IDRA NEWSLETTER

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Focus: Valuing & Asset-Based Solutions

Science and Math Are Students' Favorite Subjects at Judson ISD as a Result of STEM Initiatives

by Felix Montes, Ph.D., and Deborah Rice

In a survey of 533 students attending six schools participating in the Judson school district's STEM Initiative, 55.9 percent chose science as their favorite subject; mathematics was their second most popular subject, selected by 44.1 percent of the students. The district's STEM Initiative is a collaborative partnership to pursue innovative strategies that enhance learning opportunities and student achievement in mathematics, technology and science in grades 5 and 8, funded by the U.S. Department of Defense Education Agency. IDRA conducted an evaluation of the program for the 2013-14 school year.

In addition to the students, other project stakeholders were surveyed, including administrators, teachers, and parents. In fact, 90.0 percent of the adult stakeholders felt that the project was "very important" or "important." This project "is vital to our nation's future [because] the ability for students to actively investigate STEM concepts is priceless in preparing them for such disciplines," said one participant.

The project's intent was to infuse technology into classroom activities, introducing innovative ways of teaching STEM subjects to prepare students for the future, and to provide military-connected students with socio-emotional support to meet their unique needs.

Nearly 10 percent of the students surveyed reported that they participated in the student support group, where they received personalized socio-emotional assistance to deal with military-connected issues. About 20.5 percent of the 4,919 students benefiting from the project were military connected.

The STEM Classroom

When asked to describe how the project changed daily classroom activities, 62 percent of the students indicated that it made activities more hands-on. They also welcomed the increased use of technology for a variety of purposes, including doing research, experimentation or simulation; improving mathematics and science learning; and supporting work on projects or in teams or for self-directed work.

They felt that the project made classes more enjoyable, thereby increasing their level of engagement. In fact, they reported using technology in the classroom in the following proportions: 96 percent used laptops, 56.4 percent used calculators, 33 percent used probeware, and 26.1 percent used Labquest 2. The project was designed to value student proclivity to investigate, create and work with others using technology as mediational tools.

More than half of the students (51.2 percent) reported that they learned to use some new software, including Labquest, TI Inspire, Probeware, Logger Pro and Microsoft Office *(cont. on Page 2)*

"We must value young people – all young people. We cannot afford to value some schools and not others, some neighborhoods and not others, some ethnic or racial groups and not others, some families and not others."

– Dr. María "Cuca" Robledo Montecel, IDRA President and CEO

(Science and Math Are Students' Favorite Subjects at Judson ISD as a Result of STEM Initiatives, continued from Page 1)

productivity package – all of which they used to conduct research for interesting projects with other students, such as zombie apocalypse lab simulations, crime scene investigations, and making solar cookers.

Technology was used to enhance content learning. Out of the 521 students who responded to this question in the online survey, nearly half (48.5 percent) reported improvements in their understanding of a variety of STEM concepts because of the project. The largest improvements were in familiarity with the technology provided by the project (80.2 percent), finding science a more interesting subject than before (65.6 percent), and using the materials and technology provided by the project often (63.3 percent).

In general, all participants had a very positive outlook about the project's potential and outcomes, as 63.9 percent felt that the project was already having a positive effect on classroom instruction, raising student interest in the STEM fields and improving their academic achievement. The summative aspect of the evaluation confirmed this sentiment as the following findings show.

Summative Findings

Military-connected students performed better on the state-mandated STAAR science assessment (82.7 percent passing) this year than military-connected students in the baseline year (77.0 percent passing) in both grades. And all project students performed better in mathematics (92.8 percent passing) this year than fifth and eighth graders combined in the baseline year (81.2 percent passing). In addition, the students earned better end-of-year grades than the baseline students in both the fifth grade (86.8 percent passing versus 83.6 percent passing) and eighth grade (83.3 percent passing versus 79.0 percent passing).

Attendance – The target elementary campuses had higher attendance improvement in the fifth grade than the other campuses. These campuses improved by an average 0.30 percentage points, from 96.45 percent to 96.75 percent attendance, compared to only a 0.03 percentage point gain, from 96.45 percent to 96.48 percent, at the other campuses.

