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## What Frames Us, Defines Us

. . . it is NOT the diversity that is the problem.  
It is the unconscious handling of diversity that creates  
the lack of fairness in the organization. . . .  
It is that diverse organizations require more sophisticated  
leadership, conscious awareness, thought,  
behavior, and tools to reap the benefits of what true  
diversity can provide.

—*Laura Liswood, 2010, xxvii*

### Getting Centered—An Inward Look

In picking this book to read, it may be that you are curious about how change was initiated and sustained in the Ventura Unified School District (VUSD). Before reading and thinking about Ventura, we ask you to begin by looking at your role as an educator. We want this book to be a full experience for you and to that end we invite an inward look. Take a few moments to think about the opening quote and the author's description of diversity. Now, think about this question: In what ways do you describe yourself as an educator in the context of diverse student populations? Please use the space below to record your thoughts and questions.

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## Story of the Ventura Unified School District

Narrowing and closing achievement gaps begins by recognizing that the focus must be on us—educators as learners. When we can honestly say to ourselves and to our colleagues *there is nothing wrong with our students*, we are at that moment prepared to educate our students. When we can honestly say *students' race, ethnicity, gender, special needs, English learning, socioeconomic, sexual orientation or identity, or faith is an asset on which we can build their educational experience*, we are at that moment prepared to educate all students from all demographic groups to levels thought unattainable a generation ago.

This book is the true story of one school district that is a few years into the process of educating students from all demographic groups. The story is one of process. The story is one of heart. The story is one of personal reflection. The story is one of cross-cultural dialogue. The story is one of school leaders holding themselves and others accountable in ways unthinkable a few years ago. The story is one of confronting policies and practices that unknowingly limited students' access to equitable opportunities. This story is not one of unusual bravery and courage; rather, it is a story of educators embracing their personal and professional responsibilities. This story is not finished; in fact the story has only just begun.

We bring you this story because it has a track record that presents roadblocks and barriers to be circumvented and not as reasons to capitulate and not educate our students. This story is about core values. The core values in this story are lived core values, not those mechanistic core values that are too often trotted out to satisfy state or regional accreditation requirements and review teams. This story is about the democracy of a nation that *can be*; it is the modern story of *E Pluribus Unum*. This 1782 phrase, on the seal of the United States, originally described the evolution of thirteen colonies into states of the United States. Today the phrase has evolved into describing the diversity of a country, a diversity to be embraced. Of course, we recognize only too well that the evolution to recognizing and providing for the rights of all people has been one of constant and continuing

struggle. This story is how one school district is embracing its diversity and taking its place in a United States that can and does provide access and equitable education to students from all demographic sectors of society.

## **Trudy's Guiding Question: What Frames Us?**

When we, Trudy and Randy, decided to write this book, we thought for a long time about how to begin. I, Trudy the Superintendent of the Ventura (CA) Unified School District at the time, decided to just begin writing and see where it took me. What you see in these opening pages are my thoughts from a frame of reference of having served 35 years as an educator, the last 14 as superintendent. All my years in education have been with this same school district. I begin with the subheading above—a question that has guided my leadership.

Ventura Unified is deep into the process of addressing the reality of the achievement gap with a common focus on confronting educational inequities within our practices and procedures. Early in our journey we recognized that students being categorized and labeled as underachieving implied a deficiency with our students, their families, and too often, their cultures. Instead of embracing deficit thinking, we chose to embrace our roles as educators and to view our students as being underserved and needing to be served differently. This stark realization placed the responsibility on the educator, and we accepted that responsibility with privilege. As we guide all students to reach their full potential, we strive to create culturally relevant learning environments and practices that provide a sense of belonging and support for all students and their families. Over the past decade, we have transformed from unintentionally participating in practices that marginalized students and their communities to being committed and successful in making the education of all students a common priority and a moral imperative.

## **Where it Began**

Our work began 10 years ago as we changed our District Management Team (DMT) to District Leadership Team (DLT) and began to build a foundation of leadership, trust, and confidence among our leaders. In the early years, we touched the surface of difficult issues. We examined the ethics of leadership. We explored the history of our district. We

became experts in generational differences. We created and developed a mission, vision, and guiding principles that reflected who and what we wanted to become. We enjoyed team building, *getting to know you* activities, and even learned to laugh at ourselves. We developed deep friendships over time that soon became bonds of solidarity and commitment. We were ready for the challenges of moving our district forward in the best interest of every child. We knew that commitment would take hard work and self-exploration. We knew that our vulnerabilities would be exposed, our unintentional biases challenged, and our comfort levels would be shaken. We were poised to do life-changing work. We were about to begin on a journey of Cultural Proficiency that was deserving of those we were privileged to serve.

