Ana Cortez-Hernandez, Featured By Influential Women, Champions Leadership And Equity Through Two Decades Of Service

PORTOLA VALLEY, CA, UNITED STATES, September 16, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Seasoned Educator and School Leader Draws on Lived Experience, Mentorship, and a Commitment to Belonging to Help Students and Educators Build Meaningful Futures



Portola Valley, California – Ana Cortez-Hernandez is a seasoned educator and school leader whose more than 20 years in education have been defined by a commitment to equity, access, belonging, and student-centered leadership. Across public, private, and charter school settings, she has consistently worked to create educational environments where students are challenged to achieve at high levels while receiving the relationships, resources, and support necessary to succeed.

Currently serving as Head of Upper School at Woodside Priory, Ana provides leadership across grades 9-12 while guiding daily operations, faculty development, academic programming, strategic planning, and accreditation efforts. Her work also places a strong emphasis on student wellness and belonging, reflecting her belief that academic achievement is strongest when students feel known, supported, and valued.

For Ana, education has always been personal. Born in Mexico and raised in inner-city Oakland following her family's immigration to the United States, she experienced firsthand the inequities that can shape a young person's educational journey. Those experiences gave her an early understanding of both the challenges facing underserved communities and the profound difference a supportive school can make.

Rather than allowing those challenges to define her path, Ana used them as motivation to pursue a career dedicated to helping others access opportunities and realize their potential. She began her career as a classroom teacher before progressing into school leadership, eventually taking on the responsibility of helping establish Cristo Rey De La Salle East Bay High School as its Founding Principal.

In that role, Ana helped develop a college-preparatory educational model that combined rigorous academics with corporate work-study experiences. The model was designed to provide students with meaningful preparation for higher education and professional life while connecting classroom learning to real-world experiences. Under her leadership, the school cultivated a 100% college-going culture, reflecting her conviction that students should be encouraged to envision ambitious futures and given the support necessary to pursue them.

Today, that same philosophy continues to shape Ana's leadership. She believes that high expectations and strong support systems should never be separated. Students deserve to be challenged, she believes, but they also deserve adults who understand their individual journeys and are willing to walk alongside them.

At the heart of Ana's approach is the concept of influence. She views influence not as authority or status, but as the ability to plant and nourish ideas, perspectives, and experiences that help others become their fullest and most authentic selves.

"To be an influential woman means having the opportunity to invite others into Ana's own experiences, allowing others to learn from the mistakes Ana has made, from the challenges Ana has overcome, from the successes Ana has been able to experience," she explains.

For Ana, being influential means becoming a resource for others. It means sharing lessons learned, making connections, recognizing potential, and encouraging people to continue growing. Education leadership provides her with an especially meaningful platform to do that work because she has the opportunity to influence not only students, but also educators and aspiring leaders.

Her advice to younger women pursuing their ambitions is similarly rooted in perseverance and community. Ana encourages women not to abandon their vision when they encounter obstacles. Instead, she recommends finding mentors who have already traveled some of the road they hope to follow, asking questions, seeking help, and recognizing that success does not have to be achieved alone.

That belief in mentorship has played an important role throughout Ana's own career. She attributes much of her success to her mother, husband, children, sister, and the many mentors who supported her throughout high school, college, and her professional journey. These individuals challenged her, encouraged her, connected her with opportunities, and helped her

recognize potential in herself that she might not always have seen.

Mentorship remains important to Ana even today. She continues to value having someone she can turn to for debriefing, brainstorming, perspective, and accountability. She also emphasizes the importance of developing relationships beyond one's immediate professional community.

For women entering education leadership, she advises against trying to appear as though they have all the answers.

"Don't fake it till you make it," Ana says. "There is no need to fake anything."

Instead, she encourages emerging leaders to ask for support, clarity, guidance, and feedback. She believes aspiring educators and administrators can benefit enormously from connecting with professionals in similar roles at other schools, learning from their experiences, sharing ideas, and bringing valuable lessons back to their own communities.

This spirit of continuous learning is especially relevant as education enters a period of significant change. Ana identifies the rapid growth of artificial intelligence as one of the field's most important challenges and opportunities. While AI has the potential to transform teaching and learning, she believes its implementation must be thoughtful and intentional, ensuring that technology genuinely supports educators and students rather than simply introducing another layer of complexity.

Teacher burnout is another significant concern. Having spent much of her career working closely with educators, Ana understands the importance of supporting the people responsible for supporting students every day. She sees an ongoing need for schools to consider how they can better care for educators, strengthen professional communities, and create sustainable environments where teachers can continue doing meaningful work.

The broader political climate also presents challenges for schools, particularly as education policies and funding decisions affect students, families, and educators. For Ana, these realities reinforce the importance of advocacy, stability, and meaningful support within educational communities.

Despite the challenges, Ana remains deeply optimistic about the profession she chose decades ago. One of the most important pieces of career advice she ever received came from the director of the Upward Bound program during her high school years, who encouraged students to pursue careers that would fill their hearts and souls.

That message stayed with her.

Since entering education, Ana says she has never had a day when she woke up dreading work. Even when the profession presents difficult circumstances, she approaches those moments as

opportunities to improve, learn, and become better.

Her passion for education is also closely connected to the values that guide her life. Integrity, hospitality, authenticity, and spirituality are central to how she approaches both her personal and professional responsibilities. She believes in being welcoming, creating spaces where people feel they belong, and remaining true to oneself.

Spirituality, in particular, has an important place in Ana's life and family. Rather than defining it through affiliation with a particular religious congregation, she views spirituality as part of her personal journey and a source of reflection and grounding.

These values ultimately inform the kind of leader Ana strives to be: one who sees people before positions, possibilities before limitations, and relationships as essential to meaningful progress.

Her academic preparation reflects the same commitment to lifelong learning. Ana earned her bachelor's degree from Occidental College and went on to receive her master's degree, teaching credential, and administrative credential from Mills College. Throughout her career, she has continued to expand her leadership perspective while remaining closely connected to the students and educators at the center of her work.

As she looks toward the future, Ana remains focused on creating schools where students can develop academically, emotionally, socially, and personally. Her vision extends beyond college acceptance or career preparation. She wants students to leave school equipped to build meaningful lives, understand their own value, and contribute positively to the communities around them.

For Ana Cortez-Hernandez, influence is ultimately about what people carry forward after crossing paths with her. It is about planting a seed, nourishing an idea, offering encouragement, and helping another person recognize what is possible.

Through more than 20 years in education, she has embraced that responsibility with purpose. Her journey demonstrates how lived experience can become a source of leadership, how mentorship can create lasting impact, and how education can serve as a powerful vehicle for expanding opportunity.

As an educator, principal, mentor, and advocate for belonging, Ana continues to invest in the next generation—one relationship, one conversation, and one opportunity at a time.

Learn More about Ana Cortez-Hernandez:

Through her Influential Women profile, https://influentialwomen.com/connect/ana-cortez-hernandez

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