

National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities Teleseminar Transcript – December 8, 2005



“Increasing School Holding Power for All Students”

Presenter: Dr. María “Cuca” Robledo Montecel, executive director of the Intercultural Development Research Association

Part 1: Intro and Overview of IDRA Research on Dropouts and School Holding Power

The [National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities](#) presents, “Increasing School Holding Power for All Students,” with Dr. Loujeania Williams Bost and Dr. María “Cuca” Robledo Montecel.

Dr. Loujeania Williams Bost is the director of the National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities. Dr. Bost holds a Ph.D. in special education from Pennsylvania State University, with emphasis in reading comprehension strategies with struggling adolescents with learning disabilities, and translating research into practice. Dr. Bost has an extensive practice in developing state-level systems to meet general supervision requirements under the IDEA, including compliant management, monitoring, and technical assistance. She has an extensive background in serving persons with disabilities and has been a public school teacher, a program administrator for agencies serving adults and adolescents with mental retardation, and a researcher. So, welcome, Dr. Bost.

Dr. María “Cuca” Robledo Montecel is the executive director of the Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA), an independent, private, non-profit organization dedicated to equity and excellence in education. A nationally-recognized expert on the prevention and recovery of dropouts, Dr. Robledo Montecel directed the first statewide study of dropouts in Texas. Under her leadership, IDRA’s innovative dropout prevention program – the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program – has made a visible difference in the lives of more than 416,000 children, families, and educators. Dr. Robledo Montecel has authored and co-authored a number of publications, focusing on effective bilingual education, school holding power, and parent leadership. Dr. Robledo Montecel holds a bachelor of social work degree from Our Lady of the Lake University, and a master’s degree in educational evaluation from Antioch College, and she earned a doctorate in research and evaluation from the Urban Education Program at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee. She has been named among the top 100 Hispanic influentials by *Hispanic Business Magazine*. So you can see we have a terrific faculty for today’s program. We begin today’s virtual seminar with Loujeania Williams Bost, who is speaking today from Clemson; so welcome to the program.

DR. LOUJEANIA WILLIAMS BOST: Good afternoon. We welcome our audience from the National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities, here at Clemson. And today’s teleseminar, “School Holding Power,” refers to the ability of schools to keep students in school until they achieve the ultimate objective of a high school diploma.

School holding power shifts the focus from the individual to the school’s ability to build systems that monitor and support students as they progress through the education system. The ultimate

measure, then, is not to assess where the students fail to navigate the system, but how successful schools are in shepherding students from their entry in school all the way through the point that they receive their high school diploma.

School holding power is an important indicator of a school's measure of success in an era of accountability. School completion rates provide evidence of the extent to which schools engage students in the educational process, and as such, have become measures of school performance. Both *No Child Left Behind* and the *Individuals with Disabilities or Education Improvement Act* have focused attention on the problem of dropouts and are a driving force in efforts to increase rates of school completion, especially for students with disabilities. These measures require state and local education agencies to monitor progress of all students, using indicators of adequate yearly progress, measures of academic performance, and rates of dropout and graduation. In addition, both mandates place emphasis on the use of scientific and validated methods and program models to improve educational outcomes for all students.

Schools can increase their holding power by adopting and implementing effective programs that recognize students' inherent value, their contributions, and their potential significance to their communities and society as a whole. This teleseminar will present the framework for increasing school holding power and one effective model developed and implemented for nearly two decades by the Intercultural Research Development Association, our speaker for the day.

Welcome, Dr. Cuca Robledo Montecel.

DR. MARIA "CUCA" ROBLEDO MONTECEL: Good morning. Good morning. I am very pleased that all of you have taken some time to come together this morning, and to talk about this very important issue of school holding power and how to increase it.

It has never been the case, as all of you know, in the history of the United States, that most minority students actually *do* graduate from quality high schools, or from any type of high school for that matter. It has also never been the case that schools actually prepare every student to succeed in college or in a good job that sustains them, their family, and their community. Furthermore, it has never been the case that all sectors – community, business owners, public officials, and the voters who elect them – demand a quality education for all students. It is in that context of what has never been the case that I will be spending a bit of time with you today speaking about what IDRA has done over the last 20 years in this issue of school holding power.

