

Our Stories—Sí Se Puede

Since the start of the HBLI (1996) and through our many activities, we have come in contact with many accomplished individuals. Many of these persons have overcome great odds and in so doing provided a better future, not just for themselves but for many others. We think there is value in telling our stories, which in turn will empower others to believe that *sí se puede*.

—Valverde

JOE J. BERNAL, PH.D.

*Texas State Board of Education,
San Antonio, Texas*

For over fifty years, Joe Bernal, a native of Texas, has provided strong leadership and service, primarily in education and government. He has served his community as a social worker and in education as a classroom teacher, school building principal, and assistant superintendent. As a public servant, he was elected to the Texas legislature as a representative and senator. Currently, he combines both his educational and governmental experience as a member of the Texas State Board of Education. First elected to the state board in 1996, he was reelected in 2000. He served as vice chair of the 15-member state board from 2001 to 2003.



During his years in the Texas state senate, Bernal, a Democrat, was the primary author of bills enacted into law that provided elementary teachers a 45-minute planning time period, created free statewide kindergarten for some five-year-olds, established the University of Texas at San Antonio, authorized the first minimum-wage law in Texas, and expunged from state statutes all laws supporting segregation of the races. He also authored the legislation that created a dental school and nursing school at the University of

Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio.

While Bernal takes much pride in his role of establishing UTSA and the dental and nursing schools, from a social and economic perspective, he believes that his leadership while a senator helping the farmworkers in 1967 was the high point. At the time, he was the only Latino senator and by challenging the state in its treatment of farmworkers, the Texas Rangers did not and have not “hassled” farmworkers in their union efforts.

Bernal is a World War II veteran, having served in the Philippines and in Japan. He earned a bachelor's degree from Trinity University, master's degree from Our Lady of the Lake University, and a doctorate from the University of Texas at Austin. He is pleased to have known and studied under Professor George I. Sánchez.

While in his various roles as an educator, he also served for seven years as an executive board member of the National Association for Bilingual Education, and he served as legislative chairman of the Texas Association for Bilingual Education. Furthermore, he was elected president of the 1,200-member San Antonio Area Retired Teachers Association for the year 2001-2002 and now serves as its legislative chair.

He is married to Mary Ester Bernal, an accomplished educator. They have four children, three sons and a daughter, all grown and successful in their careers.

DORA GONZALES, MSW

*School Board President,
Comal Independent School District, Texas*

Fifteen, an eighth-grade education, and pregnant. Add to this, the mindset of a school district that discouraged pregnant students from continuing their education, “because it didn't look good.” And a principal who during the mandated withdrawal from school stated, “This is what happens to Mexican girls.” These events and circumstances were all the potential elements of a bleak future. In 1970 I never imagined the opportunities these struggles would create for me.

Providing for the care and support of a new baby girl became my full-time job. I had always wanted to be the first of my family to go to college. Even with help from my family, returning to school seemed like an unattainable goal. I soon married the father of my baby. I became a stay-at-home mom and he, a second-generation textile worker, like many of the young people in our small community. A few years later we had our son. But the struggle to support two young children and living from paycheck to paycheck became too much. Soon I became a single parent again, but now with two young children. I joined the ranks of the textile workers, a job that provided a weekly paycheck, but little else.

The drive to provide more for my children got me through a technical school. I was able to find a job as a dental assistant. A job I truly enjoyed and took great pride in doing. But several years later, due to health problems related to chemicals used in the course of my job, I was unable to continue. I could no longer use the only job skills I had.

At thirty-eight years of age, I pursued my life-long dream, to go to college. With a GED in hand, lots of life experience, a drive to succeed, and little else, I applied and was

accepted to Southwest Texas State University. I remember driving to SWT that first day thinking, “What am I doing? I am up against students who just graduated from high school, who know much more than me.” The first semester I made the dean's list and increased my confidence, I could do this, and I did. After receiving my bachelor's degree I pursued a master's at the University of Texas at Austin.



My involvement with school district issues began as a result of a situation with my high school son. While in school, my son began to have problems in school which I felt were related to biases toward Hispanics in the district. In an effort to get some minority students out of the system, students were enticed to get their GED, “because a GED is just as good as a diploma.” A group of students and parents were able to demonstrate a history of this behavior and a lawsuit was filed in federal district court. After several years the suit was resolved and changes were made in the school district.

We were also successful in filing another lawsuit to create single-member districts within our school district. I ran for the school board and was elected. I became the first Hispanic school board member in the forty-seven-year history of the district, the same school district I had attended so many years before.

Since 1970 great strides have been made in our school district, but not without struggle. The year 2003 brought significant changes: the hiring of the first woman superintendent, the first African American administrator, and I now hold the office of president of the school board. I am the first Hispanic and only the second woman to hold this position. This is what can “happen to Mexican girls.”

HBLI Helps with Unity 2003 California School Board Conference

The Hispanic Border Leadership Institute participated in the Unity 2003 Conference presented by the California Latino School Board Member Association, October 2-4, 2003, in Del Mar, California. The Unity Conference brings together the Asian Pacific Islander School Board Member Association, California Latino School Board Member Association, Coalition of Black School Board Members, the California Superintendents Association, and the California Association of Latino Community College Trustees. This year's conference theme was “The Time Is Now: Raising our Voices for Needed Change,” with breakout sessions on topics such as the legal rights of immigrant parents and children, public school accountability, No

Child Left Behind, and superintendent evaluations. A youth leadership seminar was also offered and included a panel of Latino professionals and role models who shared their success stories with high school and middle school students.

The breakout session entitled “Everyone Wants High Achievement—How Trustees Can Make It Happen!” presented by Dr. Leonard Valverde was very well attended. Dr. Valverde talked about the importance of having teachers, principals, superintendents, and board members create supportive environments that can increase student achievement. In addition, he talked about ways to maximize superintendent and principal performance.

Lilia Murray, Program Coordinator, organized and staffed an

informational table and provided tote bags for the conference. We reconnected with the HBLI California leadership seminar alumni and generated interest for our next California seminar scheduled for early spring 2004.

The leadership seminars continue to garner praise from the participants and presenters. By attending school board conferences, HBLI is attaining recognition among state school board associations like the Arizona School Boards Association, the California School Board Association, the California Latino School Board Member Association, the Texas Association of School Boards, and the Texas Mexican American School Board Association. In addition HBLI is associated with the NALEO National Education Leader-

ship Initiative Program. Currently, we are working with the New Mexico School Board Association and the Colorado Latino School Board Caucus in preparation for the leadership seminar scheduled for January 29-31, 2004, in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Lilia Murray and Leonard Valverde continue to promote the HBLI leadership seminars by participating in conferences like the California Unity Conference, Celebrating Opportunities Conference, and the Texas Mexican American School Board conference. The leadership seminar format provides an opportunity for the exchange of ideas and viewpoints by school board members and experts in an intimate setting to ultimately provide a rich experience for both seminar participants and presenters alike.