## **Sharing of Stories: Creating Sacred Space**

We created what we called *sacred space* where it was safe to share our stories and our life experiences so that we could challenge and prepare ourselves to know and respond to the stories of our students and their families. Four years ago we created the metaphor of *doors opening, doors closing* to help us visualize our actions of serving all students. We utilized our own stories of doors closing and opening to reflect on how we respond to our students. Deep dialogue, vulnerable divulging, and heartfelt reflection became part of the culture of leadership. We realized that we must examine our own stories to determine who we are and where we come from with the realization that our life experiences frame and shape us as educators. Each individual has a story to share and each experience empowers us to gain deeper understandings of our students so that we may unlock the rich potential in every child.

### **Stories that Framed Leaders in VUSD**

The stories that follow are representative of the many stories shared as we recalled and wrote our stories. If you have not done a similar process with your colleagues, it will equip you in responding to the educational needs of your school community. Be prepared to experience deep levels of understanding of self in relation to others, especially those we serve.

#### ***Middle school assistant principal***

“My parents arrived to this country in the 1970’s from Mexico with the hopes and dreams of providing their children with a better

future and the 'American Dream'. Both my parents had little education, but that did not limit their spirits and their will to succeed. When I was nine, my parents told me I was going to college and explained that they had opened a college fund account for each of my siblings and me. That commitment framed who I am. I learned that the value of education was a commitment of a bank account from parents who had no money to spare. Today my mission is to be a mentor and role model. I challenge myself to be the one who promotes and supports students to believe in their abilities and strive for higher education. I am a bilingual, biliterate, and bicultural leader. I support our nation as a global leader and I give gratitude to my roots."

***Middle school principal***

"When I strayed from the expected path and did what I wanted to do as a young woman, I began to frame myself as a leader. I traveled alone to nations across the globe to experience the cultures of others as I learned to experience myself. I learned very simply how good people are in all corners of the world. People are kind, friendly, inquisitive, funny, and generous. I learned to give gratitude for my own story and through my world travels, I continue to learn from and celebrate the stories of others. I learned to embrace myself as I embraced the world around me. "

***Middle school assistant principal***

"It took 20 years of living in a toxic environment to break contact with my mother and her partner and to free myself from the dysfunction of family. I became an orphan that day and there was no going back. When I left, I was told that I would cease to exist. They were right that I ceased to exist as the person I was, but flourished in the existence of the person I have become. I found friends who supported my survival and I believe that I am worthy of the good life I have built. The abuse is part of my story, but it does not define me. I define myself. I know that my response to my framing story has provided hope to hundreds of students in similar situations."

***Director Special Education***

"I was raised by a deaf mother. I endured stereotypical beliefs that people held about 'deaf and dumb' individuals. I learned the power of ridicule by watching my precious mother be embarrassed by her hearing aids as she tried to hide her deafness from the

world. My mother gave me the qualities that do not require hearing. Her deafness taught me to be accepting of others, to give more than most and to stand up for others, even when no one else is standing. I lost my hearing as a young adult. I am a confident, proud, deaf adult and I decorate my hearing aids for the world to see and admire.”

***High school principal***

“I grew up in a family where no one on either side attended college. I was not a college bound kid. I underperformed in high school and only attended school for athletics. I was programmed to believe that I did not belong in college. My mother left us when I was 13 and I quickly learned to fend for myself. My story has framed me to never underestimate a student and never allow a student to presume that they are not college bound. I am a tenacious optimist. I believe in the potential of every child.”

***Elementary school principal***

“I found myself as a teen parent at the age of 18. I was a high achiever but the pregnancy as a high school senior suddenly changed the image that others had of me. I was no longer the high achiever in the eyes of others. I defied the odds. I proved them wrong. I had my daughter at the age of 18 and I became more responsible than ever before, driven with a sense of purpose and determination. My story has framed me to believe that there are no obstacles too great, that second chances do matter, and that we remain strong and steady in our belief in all students. When they falter, we do not.”

***Director, Indian Education***

“I am a tall, proud, black woman. I stand as proud as my mother stood on the day we were told, ‘we don’t rent to you people’. My father served in the U.S. Navy and we were told that we did not belong. My story has framed me to be relentless, resilient, and steadfast. I defied every educator whose actions and words screamed that I did not belong! My high school counselor told me I was not college material and my parents would not be able to afford a private institution. A teacher suggested I take the clerical track. I was told that the homecoming court was not for girls who looked like me. I have a doctorate degree. High achievement is for ‘my people’. The students I serve are standing beside me as tall and proud leaders.”

