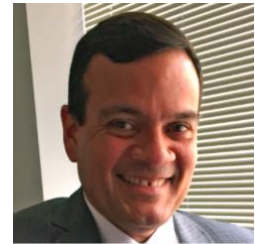


An interview with KARLING AGUILERA-FORT

**California Association for Bilingual Education, Immediate Past President
El Rancho Unified School District, Superintendent**



Interviewed by Laurie Nesrala, Editor and CABA Education Consultant/Membership Liaison

How has being an immigrant yourself framed your work with immigrant and language minority students?

Being an immigrant has helped me understand the experiences of immigrant students who are trying to adapt to a new society and a new culture. My own experiences allow me to share a lens with them and be more empathetic. I can use my own experiences to actually connect with students and their families, to be reflective, and to walk in their shoes.

Can you tell us about your own educational journey?

Since I was 13 years old, I knew I wanted to be a teacher of kids with learning challenges. I had a relative who was facing learning challenges and I was looking for ways to help her. I would watch what teachers would do—and then do it differently! My heart has always been in teaching and when I finished high school, I went directly to get a degree in education. In Venezuela, I taught special education in elementary and middle school for 8 years. The last two of those years, I taught in the teacher credentialing program for Special Education.

Later, I had the unique opportunity to participate in an international educational conference in Havana, Cuba. There I met teachers from the US and discovered that we had commonality in how we framed and approached our work. In 1994-1995, they invited me to do a presentation in San Francisco and I returned the next year to do a follow-up. Because the district needed a teacher who could teach Special Education in Spanish, the following year I was invited to teach there. I quickly realized that half of my students didn't need special education, they just needed to learn English! I used their native language as a vehicle to teach them until they could integrate into the general education setting.

How did you first become involved with CABA?

While teaching, I began to take on a more active role in the school, serving as an informal mentor for Special Education teachers within the school context and later joining the district's Leadership Team. With the advent of Prop 227 in 1997 and because I knew how important it was to develop literacy and conceptual skills in the native language, I became active in the local

CABE chapter. CABE was the only organization providing guidance and support for bilingual education. Because I had done a lot of work as a teacher with families around how to support and advocate for their children, and because I have provided high levels of instruction to my students, re-integrating them to the general bilingual education settings in 2000, I was honored with the CABE Teacher of the Year award. In 2002, I was asked to run for the board position of Director of Community Affairs, a position that I held for one term. Two years later I was encouraged by my colleagues to run for President of CABE and I served a full term.

What is it about CABE that keeps you involved?

CABE is THE organization providing guidance, support, and tools to work with English Learners in an effective, respected and responsive way. CABE is THE organization that has shown me how to be a strong advocate for English Learners. Five years after my first term as president, I was asked again to run for president during what was *a new phase* for CABE—The board had just adopted a new strategic plan and hired a new CEO. This was perfect timing to work with the organization as the president of the Board of Directors once more.

What do you see in CABE's future?

As the main organization nationwide advocating for bilingual education, CABE will continue to provide guidance and professional development for teachers, administrators, parents and community members. I see CABE taking on an international role as a lead organization inviting others to join this work on behalf of multilingualism and multiculturalism, while connecting all of this to global education. As a matter of fact, CABE has already started this work with Mexico, Spain and China. I see an *international* chapter in CABE's future!

To what do you attribute CABE's success?

I believe that much of CABE's success comes from the commitment and beliefs of CABE members as a whole. Their love of knowledge, in terms of content, pedagogy, and implementation of programs for bilingual and multilingual education, is of the highest caliber. Additionally, for over 40 years the leaders of this organization, from Silvina Rubenstein, Maria S. Quezada, to Jan Gustafson Corea and many others, have taken CABE to new levels, each according to the context of their time. Every single board member is committed to the cause of bilingualism, multicultural education and English learners.

Dual language education has grown exponentially in the last decade, both nationally and in California. To what do you attribute this growth?

People have begun to realize the power of bilingualism, multilingualism and multiculturalism. Families want their kids to understand and interact with the communities they live in and in a global society. Language is a key aspect of doing that. Our kids are successful when we provide them opportunities to master more than one language.

What is your message to teachers entering bilingual education?

You are going to change and transform lives. You are actually the one who will prepare those that will implement a new society in a new world. You will experience how wonderful it is to see the transformation of kids. Just think about how many lives you will be benefiting as a bilingual teacher!

Any other thoughts for CABA members and readers of CABA Corner?

People need to know that CABA is there to support, educate, and guide, not just teachers, but anyone looking to support bilingual education. CABA is not afraid of taking risks on behalf of our students—and will continue to do so. I will also continue to do so. **I am a CABA-ista now, tomorrow and forever!**

Biographical Information

Karling Aguilera-Fort is currently the Immediate Past President of the CABA Board of Directors and the Superintendent of El Rancho Unified School District. Formerly, he was the Assistant Superintendent for the Superintendent's Zone Mission District. K-12, where he provided guidance, support and supervision to the schools in an area of the city of San Francisco where more than 60% of the students are Latino and English Learners 15% are African American and 15% are white. Karling was responsible for graduating schools out of the School Improvement Grant (SIG) by developing systems and structures that to ensure sustainability of the continuous improvement cycles initiated in the Superintendent's Zone across the K-12 schools.

Karling served as the principal of Leonard R Flynn Elementary School during the school years 2010-2012. Before that, he served as Assistant Superintendent of Learning Support & Equity for the Academics and Professional Development Division in the SFUSD with a budget of more than 160 million dollars. He was responsible for overseeing a number of programs, which were created to serve populations of students that historically have not been supported to the fullest extent. These programs include: English Learner Services, Special Education Services and Standard English Learner Services.

Karling also served as Principal of Fairmount Elementary School (SFUSD), co-principal of Garfield Middle School in Redwood City School District, Assistant Principal at Buena Vista Elementary School (SFUSD) and has been a lecturer in the Principal Leadership Institute at the Graduate School of Education in the University of California, Berkeley.

As a Spanish Bilingual Special Education Teacher, Karling Aguilera-Fort was awarded Teacher of the Year in 2000. He was the President of the California Association for Bilingual Education (CABA) during 2007-2010, and again in 2015-2017. Originally from Venezuela where he worked at different levels in the educational system within Special Education, Karling Aguilera-Fort was invited to teach in the Spanish Bilingual Special Education setting in the SFUSD.

Since the beginning of his career, Karling has been involved with the issues of equity and social justice on behalf of the most marginalized students. He attended the Graduate School of Education at UC Berkeley where he obtained his master's degree in Educational Leadership. Now he is studying for his doctoral degree in International Educational Leadership. Overall, Karling has been involved with education nationally and internationally for 28 years.