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Inside Track: Cuellar puts the focus squarely on education

The owner of Primera Plastics not only invests in his business, he invests in his employees and their children, as well.

By [Charlsie Dewey](#)
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As a business owner, Noël Cuellar doesn't want to create jobs; he wants to create careers.

A turning point for Cuellar was the recent recession, when he began to notice the talent drying up in the region.

Cuellar said while other organizations were focusing on growth by volume and revenue, Primera Plastics focused on shoring up the skills of its workers.

“Since we couldn't find talent, we developed our own,” he said. “We've spent \$200,000 in two years to accomplish that.”

Cuellar said helping his employees gain the skills they need to advance is a no-brainer for him because it's the same thing he did for himself when he hit a dead end in his late 20s.

Cuellar comes from a migrant family. He spent the first six years of his life traveling the country with his family as they followed the harvest cycle.

“We would go to Florida for the citrus, Ohio for vegetables and Michigan for the fruits,” he said.

Moving every 90 days or so made early education difficult.

When he was 6 years old, Cuellar's father landed a job at the H.J. Heinz pickle factory in Holland, after having been a seasonal employee there for three years.

Speaking primarily Spanish, Cuellar was placed in special education classes to try and help him catch up with the rest of his classmates, but he said being in those classes led to bullying, which didn't make school any easier for him.

What Cuellar learned in those early years was how to get by and coast through school. He noted he didn't read a book cover to cover until his mid-20s.

Upon graduating from high school, Cuellar followed his father into H.J. Heinz, where he worked for

seven years. He said the money was decent compared to what the family had made working in the fields, but he continued to struggle.

“Working, buying a car, spending the money — no financial plan, no plan whatsoever for the future,” he said of his life at the time.

He said lacking any kind of financial knowledge led him to a money crisis before he was 30, and to the realization that he had to do something different if he was going to succeed as an adult.

While working as an operator at Prince Corp. in Holland, Cuellar began to look around him and identify career opportunities at which he thought he could excel.

“I was watching the technical staff over at Prince, and they were the guys tweaking the machines and making the parts, and I wanted to be one of them,” he said.

But an aptitude test administered by the company revealed he didn’t have what it takes for the mechanical positions he’d set his sights on.

“Not being the type of person that takes rejection well, I realized I’m lacking skills,” he said. “That’s when I started taking classes at Grand Rapids Community College. I excelled at it, and within two years of classes, I was training the technicians.”

Cuellar soon began hearing about the need for minority suppliers in the auto industry and he said a light bulb clicked on.

He founded Primera Plastics, a plastic injection company, in 1994 with two presses and a 5,000-square-foot building. Today, the company operates 30 presses out of a 107,000-square-foot building with an additional 40,000-square-foot warehouse, all of which sits on nearly 11 acres of property in Zeeland.

Primera Plastics now employs 130 workers.

This year Cuellar is making a \$3 million investment in the business, which includes the purchase of an additional building to accommodate the company’s growth and the purchase of six presses, three of which will be additional presses. The three presses slated for replacement will become part of an employee training center within Primera’s warehouse.

“Our entry-level technical employees can go learn how to process and play with that equipment and not with the production machines,” Cuellar said.

In addition to the onsite training center, Cuellar is instituting a series of math classes for all of Primera’s employees this year. Employees will be required to take entry-level, intermediate and advanced math for manufacturing classes.

Cuellar already requires that his employees take a financial intelligence course, which is provided by the company’s bank. He emphasized that bank representatives come in during all three shifts so employees don’t have to come in during a special time.

Noël Cuellar

Organization: Primera Plastics

Position: President, CEO and Founder

Age: 55

Birthplace: Weslaco, Texas

Residence: Holland

Family: Wife, Janet Cuellar, and son, Mitchell

Business/Community

Involvement: Talent 2025 member, mentor at West Ottawa, Zeeland and Holland high schools; works with Disability Network.

Biggest Career Break: Getting an education.

“We are working on the financial piece so they can understand how to manage their money because, if they can do that, they can manage our business and understand how they impact the balance sheet,” he noted.

Cuellar said the company’s focus on education and creating career paths for employees is already having an impact.

“Two years ago, we had mediocre talent on the technical staff. Today, we have nine master molders with at least a level one, and out of the nine, four are level twos. A level three can teach at the trade schools,” he explained.

He said more employees are starting to inquire about how they can advance within the company. He has noticed more new cars lined up in the company’s parking lot and is aware of employees purchasing first homes, which he attributes to the financial education the company is providing.

Cuellar is also working with at-risk high school students to help prepare them for jobs in manufacturing.

He has instituted the Pathways program, which allows sophomore-level students to join the company at \$10 an hour and receive mentoring both on the shop floor and in soft skills such as communication, personal presentation, punctuality, self-esteem and more.

The students also participate in the financial intelligence classes, which Cuellar hopes will help them learn to save for a car that they can then use to get to and from classes at one of the local trade programs or colleges once they graduate from high school.

Cuellar said the students have the opportunity to further their education on the company’s dime if they stick with the program.

“We are investing money in people’s careers or potential careers — if they have the desire and are willing to pay the price for success,” he said.

Cuellar said he tries to instill the idea that “you aren’t getting paid by the hour; you’re getting paid for your value.”

Even if the students end up moving on from the company, Cuellar said if they have the tools to succeed somewhere else, he considers the program a success.

“When they graduate, if they decide not to stay with us, at least when they go out they will have some tools in their toolbox to fall back on and give them a chance to succeed,” he said.

“We are trying to convince the younger generation to stay in Michigan. We lose a lot of them.”

Cuellar also regularly talks to high school students in Ottawa County about careers in manufacturing and encourages them to invest in themselves and their education. He regularly partners with other Ottawa County business owners with similar backgrounds on these visits.

“We do mock interviews, work with kids on problem solving, sometimes judge competitions and provide presentation tips,” he said.

Because education was a key to his success, Cuellar said Primera is also trying to reach out to its

employees' children. For the past two years, Primera has purchased back-to-school supplies for all of them, ensuring they have the resources they need to succeed in the classroom.

“By really focusing on education — because that is how I learned to succeed — I’m trying to pass that on to the employees,” Cuellar said. “It’s going to take time, but we are putting it in place so the people who work here have the opportunity to advance and develop themselves.”



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