**Assistant Superintendent Business Service**

“I grew up in South Central Los Angeles. My reality was continual concern for my safety and well-being. I am the only one in the neighborhood who went to college and became a professional. My friends were murdered, jailed, or became drug addicts. This was my reality. This is the stark reality of many of our students today. I am here to ensure that every student is treated with dignity and respect. I am here to ensure that the stark realities of some of our students are not only recognized but accommodated and understood.”

**Reflection**

Pause for a moment to think about these personal passages. What thoughts and reactions surface for you when reading these brief stories? In what ways were these successful educators framed or defined by their personal stories? What questions arise for you when reading the stories? Take time to reflect on the experiences in your life that framed who you are today. Do you know the stories of your colleagues and the young people you are privileged to teach and guide?

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**Do We Have the Will and the Vision to Open the Doors?**

Now that you have a flavor of our experiences, I will guide you through our thought processes as we continued on our journey to access and equity. In doing so, I am shifting from passive to active voice so you can sense and feel what it may have been like to have been “in the moment” of these internal and dialogic conversations.

From these early discussions that evolved over time, we developed a mission, vision, and set of guiding principles. This book describes our journey in developing “who we strive to be.” This book challenges us to ensure that our values do indeed reflect our actions at all times. We speak of our vision proudly; student voices read it at every Board meeting, yet we continue to identify practices that do not reflect our stated values. We understand and embrace the reality that

### From My Superintendent's Journal

As we reflect on our own experiences, we create the power to dispute and dialogue about the practices and policies that negatively impact our current students. We may shake our heads in absolute shock and disbelief of what once occurred. Yet, are we willing to confront and address the practices that are currently in place? Are we willing to question the practices that the students of today will someday claim as door openers and closers?

We recall past practices within our district that are often questioned by, "Can you believe we used to do that?" We shake our heads at shocking practices that existed within our district as recent as the 1960s and the 1970s. Can you believe that we used to have smoking rooms for staff members and ashtrays outside the classrooms at our continuation high school? Can you believe that we used to terminate teachers who were pregnant and unmarried? Can you believe that we had girl's lines and boy's lines? Can you believe that we determined how long a boy's hair could be? Can you believe that we incorporated corporal punishment into our discipline policies? Can you believe that gay/lesbian employees could not reveal their sexual identity for fear of reprisal?

We are proud that we can look back in shock and agree that these practices no longer exist in our district. This is not enough. We must continue to question the practices of today and recognize that there are current practices in effect that will shock the educators of tomorrow. Will our students recall practices 20 years from now that closed doors on their future? Will they frame their experiences with, "Can you believe"?

- Can you believe that we employ grading practices that do not accept late work?
- Can you believe that we disallow students into Honors or Advanced Placement classes because of summer work requirements?
- Can you believe that students must have personal resources to participate in many school activities such as athletics, music, clubs, and graduation ceremonies?
- Can you believe that we give assignments that require personal resources in the home?
- Can you believe that we give extra credit for attending community events that require personal resources?
- Can you believe that we hold parent conferences in the afternoon only? Can you believe that we hold picture days, dances, and assemblies on Jewish holidays?
- Can you believe that we have students make mother's day cards, Christmas gifts, and Easter decorations?
- Can you believe that we only allow students to go to a dance with a date?



(Continued)

We are challenged to examine what stories our students will tell. Do we have the will and the vision to open the doors that are closed?

As we examine our mission, vision, and guiding principles, we strive to achieve actions that reflect our values. We ask ourselves if we have the will and the courage to ensure that our actions reflect our stated values and belief systems. As we engage in leading conversations that matter, we have begun the critical process of ensuring that every decision and every action has a lens of opening doors for every child. Practices related to contextual factors of poverty, sexual orientation, language acquisition, culture, and parental access using an inside-out model are explored through real life school and district experiences. As educators we have the responsibility and the privilege of opening doors for all. We strive to update our practices to reflect what we are becoming and not what we used to be. The leverage for change requires clear understanding of policies, procedures, and vision that all educators have the capacity to educate students from diverse ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

if there is a disconnect between what we say we believe and what we actually do, we must either change the value statement or change the action. Our students deserve nothing less.

We will revisit VUSD's Guiding Principles and Mission Statement in more depth in Chapter 4 and are including them here so you can become acquainted with these statements as early outcomes of our *inside-out approach* to being ever better stewards of our school district.

