

A portrait of Perla Rodriguez, a woman with long blonde hair, wearing a light blue button-down shirt and a white blazer. She is smiling and has her arms crossed. The background is a soft, out-of-focus grey.

Perla Rodriguez

Principal

Echo Shaw Elementary School

Cornelius, Oregon

The Stats:

Years as principal: 16

2018 National Distinguished Principal

Education:

- Boise State University, Bachelor of Education
- Concordia University, Master of Education
- George Fox University, Doctor of Education

School details:

- Grade span: Pre-K–6
- Number of students: 465
- 85 percent free or reduced-price lunch
- 65 percent English-language learners

Programs:

- Dual-language English/Spanish school
- Full-day kindergarten
- Full- and half-day pre-K offerings

Dual-Language, One Goal

Access to multiple languages and cultures strengthens learning

As the daughter of proud Mexican immigrants, Perla Rodriguez has demonstrated a strong personal commitment to bicultural education throughout her career. Nowhere is that more clear than at Echo Shaw Elementary, where her efforts have led to the school receiving Exemplary Reading Program honors from the Oregon Reading Association and being ranked as a Model School by the Oregon Department of Education. Here's what she had to say about her journey as an educator and a principal.

On bilingual education

I feel I am called to serve in a school where bilingualism and biculturalism are not only valued, but also nurtured. I was raised believing that having more than one language meant my brother and I were equipped to function in more than one world. My parents learned English as adults and expected us to have a strong command of English, but they also wanted us to value the native language of our home. They often told us how fortunate we were to have *two* cultures.

On her greatest challenge as a principal

My role is to protect teaching and learning, while encouraging and facilitating innovation. Teachers are the heart and soul of their classrooms, and their understanding and buy-in is critical. There are times that it feels like we need to move faster, but in the words of [Brazilian educator and philosopher] Paulo Freire, "Leaders who do not act dialogically, but insist on imposing their decisions, do not organize the people—they manipulate them. They do not liberate, nor are they liberated; they oppress."

On work-life balance

Outside of my work as a school principal, I have judged professional boxing in Oregon for 17 years, and in the last two years, I started judging for the World Boxing Council (WBC). To date, I have judged seven WBC title fights, five of them world title fights, and have been appointed to judge throughout Mexico and as far away as London. It often surprises people to hear of my two passions—education and professional boxing—but I remind them that educators are still individuals. We give so much of ourselves to others that having hobbies that are not related to education is part of maintaining balance and personal health.

On what she's most proud of as a principal

I'm proud of how we have continued to increase the rigor in our dual-language program and how we have used our program to address issues of social justice. Particularly for students of Latino descent, our country can seem like one that does not value diversity. At our school, we have fully embraced our role as educators and have decided that we will not shy away from topics that may feel "political." Our role is to help our students to make sense of their world, and I am thrilled with the ideas and resources we generate to help our students navigate challenging and often highly personal topics. 