The participating middle school had higher attendance improvement in the eighth grade than the other middle schools. The campus improved by an average 0.26 percentage points, from 96.17 percent to 96.43 percent attendance, compared to a decrease of 0.23 percentage points, from 96.85 percent to 96.62 percent, at the other campuses.

Discipline – The target elementary campuses had higher discipline improvement in the fifth grade than the other campuses. These campuses improved by a median reduction of 13 disciplinary incidents, compared to an 11.5 median reduction at the other campuses.

The target middle school had dramatically higher discipline improvement in the eighth grade than the other middle schools. The campus improved by 266 fewer disciplinary incidents, from 556 incidents (baseline year) to 290 incidents (project year) compared to an average increase of 47.5 incidents, from 428.25 (baseline year) average incidents to 475.75 average incidents (project year) at the other campuses.

Future Improvements

In addition to the acquisition and deployment of the technology, professional development was at the core of the intervention. Teachers, administrators and parents participated in substantial professional development activities that involved technology, pedagogy and family engagement. The coordination and integration of all project activities were crucial. Some of the most successful strategies in this regard involved: (a) developing a 30/60/90 day implementation plan; (b) developing rapport with the target campuses and teachers involved in the grant; (c) developing a strong network base in the community for support and guidance; and (d) having an open line of communication that individuals involved in the grant can call upon at any time.

When asked about additional training or other support needed to perform their project functions better, administrators, teachers and parents provided important suggestions, including training to improve positive leadership and advocacy for quality education and a better school climate; more strategies to help students adjust and improve their social and emotional needs and academic success; continuous refreshers of the technology training; improved communications; more parent training, including technology and Internet safety; and curricular and pedagogical training that would more explicitly link the project with the TEKS (state-mandated curricular guidance). This demonstrates a commitment by all stakeholders to improve the project as it embarks on its second year of implementation after a successful first year.

Felix Montes, Ph.D., is an education associate in IDRA's Department of Student Access and Success. Comments and questions may be directed to him via email at felix.montes@idra.org. Deborah Rice is the project director of the Judson ISD DoDEA STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) grant.

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Opportunity Matters: The Path to "Equity Literacy"

An interview with scholar and social justice advocate, Dr. Paul C. Gorski

by Laurie Posner, M.P.A.

Today, low-income students make up a "new majority" of all children attending public schools in the United States. Between 1989 and 2013, the population of children attending the nation's public schools increased from 32 percent to 51 percent (Suitts, 2015). Yet, while student demographics have changed, deficit views about low-income children and families, in large part, have not. And these perspectives define education policy and practice.

In February, through the IDRA Opportunity Matters Roundtable Series,* we examined these issues with guest speaker, Dr. Paul C. Gorski, via webinar and in the interview that follows. Dr. Gorski is associate professor in New Century College and a research fellow in the Center for the Advancement of Well-Being, George Mason University. His most recent book, which he references in the interview, is *Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty: Strategies for Erasing the Opportunity Gap*.

How did you become involved in working on educational equity and closing opportunity gaps?

I cared about social justice concerns most of my life, but it wasn't until college that I started to find outlets for my social justice spirit. I had fantastic mentors – Bob Covert, Charlene Green, Allen Saunders, and others. They were doing racial justice and other kinds of justice work in local public schools. They were gracious enough to mentor me, and I found the perfect outlet for my social justice energy. The most important thing I learned from them was to question the popular narrative. That helps to explain why I talk about *opportunity gaps* instead of *achievement gaps*.

Why do you feel that this work is particularly important now?

It's always important. But it does feel particularly important these days, in part because of bigger societal conditions, like the growing wealth and income gaps.

How do you define the most significant opportunity gaps impacting low-income students in this country? What are the biggest barriers to closing them?

There are not enough living-wage jobs for all working-age adults. Some families can't afford healthcare. I know that we, as educators, sometimes avoid talking about that stuff because it feels like it's outside our spheres of influence. But those are the things that have the biggest impact on students. If we want to understand low-income students, we need to start by understanding those enormous barriers.

The biggest barrier to closing the opportunity gap is the tendency to think that we fix the gap by fixing the most marginalized families rather than by fixing the things that marginalize the most marginalized families. Unfortunately, the deficit view of low-income students and students of color and immigrants and other students remains pervasive. If we don't change that, we never will be capable of imagining solutions to the opportunity gap.

What is an equity literacy approach?