### **VUSD Guiding Principles**

- We will make decisions in the best interest of students.
- We will value and celebrate diversity and treat all people with dignity and respect.
- We will operate in a fiscally responsible manner.
- We will work as a team.
- We will maintain a working environment that promotes professional growth and excellence.
- We will celebrate and recognize success, creativity, and achievement through a variety of indicators.
- We will embrace families and community as partners in education.

## VUSD Mission Statement

The Ventura Unified School District will educate all students in safe, healthy and high performing school. We will . . .

- Inspire all students to excel academically.
- Honor the unique quality and diverse backgrounds of all students,
- Build supportive relationships,
- Guide all students to reach their full potential,
- Motivate all students to successfully pursue their chosen life path, and
- Engage all students to become responsible and contributing members of society.

These are words that are valued and coveted in VUSD. Students at every Board meeting read them and we strive to ensure that our actions reflect our stated values. We have developed our concept of opening doors utilizing the Conceptual Framework of Cultural Proficiency (Stephens & Lindsey, 2011). As we have delved into the process, we have captured the voices of our leaders by sharing our individual stories, assessing our own cultural knowledge, and ultimately challenging our practices and policies at every level.

## Reflection

What is your reaction to the “Can You Believe” examples? What questions arise for you? In what ways does this section inform or affirm your current work? Are you able to identify actions within your organization that are disconnected from the value statement? How can we possibly move forward without truly knowing, understanding, and articulating our belief and value system? Please use this space to record your comments.

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## Door Closers and Openers

Doors closing or opening is the metaphor currently being used in VUSD by educators to describe and define how we serve our students. All schools have doors; some are on hinges, whereas others

exist in our values, language, policies, and practices. Whether the doors are tangible or intangible they serve the same functions, either as barriers or passageways. The *Cultural Proficiency Continuum*, which is presented in greater depth in Chapter 2, provides a spectrum of behaviors and responses used by educators and is presented here as an introduction to the most visible of the Tools of Cultural Proficiency.

**Cultural Proficiency**—Is the door wide open, and are we escorting students through the door? To what extent are we advocating for students and their communities?

**Cultural Competence**—Is the door wide open? To what extent are we using students' cultures as assets in our instructional programs?

**Cultural Precompetence**—Is the door cracked open? To what extent do we have the courage to examine access and achievement data to assess areas of discrepancy and disproportionality?

**Cultural Blindness**—Door? What door? In what ways do we ignore or render invisible the diverse communities in our school attendance area?

**Cultural Incapacity**—Is this the door you are to be using? In what ways do we send messages that our school is not inclusive?

**Cultural Destructiveness**—Is the door slammed shut? In what ways do we exclude or marginalize students and their cultures?

As we created a safe environment for sharing, site and district leaders began to divulge their door closing experiences in their own educational lives. The metaphor of “door closers” and “door openers” began to take a life of its own.

## Door Closers

The power of words, consequences, and expectations has a lasting impact on students. The leaders of VUSD were challenged to retrieve memories of times when educators used or misused powers to their detriment. As leaders shared their experiences, we once again gasped in disbelief, cried, and even laughed at the absurdity of the door closing actions. We challenged ourselves to think about today as we reflected on yesterday:

High school Latino principal with a doctorate in education shares the story of being in eighth grade and having the social

studies teacher assure him that he was not to worry about passing the class because he would be an orange picker like his father.

Assistant superintendent recalled the time a social studies teacher called her a communist for expressing views that did not meet the mold of the teacher's belief and value system. She never spoke up again in social studies.

High school assistant principal was released from the Associated Student Body (ASB) due to the fact that her single mother could not afford the ASB sweater that was voted by all members to purchase. She shares the story of how she publicly voted, "yes" to purchase the sweaters and later spoke privately with the teacher to explain that she could not afford the sweater. The teacher told her she should have voted "no" and released her from the leadership class.

Elementary principal recalls being told that on the first day of class that only half of the class would pass the Algebra II/Trig class. This served to be a self-fulfilling prophecy because he was one of the predicted casualties.

Grant coordinator was told in fourth grade that she would never be a great reader and there was nothing that could be done. That same year, she found a way to compensate for her predicated lack of literacy and earned the class clown award.

The power of words to hurt and marginalize students is evident when presented as we have here. Similarly, the power of words to heal, to include, and to promote are powerful in their own ways. Being mindful of what is said and attentive to the effect on others is an ethically responsible act on the part of educators when working with diverse communities where access and equity issues are of concern. Opening doors cannot be taken for granted; it must be intentional.