Let me begin by re-emphasizing a comment Dr. Bost made as she was preparing today's context for us. And that is that school holding power is about the ability of the school to engage students, through to graduation, learning, and then be prepared for life. Much of what has not worked in dropout prevention in the past has not worked because of two reasons. One, programs have been designed as very discrete activities that are to motivate students. And, two, programs have been lacking – that are actually systemic – that actually create this ability of the school to hold on to students. So that is the framework for our conversation today.

Let me begin by reviewing our objectives. And those of you that are following along with the materials that were prepared for you, we're going to start on Page 2 at the moment, and review the three objectives that we have for our brief time together today.

The first is, I will review the major research that the Intercultural Development Research Association has conducted over the last 20 years on the issue of dropout prevention. Secondly, we will look at a particular program – the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program – which is a proven dropout prevention program. We will look at what it is, what the critical elements are, and the results that it produces. And then, finally, and importantly, I'm very, very excited this morning to have you be among the first group of people that hear about a new framework for transforming schools, one that takes us away from this very sort of discrete, programmatic effort to the kind of institutional change that is required in order to stop this massive hemorrhaging of students out of high schools before they graduate. So we will do those three things.

Let me begin by giving you a brief history of the work that IDRA has done, beginning with a 1986 study called, "The Texas Dropout Survey Project." This project was important in Texas because it was the first statewide study that took a good, in-depth look at the issue. And it is important nationally because it stands as *the* first statewide study of this issue in very particular ways. We asked three research questions back in 1986. And I was privileged at the time to serve as principal investigator and worked with a team of people from the Intercultural Development Research Association and from throughout the state to look at these three research questions.

The first – *How many young people in Texas were dropping out before graduating high school?* The second – *What was the economic impact of young people dropping out of school before graduating on criminal justice costs, human service costs, and other costs?* And then, third, *What kinds of programs were available in Texas at the time – remember, this was 1986 – that would serve to keep children in school?* So those were our three questions.

The study was commissioned by the Texas Department of Community Affairs and the Texas Education Agency, our state department here in Texas. It was, as I noted, the first comprehensive study of school dropouts in this state. What did we find? Well, we found that in 1986 Texas did not collect, nor have any systems to collect, any information on the number of students that were dropping out or their characteristics. This, by the way, was not particular to Texas at the time, and was, in fact, the state of the nation in 1986. So there were no definitions, no data, no sense of the magnitude of the problem, and certainly, no sense of the reasons for the problem.

In the absence of other data, IDRA created an attrition methodology. We started with ninth grade enrollment from the state department of education and then looked to see how many of those ninth-graders were enrolled in the 12th grade, and then adjusted statistically for in and out migration, for growth or losses, in the particular population of the school. We did this, as I said, in the absence of any other data available.

We also validated these findings by looking at census data and at direct student interviews. What did we find? We found that in 1986, 86,000 students did not graduate from Texas public schools – that is 33 percent of students in Texas had dropped out during their high school years. What

was it costing the state of Texas? \$17.2 billion over the lifetime of those students in foregone income, lost tax revenues, increased criminal justice cost, welfare, employment, and job training.

What else did we find with regard to costs? Very important, and other research since then has validated this IDRA information about investment. We found that for every dollar that you invest in dropout prevention – you the schools, you the community, you the taxpayers – that for every dollar that is invested, we get nine dollars back. In any book, that is a very, very good investment, and continues to be so.

Following the study, the first statewide policy was put in place – House Bill 1010 in Texas – that mandated that the state department calculate and report the dropout rate. There have been changes over the years in those ways of dropping out, in those ways in which dropouts are recorded, and we will be talking about that a little more as we go on.

IDRA's attrition formula, this enrollment methodology that I mentioned, has remained the same over the years. We've used the same method. And so we have 19 years utilizing exactly the same methodology of tracing what is happening with this issue in the state of Texas. Other researchers across the country, including the Harvard Civil Rights Project, Gary Orfield there, and Walt Haney, and the National Center for Educational Statistics, have validated this attrition estimate that IDRA developed in the absence of other data.

