

There Is No Such Thing as an 'Illegal' Human Being

BY J. MICHAEL CLÁRA

I was shocked as I read *The Tribune's* editorial "Falling Test Scores" (Aug. 13). Immigrant-bashing and blaming educational financial woes on immigrant children and parents in a newspaper editorial belies *The Tribune's* so-called progressive reputation. Globalization has made Mexican and other migrant labor, especially when undocumented, a key to restructuring the U.S. economy. Scapegoating these same workers for U.S. economic problems is thus an act of supreme hypocrisy and political opportunism.

At one point *The Tribune* editors had the "chutzpah" to say, "There are no more expensive students than low income children who don't speak English." I submit that the expense comes in the form of institutional racism practiced by educators. Instead of considering such realities, many of us choose to get derailed by all the hostile myths about immigrants. Consider the recent actions by the Salt Lake School District:

■ Discarding SAT Scores of Latino Children: It is one of the most insidious forms of racism to tell a child that he/she doesn't count because of

his/her ethnic origin. When the district decided to discard the SAT scores of Latino students who are English Language Learners, it revealed its low expectations of Latino children's academic performance. This attitude becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. The superintendent issued an apology and stated that from now on, she will include the SAT scores of Latino children with the district totals. (Salt Lake School District Media Statement, Dec. 6, 2000).

■ Prohibiting the Spanish Language On Campus: The ultimate betrayal of Latino children is the demagoguery that asserts that their main "handicap" is speaking Spanish. The Spanish language predates the founding of this state (and the country, for that matter). It is the principal language of the Western Hemisphere and the second language of the United States. By prohibiting the speaking of Spanish in the school, hallway, lunchroom, playground, etc., we send a message to our children and community that success in the school requires that they abandon any identification or affiliation with the culture and experiences they bring to the school.

A student's prior experiences and identities are seen as

an impediment to academic growth rather than a foundation upon which academic development can be built. When students' language, culture, and experiences are ignored or excluded from school interactions, students are immediately starting from a disadvantage. In an effort to resist this type of devaluation of culture by the school, students will mentally withdraw from participation in the life of the school. Here again the superintendent stepped up to the plate and issued a memo to all principals, informing them that the ban on speaking Spanish in the schools should be lifted. (Superintendent memo to all administrators, Jan. 18, 2001.)

■ Segregation by Way of Forced Busing. On May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court of the United States ruled on the landmark case of *Brown vs. the Board of Education*. The Supreme Court determined that forced busing of children to schools outside of their communities could cause irreparable damage to these children. Chief Justice Warren stated that "the separation of children based on their race has a detrimental effect upon the [bused] children. The impact is greater when it is sanctioned by law; for the policy of separating the races is usually interpreted as denoting the inferiority of the

minority group. A sense of inferiority affects the motivation of a child to learn."

Recently the Salt Lake City Board of Education took the courageous step of putting a stop to this demeaning practice of forced busing based on ethnic origin. (School board meeting vote, June 5, 2001).

Schools reflect the values and attitudes of the broader society that supports them, so it is hardly surprising that the Latino community has experienced the extensive devaluation of its culture and language within the school context. Culturally diverse students are disempowered educationally in very much the same way that their communities have been disempowered historically.

The logical implication is that these students will succeed academically to the extent that the patterns of interaction in the school reverse those that prevail in the society at large. In other words, a genuine commitment to helping all students succeed academically requires a willingness on the part of educators, individually and collectively, to challenge aspects of the power structure in the wider society.

These Latino children should no longer be placed in a position where they have to respond to attacks against themselves defensively. Instead they

should be allowed to create a consciousness within their communities, of their connectedness to the land. In Utah, the prevailing attitude is that Latinos "should go back where they came from." Such sentiments imply that Latinos are unwelcome and not to be extended courtesies and protection under the law because "they don't belong here."

I am apt to say that our Utah mentality is practicing racism; however, that is inadequate in describing what is happening. Something even more insidious is occurring: dehumanization (as evidence by *The Tribune* editorial). I define dehumanization as treating people legally, culturally, socially and even politically as less than human. Many people of color, in fact, are subjected to brutal and extreme forms of dehumanization — including an insistence that we don't belong here. If Latino children are to go back to where they came from, apparently Utah and the Four Corners area would be their destination.

The ancient homeland of the Aztecs is where modern-day Utah currently is. Research

conclusively debunks the racist mantra of telling Mexicans and Central Americans to "go back where they came from." These red-brown children who are vilified as aliens have roots to this land that go back thousands of years, long before Mormon Pioneers arrived in Mexico (present-day Utah) and long before the Pilgrims set foot on the East Coast. As a school district and as a community, we need to re-examine our beliefs, attitudes and behavior toward these red-brown children. As we do so, we will ultimately learn that all human beings are indeed connected, to one another and to Mother Earth, and that there are no such things as aliens anywhere on this planet. I see a day in our community where we hold all life as sacred and where there are no "illegal" human beings.

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Salt Lake City Board of Education
Our Children Deserve Diplomas Not Delusions

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