The *equity literacy* approach is a comprehensive framework for preparing teachers and students to see the world through an equity lens. Speaking specifically about teachers, the idea is that creating an equitable classroom environment for all of my students requires a set of knowledge and skills that often are not taught in teacher education programs or even in diversity in-service sessions. This means recognizing biases and inequities, including those that are very subtle, and knowing how to respond to and redress biases and inequities in our classrooms and schools.

What are the origins of this concept?

My brilliant colleague and friend, Katy Swalwell, and I had unknowingly both been writing short

(cont. on Page 4)

> *The "culture of poverty" framework had become the most popular way we, in education, were talking about poverty... and it continues to have devastating consequences, suggesting that what we need to do is fix the people in poverty rather than fixing the inequities experienced by people in poverty.*

IDRA South Central Collaborative for Equity

For more information about the IDRA South Central Collaborative for Equity or to request technical assistance, contact us at 210-444-1710 or contact@idra.org.

Additional resources are available online at www.idra.org/South_Central_Collaborative_for_Equity

funded by the U.S. Department of Education

(Opportunity Matters: The Path to "Equity Literacy," continued from Page 3)

articles for Teaching Tolerance that were based around the same basic idea. She was focusing on how students need *equity literacy*, and I was focusing the need for teachers to have what I was calling at the time *equity proficiency*. In fact, I initially titled an article, "The Insufficiency of Cultural Proficiency."

My basic argument was that the obsession over the abstract notion of "culture" in conversations about poverty and education was more or less ensuring that we weren't going to make much progress when it came to equity. Knowing this or that about Mexican American culture, I was arguing, was not the same as understanding how so many Mexican American families experience racism and other inequities in and out of our schools.

The "culture of poverty" framework had become the most popular way we, in education, were talking about poverty as well, and it continues to have devastating consequences, suggesting that what we need to do is fix the people in poverty rather than fixing the inequities experienced by people in poverty. So in writing about different contexts, Katy and I were making the same argument: We need to put equity at the center of the conversation about diversity. Cultural competence isn't enough. Cross-cultural relationships are not enough. The culture of poverty and cultural literacy are disasters.

We have been developing equity literacy as an approach that borrows some of the positive aspects of existing culture-centered frameworks, like culturally responsive teaching, but explicitly uses equity as the centerpiece.

How do perceptions about students in poverty and the "culture of poverty" affect schools, teaching and education systems?

When it comes to our ability to provide safe, engaging, equitable learning environments for students whose families are in poverty, the "culture of poverty" approach has done tremendous damage. It is the opposite of equity literacy by pointing to the cultures of low-income families as "the problem." I just don't see how somebody can believe all of the stereotypes embedded in the "culture of poverty" view and still have the highest possible expectations for students in poverty.

More generally, it's completely made up. There is no such thing as a "culture" of poverty or "mindset" of poverty. People in poverty are infinitely diverse. They don't share a single, predictable set of values and behaviors. That idea was debunked by social scientists in the 1970s.

For educators who want to incorporate elements of an equity literacy approach, what's a good starting point?

I'll suggest two starting points. The first one is to reflect on our own perspectives. Here's what I learned preparing to write my book, *Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty*: If I believe that educational outcome disparities across race or class exist because of deficiencies in low-income families or families of color rather than gaps in access and opportunity, then I cannot be an equitable educator for those families. It is impossible to hold that view and have high expectations of marginalized students simultaneously. I know it's hard to hear, but 75 percent of our ability to create equitable learning environments is about perspective.

On a more practical note, we can start by reviewing our classroom materials for even the most subtle bias. Low-income students and students of color see biased reflections of themselves constantly, and if we're not able to see and address those images when they pop up in our classrooms, then we're piling on the inequity. But again, this is why the first step is about perspective, about view. If I don't understand these inequities and biases and how they work, or if I have them myself, I'm not very likely going to be able to recognize and address them.

What gives you hope?

Glad you asked this. What gives me hope is thinking about teachers – about people who, despite all the ways they're being disempowered in the public education system today, show up to work, care about students, and are desperate to do whatever it takes to help every single person who comes through their classroom doors. Teachers are my heroes.

