individuals coming into local communities with top-down and/or quick-fix approaches. Local communities are vibrant and complex spaces that need to be treated with utmost respect. Our ultimate goal is to help in the development of future leaders who are critical, who develop a critical consciousness, and who work alongside communities in order to elicit change and achieve justice.

The following are the main themes that we focus on in the Institute:

- Importance of Identity, Culture, and Traditions
- History of the People/Struggles
- Connections to Land and Water

- Becoming a Leader/Macehualli Model/Indigenous Philosophies & Traditions
- Legislation/Policy Development
- Transformative and Community Based Research

The *Cultivando Nuestro Futuro* Leadership Institute was created to provide an opportunity for young people of color to learn leadership skills and become familiar with various areas that are directly involved with leadership positions such as policy development, legislation, administration, and research. By using an intergenerational leadership curriculum based on traditional thought and philosophies, we are creating emerging leaders that are not only conscious, but that understand social, cultural, economic and political dynamics in their communities.

A major component of the CESOSS Leadership Institute is the development of a strategic plan that FCLs develop over the course of an academic year with the guidance of a mentor. The strategic plan includes the identification of a pertinent land and water-related issue that is impacting the community that the FCL is interested in better understanding. This work involves in depth research that is community-centered. The importance of community is central to our work. That means that our entire approach to our programming, advocacy, and educational work puts the community's well-being at the core. This approach is different from most learning and projects that takes place at higher education institutions, but that we feel is fundamental for our young leaders to learn. It is fundamental for our leadership institute to impart the importance of what it means to place the community at the center and the process that involves—e.g. working alongside community members in understanding current issues, focusing on the main concerns of community and what they believe is most important, and especially creating mentorship opportunities that will last beyond the institute itself. The program culminates with a celebration of CESOSS Leadership Institute participants sharing their strategic plans and accomplishments throughout the year to the larger community, family, elected officials, and the larger public.

What we've created is an opportunity for young emerging leaders to connect and learn from community leaders, researchers, scholars, and elders who can guide them on reaching deeper understandings of community needs. This leadership institute in essence creates an intergenerational space where many stakeholders become involved in the education of young leaders from across our communities.

Macehualli Framework¹ – Connecting to Indigenous Philosophies

The *Cultivando Nuestro Futuro* Leadership Institute is based on the *Macehualli* Framework. *Macehualli*, is a Nahuatl word signifying the people. This word was also used to describe what is referred to as the ‘common people’ who made up the majority of the population in Mexico² society such as the artisans, the laborers, the farmers, etc. But, the belief was that when the *macehual*, the common person, followed a path of learning and consciousness, they would be liberated through the act of ‘*merecimiento*,’ which means to be deserving of (Toltecayotl, 2014). The *macehual*, by following a path of knowledge, would in essence reach a place that is deserving of a greater consciousness.

We have taken this philosophy to form the basis of the *Macehualli* Framework. We teach our students that to follow the path of a leader is the act of utilizing knowledge to gain greater consciousness so we are then able to work with our communities in fostering wellbeing, health in all of its forms, and justice. We teach students that to be a leader signifies the act of being deserving, to *merecer*, and that one gains this by being of service to their communities and people.

We consciously and intentionally move away from Western models of leadership that are often based on notions of individual success and competition. We take the typically used pyramid model where the leader is placed at the top of the triangle and invert it. We use this to teach students that if one aims to follow the path of a *macehual*, then the leader is placed at the bottom of the inverted triangle. This is used to demonstrate to students that for us, the act of leading, means a leader who exists to serve their community.

This philosophy of collective leadership and leadership formations based on notions of the collective group, have been largely ignored by much of Western society. Instead of understanding leadership through the lens of a collective group or collective good, a more individualistic model has been utilized that situates the leader at the top with everyone else below, as often illustrated with the pyramid model. This idea of ‘individual success’ continues to prevail and reinforces meritocratic ideologies that create a steadfast belief that an individual’s success is a result of their own ‘hard work’ and merit (McNamee & Miller, 2009). Meritocratic

¹ The Macehual Framework has been developed by Jorge Garcia and Dr. Virginia Necochea

² Indigenous Mexican

ideologies that perpetuate false notions of individualistic success that are completely devoid of the community and collective are harmful and self-serving.

Throughout time, Mesoamerican societies have developed leadership formation models that did not follow Westernized notions of the individual leader (Garcia, 2019; Toltekayotl, 2014). These leadership models were well defined and based on notions of the collective group and of collective effort. The creation and use of the Macehualli Framework for our leadership institute honors Mexican Indigenous philosophies that have been largely ignored in the United States. We are intentional in teaching our students about the importance of Indigenous/Native philosophies, histories, and traditions as a way to cultivate future leaders who are conscious of the profound contributions Indigenous/Native people made and the impacts they have on our lives, education, and professions. We are intentional about teaching this to our students because we are well aware of the fact that the larger educational system in the US continues to exclude these important voices from its curriculum and classrooms (Battiste, 2010).