## **Door Openers**

We recognize that we are equally moved and framed by the doors that were opened in our past. We reflect on those who mentored, those who cared, and those who mattered. As we participated in recollecting who was "around our table" in our formative years, we

shared stories of long ago, reflecting on words that were said, glances that were meaningful, and actions that changed our lives.

Middle school principal was placed in a low-level math class. A counselor took note of his potential and called him into her office. He insisted that his placement was fine but arrived on Monday to find that she had changed him to a college prep math class. He excelled and continued on that track throughout his high school career.

Assistant superintendent was cut from the basketball team on a Friday. He recognized that basketball was his only ticket to success and staying off the streets so he returned on Monday to practice. The coach recognized that he was back after being cut from the team but did not say a word. He stayed and within 3 years became a star basketball player on the varsity team. The coach opened the door for the kid who was cut from the team.

High school assistant principal's family was poor and she was embarrassed to receive free lunch. She pretended to give money to the cashier one day and the cashier reciprocated by accepting her pretend money with grace and privacy. For years, they had a ritual of exchanging money when there was no money in the hand. She eventually learned to be proud of her family status but never forgot the cashier who responded when she needed the door cracked open.

Superintendent was thrilled to find that her favorite teacher, who always taught fourth grade was teaching sixth grade and she had him again. When she questioned his reason for changing grade levels after all these years, he responded that he changed so he could have her as a student one more time. She believed him for years and believed that he liked her so much that he would make a career change for her. Children deserve to know that a teacher loves having them in class.

These stories of Door Closers and Door Openers have one thing in common. Each of these folks became successful adults. Our question came to be, *how many of our classmates were permanently shut out? In what ways do we shut today's kids out so they are permanently sidelined from successful careers and lives? How many of our students are not successful due to missed opportunities because someone closed the door before they could even unlock it?*

## Creating Door Openers as Result of Our Work

We began to challenge ourselves to intentionally respond to our question: *Do our actions reflect our values?* The superintendent challenged every district and site leader to identify practices and procedures within the organization that were door closers and to intentionally open the door. Practices and decisions throughout the district began to shift. When difficult decisions were to be made, we asked ourselves if the decision was a door closer or a door opener. We challenged ourselves to crack the doors open and to strive to escort our students and families through the doors. Door opening was included in the principals' goals and objectives and became a part of their evaluation. Each leader was challenged to intentionally identify new practices, procedures, and policies that opened the doors that were closed and widen those that were open. These are a few examples of intentional practices that emerged:

- English as Second Language (ESL) and Adult classes no longer charged a fee.
- Prom venues were changed so that all students could attend. Students could come as singles, in groups, with dates, without dates.
- Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) was implemented schoolwide.
- The continuation high school offered courses into the late afternoon rather than an early out dismissal.
- The high school library and computers were open until evening hours.
- Childcare and transportation were offered at Back to School nights.
- Parent conferences were held in the evenings to accommodate working parents.
- Expanded awards at the middle school level to include integrity, grit, and kindness.
- Increased flexibility in the promotion ceremonies to ensure that behavior was not a criterion to attend promotion ceremonies.
- All students were given poster board and supplies to create their campaign materials for student council elections.
- Changed fundraisers so as not to isolate families and out price them from participating.
- Changed policy to no longer return students back to their home schools when exited from special education.

- Offered preschool classes utilizing Spanish as the primary language of instruction.
- Purchased caps and gowns for seniors.

## Going Deeper

This final section of the chapter provides reflection opportunity as you read for your own professional experience and growth in serving the needs of diverse student populations. You and your colleagues are provided a professional dialogic learning opportunity as you continue to work for the ongoing improvement of your school/district's efforts in narrowing and closing achievement gaps.

### Reflection

Now that you have read the first part of our journey in Ventura, you may be thinking about your role as an educator and the extent to which you, your school, and your district is inclusive of diverse student populations. You may be thinking about particular students or even particular colleagues. What questions arise for you that you hope are addressed in this book? Please use the space below to record your thinking.

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### Professional Dialogic Learning Activity

To what extent are you knowledgeable about your school/district's efforts to narrow and close access and achievement gaps? To what extent does your school and district engage in opening and closing doors? What might be some specific door opening/door closing activities in your district/school? What questions about your school or district does your reading thus far prompt? The space below is for you to record the thinking of you and your colleagues.

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In Chapter 2 you will learn, or review, the Tools of Cultural Proficiency. The tools are presented through a leadership lens. As you read Chapter 2, give yourself time to absorb the manner in which the tools are interrelated and the manner in which destructive and constructive personal and organizational values are made explicit in our and our schools' actions.

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