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From “Dropping Out” to “Holding On” – Seven Lessons from Texas

**Expanded from a presentation to the Education Writers Association’s Regional Seminar,
“Left Behind? Dropouts and High School Reform,” February 27, 2004
by María Robledo Montecel, Ph.D., IDRA Executive Director**

Eighteen years ago, no one knew how many students in Texas were leaving school without a high school diploma. Then, IDRA was commissioned to conduct the first comprehensive statewide study of high school dropouts in Texas. That pioneering study, conducted for the Texas Department of Community Affairs, answered three questions.

The first question was: How many students are dropping out? The answer was: Many. More than 86,000 students did not graduate that year from Texas high schools.

The second question was: Why are students leaving? The answer was: Students are not connected to the school. Students left for many reasons, but a lack of connection was an underlying theme.

The third question was: What is it costing us? The answer was: \$17.2 billion over the lifetime of those students in foregone income, lost tax base, increased unemployment costs, increased criminal justice costs, and increased welfare costs. In fact, IDRA’s cost benefit analysis indicated that for every dollar invested in keeping kids in school, nine would be returned (Ramírez and Robledo Montecel, 1987).

That was 1986. At the time, individual student records were not collected. To conduct the study in the absence of student-level numbers, IDRA pioneered an attrition methodology that utilized enrollment data from the Texas Education Agency to develop dropout count estimates. The IDRA study pushed the development of official dropout identification, counting, and reporting policies and procedures.

Now it is 2004. IDRA has conducted a dropout study every year using the same methodology based on enrollments. But progress on accurate counting by the state has been slow and halting. Dropouts in Texas have been systematically under-reported. This has created a false sense of security. By minimizing the problem, the state has promoted inaction.

At the national level, the *No Child Left Behind Act* federal education requirements around graduation rates are casting a national spotlight on the issue of dropouts. Several organizations have created dropout count methodologies that parallel the enrollment methodology that IDRA pioneered. In Texas, as in the rest of the country, many students drop out, many students are disconnected from schools, and the costs are high.

Fortunately, many educators, parents and students have not waited for the official counts to change. They know there is a problem. They know there are solutions. Around the country, schools and communities, in partnership with IDRA and in a range of other initiatives, have

pioneered new ways to turn the tide. Class by class, they have found ways to transform schools from *places that misplace children* into *settings that hold on to them*.

Having dealt with this issue so closely for so many years, IDRA offers the following seven lessons from Texas in the hope that many more will take up the call to action.

Lesson One: Losing children from our school systems (“dropout”) is a persistent, unacknowledged problem.

Since 1986, when IDRA conducted Texas’ first comprehensive statewide study of high school dropouts, Texas schools have lost close to 2 million students with an estimated net loss to the state of nearly \$500 billion. This is like losing Austin or Dallas over the course of a decade and a half.

And this first lesson can be seen across the country. The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University reported earlier this year: “Every year, across the country, a dangerously high percentage of students – disproportionately poor and minority – disappear from the educational pipeline. Nationally, only about 68 percent of all students who enter the ninth grade will graduate ‘on time’ with regular diplomas in the 12th grade” (Orfield, 2004).

The Civil Rights Project also reported that “dropout data mislead[s] the public into thinking that most students are earning diplomas” (Orfield, 2004).

The National Board on Educational Testing and Public Policy reported: “Despite setting a national goal of a high school graduation rate of 90 percent in 1994, only two states, New Jersey and Wisconsin, met that goal in the academic year 2000-01. Shockingly, there were 24 states with graduation rates of 75 percent or less” (Haney, 2004).