The Importance of Being a *Macehual*

In Mexican Indigenous societies, the *macehual* were recognized by their community as ‘those who deserved’ because they were people who deeply cared for the community. The *macehual* were individuals who placed the interest and wellbeing of their communities before their own (Toltekayotl, 2014). The *macehual* was an individual who knew the stories of their people and their communities. They helped the people maintain their responsibilities with celebrations and events that allowed the community to be in balance with a larger cosmovision. In this model, the *macehual* was instrumental in maintaining customs and traditions the collective considered as sacred duty to maintain. The *macehual* was an integral part of the collective. They were in essence the stewards of their community. This idea that the macehualli was ‘deserving’ emanated from the philosophy that the *macehual* was the heart of their community because not only could the community rely on them for a variety of needs and resolving of issues, but the *macehual* continuously demonstrated their love and care for the community and the collective good (Garcia, n.d.). As part of the leadership institute we teach our students that the *macehualli* are those that organize *for* and *with* their community. They are the first to arrive and the last to leave. They are the individuals who demonstrate their commitment to community through their actions and life-long commitment. The *macehualli* are those who truly are of service to their communities.

Belonging to a collective is the foundation in the *Macehual* Framework. Success is not measured in relation to an individual, but as an entire community and/or collective. We emphasize that we owe our successes to our families, communities, and larger networks we are part of. The *macehual* is an individual who commits to making a positive change in their communities. This journey begins with that intent and continues with building a greater consciousness that includes the act of knowing themselves as a means to confronting their own biases, strengths, and weaknesses. The *macehual* understands the importance of their identity, traditions, culture, and language. They find their place of origin and understand the deep connection to place and people. The *macehual* understands history (as told by the people) and is proud of their history. The *macehual* makes peace with the past and walks toward the future. They become an intricate member of the community who understands that it's not just about fighting the system, but rather it's about building social justice and consciousness from within the community itself (Garcia, n.d.).

The *macehual* is deeply committed to their family, their community, and to their extended networks. We believe that by teaching our students, emerging leaders of color, these principles, a spiritual connection emerges and develops with themselves, their family, their community, and what they consider their Spiritual Nation.³ The *macehual* is capable of discerning the social, cultural, economic, and political forces that affect their community and based on this, they are able to think strategically to support their community in a way that protects and fosters the greater good. To do this, the *macehual* must first make the commitment and develop a vision that includes all of these parts (Garcia, n.d.).

We believe that if we build our own, community-based leadership development models that are rooted in culture, tradition, and community, then we can increase the number of young members across our communities who hold leadership positions across various levels and that will contribute to positive social, political, cultural, and economic change in ways that break from institutionalized forms.

By creating our own leadership model immersed in New Mexican and Indigenous cultures and traditions, we are building the importance of community and fostering the collective good. Not only is our nonprofit proud of the fact that it has created its own

³ By Spiritual Nation, we refer to whatever beliefs binds the "leader" with his/her community

leadership development model, but it also emphasizes the importance of reconnecting young emerging leaders to land and water based traditions. We are planting the seeds of knowledge in the hearts and minds of young people with the hope that regardless of the educational/professional path they follow, they will keep connected to the sacredness of land, water, culture, identity, and traditions. Our ultimate goal in the CESOSS Leadership Institute is that by utilizing the *Macehual* Framework, we are ultimately helping in the development of future leaders who have a critical consciousness and who will work alongside communities to elicit change and achieve justice.

***Ciclos de la Tierra* Framework and Educational Model: Cultivating *Querencia* through *Mutualismo* and Social Justice**

The *Ciclos de la Tierra* Framework and Educational Model is offered as another example of a community-based and community-created education that can be used in schools and organizations across the state. The *Ciclos* Framework emanates from the precious knowledge, history, and agricultural traditions of New Mexico and utilizes concepts from acequia philosophies that teach individuals, especially children, on how to become better stewards for Mother Earth by emphasizing the importance and sacredness of land and water.

The *Ciclos* Curriculum was introduced and created by Alicia Chavez, a former CESOSS Leadership Institute participant who is currently a board member of the organization. The framework of the *Ciclos* curriculum began as Chavez's initial research project during the leadership institute and continued as part of her Master's Thesis project for the Community Regional and Planning Master's Program at the University of New Mexico (Chavez, 2017). Her thesis included an expansion of her original project with a more detailed framework based on acequia philosophy and a complete educational garden program for 4th grade students (Chavez, 2017). The trajectory of this young leader is symbolic of what CESOSS ultimately envisions—to significantly impact the long-term education and professional path of young leaders of color in New Mexico who recognize the importance of land and water as part of their educational and professional paths.

With the guidance from Jorge Garcia and Dr. Virginia Necochea, two of the founding board members of CESOSS and the creators of the Leadership Institute, Chavez pitched this

idea of utilizing acequia⁴ philosophy and knowledge as a model that could be potentially used for local community organizing. From this initial idea also emerged the idea of creating a framework based on traditional acequia knowledge that could be used to teach young children about how to become better stewards of the earth and environment. Chavez wanted to not only honor historic and contemporary acequia ways of life, but also wanted children to understand local traditions that had been part of their own families and communities. The *Ciclos* Framework was intentional in teaching children about gardening but through the teachings of acequia philosophies that emphasized the importance of land and water traditions from the perspective of the people who call New Mexico home. The *Ciclos* Framework was a move away from the mostly scripted garden programs that were being used across local schools. What this framework most represents is a return to and focus on the importance of place, history, traditions, and people in New Mexico.