The national look at graduation rates that has been precipitated by *No Child Left Behind* is now largely being tracked, by the way, with an enrollment methodology that basically parallels the methodology that IDRA developed back in 1986.

What has happened in Texas since then? Well, when you accumulate the data from 1986 to now, you find that 2.2 million students have not graduated from Texas high schools, and that the state has lost \$500 billion – if you accumulate that 17.2 billion that I told you about for that first cohort of 86,000, and you add every cohort and every amount since then, the state of Texas has lost more than 2.2 million students – that's like losing Austin and Dallas, completely – and has lost an estimated \$500 billion over the life of those students. Texas loses one student every four minutes. In fact, the picture hasn't changed very much. We just completed our last attrition study and released it in November, at the beginning of November, and found that 36 percent of students dropped out of Texas schools before graduating, and that this problem affects not only minority students, by the way. In Texas, as is the case across the country, minority students do have higher rates. But the problem is not insignificant among other groups.

As an example, in Texas, the dropouts are – this past attrition study, the one that we just released and is, by the way, on our website, at www.idra.org – 22 percent White students. Of those who did not graduate, that's one out of five, one out of two are Hispanic, and two out of five are African American. So this is an issue that affects all students, all families, all communities, of all colors. And by the way, also, of both genders, and of all economic status. One in 10 school districts reported having no dropout prevention problem 10 years ago, no dropout prevention *program*, pardon me, in 1986, and nine out of 10 did not have evaluation data, so not very much was being done.

It is the case today, in 2005, that too, too many students are leaving high schools in Texas and everywhere across the country without earning a diploma. Schools are still not effectively evaluating programs, and the state has, at least in the case of Texas, focused more on lowering the dropout numbers through various numerical feats, rather than on actually lowering the number of dropouts. And I'll talk a little more about that.

A little bit about our Dallas dropout study. About the same time that we did the statewide study, we also did a very in-depth study in the Dallas school district – quasi-experimental, longitudinal study, 30 months – to identify factors that contribute to, or prevent, students from dropping out. We interviewed 200 students who had dropped out, 200 who had stayed in; we interviewed parents of both of those groups to see what made the difference.

What did we find? We found, first of all – and all of you who work directly with students in schools, and those of you who have been looking at this issue for some time – know that students first think about leaving school while they are still in middle school. Most leave – we found this in the Dallas study – between the eighth and ninth grades, and the ninth and 10th grades, at those important transition points. We also found that if a student's mother is foreign born, the student has a *greater* chance of staying in. This, for many, is *counter-intuitive*. This is what our finding was in Dallas, and it has been corroborated in many studies, including one very recent one over the last two weeks that looked, not at dropouts, but at mental health, and found, interestingly, that mental health among Mexican immigrants, children of Mexican immigrants, was much higher than other groups. It'd be interesting to look at those relationships.

Major findings. What factors correlate with dropping out? Students will leave school if they change schools often, if they work more than 15 hours a week, if they're behind in academics, if they're retained, if they are bored, and if they are encouraged by school personnel to leave. They tend to stay in school if they believe and know that there is someone, very specifically, someone, a person, who cares about them and is involved with their school activities. This relates very closely to all of what we know about the importance of student engagement, the big body of literature around that.

One final piece of information I would like to share with you about the study – the research that IDRA has been doing over the last 20 years on this issue – is a study that we did in Arizona, for the Arizona Minority Education Policy Analysis Center. IDRA was commissioned to do this study – by the folks at the University of Arizona – to develop estimates of dropout costs and to identify the dropout prevention programs that were effective. We found that the state of Arizona, at the time, had a rather good, very clear, definition – and less complex, by the way – that was easily understandable by many in the public. We found that 31 percent of students were lost in the 1997 freshman class, and we found that in Arizona, the highest dropout rate was among Native Americans, at 48 percent, followed by Latinos, at 43 percent. We found that in Arizona, as in Texas – and as in all of the country, for everything that I have seen in research and with experience – that very few programs have good research or evaluation data. How might I synthesize all of this in terms of what we have learned at the Intercultural Development Research Association about dropout prevention?