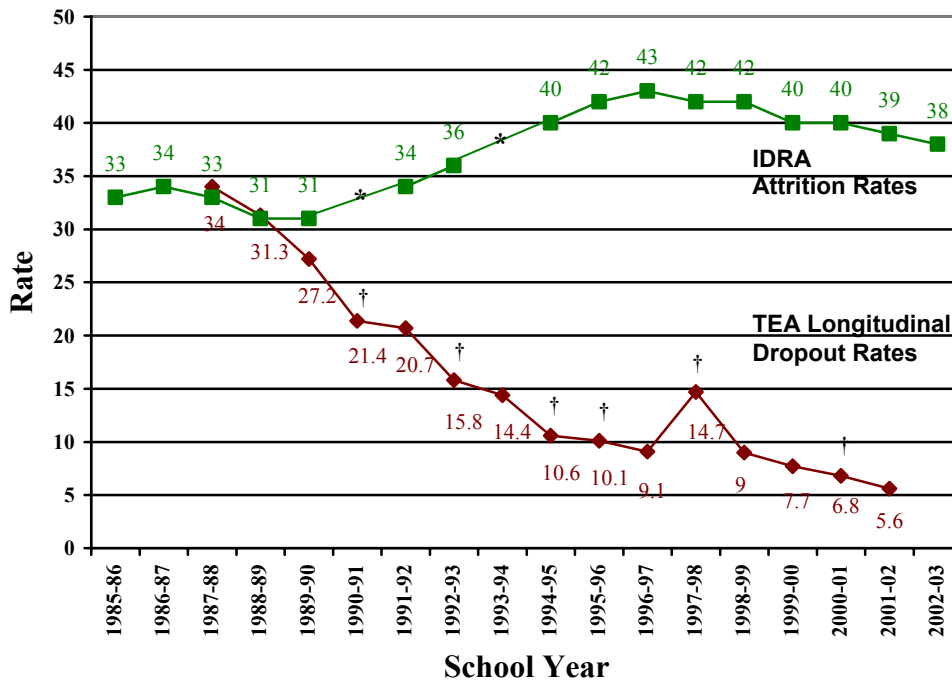
Since every student counts, we simply must count every student.

Lesson Two: Fraud is a red herring – distracting us from the real problem that is before us. Undercounting is the result of institutional intransigence, not massive fraud.

As compelling as stories of fraud can be, by and large, undercounts have nothing to do with fraud. Even if all school districts reported data within the letter of the law, as the system currently stands, they would seriously undercount lost students.

Texas currently uses 29 *leaver codes*, which result in a gross undercounting and under-reporting of students who have never received a high school diploma. In the past – as recently as 2000-01 – the state has used as many as 43 *leaver codes*. While a reduction in ways to obscure the dropout count is a step in the right direction, it still skirts the issue. To be credible, the dropout definition should be simple and clear: *Count any student who does not hold a high school diploma*. A GED is never equivalent to a high school diploma – ask any employer, college or university.

Attrition and Dropout Rates in Texas Over Time



† Change in TEA dropout definition or data processing procedures

* Rates were not calculated for the 1990-91 and 1993-94 school years due to unavailability of data.

** Longitudinal completion rate

Sources: Intercultural Development Research Association, 2003. Texas Education Agency, Secondary School Completion and Dropouts, 2001-02.

More than 150,000 students lacking documented and official transfer status are excluded from the state’s dropout counts every year.

As long as knowing the real status of our students is not a state policy reform priority, thousands of students will continue to be lost – not only from schools – but also reflected in losses in tax revenue and income that comes from decreased levels of education in Texas residents.

Lesson Three: Accountability Systems Did Not Create Dropouts

Accountability systems did not *create* dropouts. Losing children from our school systems has long been a problem. Unacceptably high dropout rates pre-date the accountability systems developed over the last several years in response to the concern about the effect of under-education on the current information-based economy. In fact, dropout rates for Hispanic students in the 1940s have been estimated around 80 percent (Cárdenas, 1995).

Accountability systems that do not hurt children will not create dropouts. High-stakes testing does hurt children and will increase the dropout rate (see Lesson Four).

Diagnostic student assessments are useful to guide instruction. And the use of state assessment measures is one of several necessary factors in assessing school effectiveness and for holding schools accountable for educating all of our students.

Bests can play an important role in this kind of school accountability – one that accepts the responsibility that schools have toward children and communities.