Importance of Acequias

Acequias are historic, life-giving, water-sharing systems, that are part of the culture, essence, and fabric of New Mexican communities (Arrelano, 2014). *Acequias* are hand-dug irrigation systems that have been part of the state for hundreds of years. *Acequias*, although introduced by the Spanish settlers in the 1400s, it is important to recognize that these systems connect back to traditional Moorish irrigation systems and Native Pueblo irrigation systems as well (Arellano, 2014). Thus, the acequias that exist today are a blend of original Moorish irrigation systems, Spanish, and Pueblo traditions as well. One needs to only realize that the word *acequia* is derived from the Arabic word, *al-sāqiya*, to better appreciate its origins and history.

It is also important to point out that the acequias in Northern New Mexico, what is referred to as Rio Arriba, run differently than the urban, semi-urban, and rural *acequias* found in the Middle Rio Grande region. Up north, *acequias* continue to be maintained and managed directly by acequia associations and community members. Whereas, in the Middle Rio Grande region, with the creation of the Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District (MRGCD) in the 1920s, the overall management of water and the main acequias are now under the MRGCD purview (The Rio Grande: A ribbon of life and tradition, n.d.). Although the creation of the

⁴ Acequias are historic, hand-dug water sharing systems that exist across the state of New Mexico.

MRGCD created a disconnect between communities and the *acequia* systems that were originally managed and maintained by community members (Markwell, 2015), it is important to recognize that the *acequias* still belong to the communities in which they are found. Main *acequias* are managed by the MRGCD, but smaller ‘community ditches,’ such as laterals, *venas*, and *contraacequias*, continue to be cared for by community members. Over the past decade there has been a rise in community-led efforts to re-organize *acequia* associations in the Middle Rio Grande region, especially in the North Valley and South Valley communities (Garcia, 2015).

Given continued challenges from climatic and environmental changes, continued urbanization, and over-development, there is a great need across New Mexican communities to ensure the longevity of *acequias*. This is especially felt in the urban and semi-urban areas in the Middle Rio Grande region that includes Albuquerque, the largest city in New Mexico, and Bernalillo County. Because of these continued threats and challenges, community-based organizations such as the Center for Social Sustainable Systems (CESOSS) and the South Valley Regional Association of *Acequias* (SVRAA), have been intentional in leading efforts to revitalize, protect, and preserve *acequia* history, traditions, and culture in the Middle Rio Grande region. What both organizations have done is to use *acequia* traditions as a basis for community-based education in the Valle de Atrisco, the South Valley, the larger Middle Rio Grande region, and beyond.

The *Ciclos* framework includes four major concepts that are part of traditional *acequia* philosophy—*resolana*, *querencia*, *mutualismo*, and self-governance. *Querencia* involves a deep connection and love of place. *Resolana* represents the gathering spaces created for conversation and reflection. *Mutualismo* teaches us the responsibility we have for ensuring the well-being and health of one another and of our communities. Self-governance is key and has long been part of *acequia* communities in New Mexico. *Acequias* are an example of democratic models of governance specific to the sharing of water.

Both the *Ciclos* Framework and curriculum are based on traditional agricultural practices and understandings. For us, it was vital to not only teach about gardening practices, but to include the connection that gardening has to our families and ancestors. We wanted children, families, and teachers to understand that this is not a new practice, but something that has long been part of our people and this place we call home. We also wanted to highlight the powerful technologies that our people created to improve agricultural practice. These agricultural and

water-sharing systems provide sustenance, water, shelter, and community organizing tactics that are powerful, sustainable, and just.

The *Ciclos* Curriculum represents an ongoing collaborative effort that pushes educators and the community to move away from the typical scripted garden curriculums that leave out the essence and history of agricultural traditions that continue to exist across the state of New Mexico. We are certain that many other cultures share similar concepts and ideas used in the *Ciclos* Framework and curriculum. It is important to note that these concepts connect to land-based traditions across the world and speak to the sacredness of land and water for New Mexican and Indigenous Peoples. By beginning with the traditions that are part of New Mexico, we are promoting multicultural education models that represent the beautiful people of this land.

Concluding Thoughts

This article highlighted three relevant and current examples of community-based and community-created multicultural education models in the state of New Mexico. These models stress the importance of integrating New Mexican culture, history, and traditions across all levels of education. Multicultural education cannot be considered complete or authentic if it is not created by the people who represent the diverse cultures and groups across the state.

With the recent *Martínez/Yazzie vs. The State of New Mexico* (2018) lawsuit and ruling, it will be vital for multiple stakeholders such as the New Mexico Public Education Department, state legislators, school boards, policy makers, among others, to truly integrate New Mexican culture, history, and land/water based traditions across the entire educational system. This is a historic moment in education and it is the hope of educational experts who work primarily on the ground with families and communities that those in power will work to create transformation by placing the voices, stories, and needs of the most marginalized at the core of any and all educational decisions made.

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