

# Meet Aurelio Montemayor



If you're looking for a leader with a passion for student achievement and family involvement—and the energy to match that passion—meet Aurelio Montemayor. A member of PTA's National Board for the past three years, Aurelio also serves as the director of the Texas Parent Information Resource Center (PIRC) of the Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA).

The U.S. Department of Education created PIRCs in 1995 to provide parents, schools, and family assistance organizations with training, information, and technical assistance to understand how children develop and what they need to succeed in school. The more than 80 PIRCs that have been formed across the nation pay special attention to low-income, minority, and English-language learning students. Montemayor talked with *Our Children* about how he got

involved with PIRCs and PTA and his hopes for more collaboration between the two groups.

**Our Children: How did you get so active in education and parent involvement?**

**Aurelio Montemayor:** My history with parents and schools goes back to the late 60s. I had been a high school English teacher and then became a VISTA supervisor and trainer with the VISTA Minority Mobilization Project that put me in contact with south Texas families and students who were very dissatisfied with their public schools.

Families were experiencing racism in schools and were demanding that there be more Mexican-American teachers, that students not be punished for speaking Spanish, that students be prepared for col-

lege and be considered college material. There were school walkouts initiated by families to put pressure on schools.

I came to IDRA in 1975 and soon became the point person for parent involvement. In the early 80s, we had a project funded by the Office of Bilingual Affairs to work with parents whose children were in bilingual programs. Our organization's sense of what we needed to do to help parents support excellence in education evolved from those experiences. We at IDRA advocate for excellent schools for all children, and the most important and natural allies in that cause are parents: we focus on parent leadership in education.

**OC: What led you to become involved with PIRCs and PTA?**

**AM:** In 1999, IDRA submitted a proposal for a PIRC and succeeded in getting the award. The PIRC requirements fit in perfectly with our interest in supporting

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parents to become active participants in creating excellent schools for all children. I've been the director for the several consecutive IDRA-funded PIRCs in Texas.

At the national PIRC office within the Office on Innovation and Improvement, Parent Options and Information, Patricia Kilby-Robb has championed bringing in major parent organizations to the annual PIRC directors meeting. Three years ago, PTA was invited along with other national organizations to meet the PIRC directors and staff. Warlene Gary, a good friend and former PTA CEO, introduced me to Anna Weselak, a former PTA National President. A few weeks later, Anna asked if I would serve as an at-large appointee to the National Board, and I accepted.

My previous experiences and contact with PTA had been few. Most of the families I work with in poor communities and Title 1 schools are not active in PTA. I hadn't seen the organization as an important vehicle for those families.

**OC: What are the challenges PTA faces in your dual roles?**

**AM:** The challenges are not brought on because of the dual roles. Wearing two hats will possibly change things for the better. The challenge for PTA is to address the working poor families whose children are in Title 1 schools.

PTA, change the model of what a local PTA unit looks like, how it operates, and what a leader looks like! Adapt so that the large number of families who don't fit into the present PTA culture can become active, dynamic participants. Reexamine the definition and model of leadership to embrace emerging leaders from poor communities as a legitimate part of PTA leadership. My stance, vision, and practical connections with families come from assumptions of value—their desire for the best for their children and an

expectation that schools will provide the very best education possible.

There are huge challenges, but if PTA puts its resources behind requiring that states and municipalities fund schools adequately, then time spent on fundraising can be used instead to create schools that work for *all* children. PTA can become a magnet for all families—a place where they will be listened to and supported.

**OC: As someone who came to education and parent involvement outside of PTA, how do you interact with other PTA leaders?**

**AM:** I am an outsider to PTA history and camaraderie, and I'm loud-mouthed, intrusive, and not very PTA polite to boot! I didn't take the choice to run for the board lightly and have targeted goals for my tenure. But if poor, working, Latino, African-American, urban, and rural

tal education services, and public school choice. To the degree that PTA supports and collaborates with PIRCs to meet the needs of these families, they are helping us meet our requirements.

If PTA meetings, conferences, and conventions highlight the rights and responsibilities of parents under the Title 1 legislation, then PIRCs and PTA are ideal partners and collaborators.

**OC: What inspires you?**

**AM:** I'm inspired by the families I see bent on preparing their children for college, even when the parents don't speak English and, economically, are hanging by their fingernails.

I'm inspired when I see teenagers sitting down to teach adults how to get onto the computer so that they can see how their children's school is doing.

I'm inspired when the student voice is

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families can become the new, exploding membership for PTA, and PTA, in turn, becomes a new voice for these families, then it's truly worth taking on being a board member.

**OC: What advice would you give to PTAs about collaborating with PIRCs and other parent groups?**

**AM:** PTAs need to understand the mission and requirements of PIRCs. PIRCs must serve families of children ages 0–5 that are being supported through proven home-visitation programs and inform parents about their rights under No Child Left Behind—very specifically about Title 1 public school accountability, supplement-

heard, unfiltered, uncoached by adults, and clearly letting us know what is working in school for them, and what is not.

I'm inspired when I see educators talking with parents and students—where each one has a chance to speak their mind without being criticized.

I'm looking for the parents who will emulate Rosa Parks, fighting for our children and schools today: the parents who will sit at the front of the school board meeting or the site-based decision-making team and be a witness for ensuring all children are truly excelling to the best of their ability and prepared for college and beyond. **OC**