Lesson Four: High-stakes Testing and Accountability Systems Must Be Uncoupled

Testing of students to promote school accountability is not a new idea. Students have been tested for decades using both locally-developed and standardized tests. But a new dimension has emerged in using a single test to make decisions concerning whether a student gets promoted to the next grade or whether a graduating student will receive a diploma.

The push for using state test scores as the primary basis for promotion, retention and graduation decisions is based on the incorrect assumption that a single test score tells you all you need to know about student achievement.

Recent research on the Texas testing program reveals that improvement in state test scores did not simultaneously result in higher test scores on national tests, and that despite rising state test scores, Texas students were not graduating in higher numbers or increasing their enrollment in college. On the other hand, research has shown that students who are retained in grade do no better the next year. In many cases, retention leads students to drop out before they graduate.

School accountability should not mean: (1) that high-stakes decisions in children's lives (e.g., high school graduation) are made on the basis of tests, or (2) that tests dictate what children learn. Texas and other states should continue to measure schools' performance. This can be done more efficiently and at less expense by moving to an assessment system that tests a sample of students from each school to get a picture of how each school is performing. Current federal policy does not allow sample testing for accountability.

Lesson Five: We cannot afford to decide that some kids don't count.

Between the 1985-86 and 2002-03 school years, the estimated cumulative costs of public school dropouts in the state of Texas were in excess of \$500 billion in foregone income, lost tax revenues, and increased job training, welfare, unemployment and criminal justice costs.

On average, dropouts are more likely to be unemployed than high school graduates and earn less money when they eventually secure work. Two-thirds of inmates in the Texas prison system are high school dropouts. The social and economic costs of the dropout problem have increased by 26 times the initial estimates of \$17 billion in 1986.

Lack of school holding power disproportionately affects minority students. Following a 17-year trend, in 2002-03, Texas Hispanic students had the highest attrition rate at 50 percent, followed by African American students at 45 percent and Native American students at 39 percent. White students had an attrition rate of 24 percent.

Lesson Six: Dropout data is not a legitimate reason to give up on public education.

Giving up on public education does not solve the dropout problem. Private schools do not have the capacity or capability to absorb large numbers of poor students. Private schools are not accountable to the public for actions or results. Further, distributing public money for private schools would take away money from our communities resulting in higher taxes for homeowners and businesses in the community. Excellent neighborhood public schools are the foundation of

strong communities. The best way to strengthen public schools is to strengthen public schools – schools that are accountable to us all.

Lesson Seven: It's time to move from dropping out to holding on.

We know what is needed to address the problem of dropouts in our schools. What we need is the public will and commitment to carry it out.

IDRA's Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program was begun in Texas and is making a difference in schools across the United States and in Brazil. Programs like this demonstrate how schools can change from giving up on certain students to transforming their schools to hang on to them.

While programs alone are not a magic bullet, they demonstrate which elements must be in place to create schools that promote the success of all our children from kindergarten to graduation.

Research demonstrates that to move from dropping out to holding on:

- All students must be valued.
- There must be at least one educator in a student's life who is totally committed to the success of that student.
- Families must be valued as partners with the school, all committed to ensuring that equity and excellence is present in a student's life.
- Schools must change and innovate to match the characteristics of their students and embrace the strengths and contributions that students and their families bring.
- School staff, especially teachers, must be equipped with the tools needed to ensure their students' success, including the use of technology, different learning styles and mentoring programs. Effective professional development can help provide these tools.

We know, without a doubt, that the nation faces a huge, untenable problem. But we also know that the problem is not intractable. Today, if we re-commit ourselves to schools that work for all children, we can ensure that all children have the opportunity for an excellent education.

Quality education is the key to opportunity, the foundation of democracy, and the heart of a good life. Many have long recognized that all of our children deserve no less.

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IDRA is an independent, private non-profit organization, directed by María Robledo Montecel, Ph.D., dedicated to creating schools that work for all children. As a vanguard leadership development and research team for more than three decades, IDRA has worked with people to create self-renewing schools that value and empower all children, families and communities. IDRA conducts research and development activities, creates, implements and administers innovative education programs and provides teacher, administrator, and parent training and technical assistance.