Resources

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Get More Online at the IDRA Newsletter Plus

- Articles on school transformation through an equity lens
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Paul Gorski is an associate professor in New Century College and a research fellow in the Center for the Advancement of Well-Being, George Mason University, whose scholarly work in education centers on anti-poverty activism and social justice in education. He is also the founder of EdChange, a team of passionate and established educators, dedicated to equity, diversity, multiculturalism, and social justice.

Laurie Posner, M.P.A., is a senior education associate at IDRA and director of IDRA's Civic Engagement Department. Comments and questions may be directed to her via email at laurie.posner@idra.org.

**The IDRA Opportunity Matters Roundtable Series, launched in fall of 2014, provides a forum for examining and fostering dialogue around key issues that impact educational equity and excellence. Get details at budurl.com/IDRAopp.*

Valuing Teachers – IDRA's Approach to Professional Development

by Paula Johnson, M.A.

At IDRA, we develop integrated, research-based professional development experiences to assure that educators have access to innovative strategies in order to solve problems, create solutions, and use best practices to educate all students to high standards. One of our goals for 2015 is to capture in new ways IDRA's valuing approach to integrated professional development for a 21st century generation of principal and teacher leadership. This article illustrates our valuing approach to providing quality educational training experiences for teachers.

For more than 40 years, IDRA has worked diligently to assure equal educational opportunities for every child. Our history centers on advocating for quality education and educational services for diverse and underrepresented learners. Our valuing professional development model focuses on personalized learning experiences that develop teachers' knowledge and instructional practice in order to positively impact student learning and the long-term academic success of all students (Hill, 2009).

A national concern for research during the last decade has been directed at the complexities and technical issues that go into teaching and what *teaching quality* looks like. IDRA's work in defining teaching quality exceeds simply determining quality by what credentials a teacher has. Rather, teaching quality includes teacher perspectives and use of effective instructional practices. We also place it in the context of a supportive organizational school and community structure.

IDRA focuses on improving schools as a whole for the sake of giving all children an education that works for them. This effort has continually challenged us to bring structure and form to the components of our valuing professional development model that demonstrate our commitment to quality education for all.

Defining VALUE

Core values are the fundamental beliefs of an organization. They are a set of shared guiding principles by which they operate. They are embodied in our work and demonstrate our commitment to quality. Since the beginning of its history, IDRA has worked to develop its own particular language about how to speak of quality in terms of teachers and education. This requires valuing all learners no matter the color of their skin, wealth, religion, sex, national origin, language characteristics, or orientation. IDRA believes that valuing teachers promotes excellence in teaching.

VALUE = Voice • Asset-Based Approach • Leadership • Unique • Evaluation

García (2012) challenges professional development providers to engage teachers in a more collaborative system of support in order to create sustainable campus instructional programs. Our model increases effective teaching and learning by capturing the voice of all stakeholders to design an asset-based approach to professional development in educational leadership that combines our unique instructional components with ongoing evaluation.

Many excellent teachers share this belief: All students deserve success, failure is never an option. IDRA's work toward assuring educational opportunity for every child through this valuing model is demonstrated through two fundamental programs: high quality professional development, and on-site coaching and mentoring.

For example, over the last year we have successfully engaged teachers in long-term, in-depth training through an innovative hybrid approach through our federally-funded Transition to Teaching program, Teachers for Today & Tomorrow (T^3). IDRA mentors participating teaching candidates through coordinated onsite and online professional development. As members of our Community of Educators private social network, hundreds of teachers participate in online discussions and professional development activities throughout the school year to develop *(cont. on Page 6)*

Our model increases effective teaching and learning by capturing the voice of all stakeholders to design an asset-based approach to professional development in educational leadership that combines our unique instructional components with ongoing evaluation.

(Valuing Teachers – IDRA's Approach to Professional Development, continued from Page 5)

their instructional practice. Additionally, they are able to access and share teaching resources posted by IDRA, as well as connect and interact with members across the state.

Teachers play a vital role in students' academic success education. IDRA enhances its high quality professional development with on-site, job-embedded professional development coupled with coaching and mentoring. Our approach demonstrates a valuing attitude in which trainers-mentors:

- Respect the knowledge and skills of all teachers;
- Treat teachers as partners and adult learners; and
- Identify teachers' assets and build on their strengths.

On-site coaching and mentoring is practiced throughout the year and is designed to reinforce what is presented in the professional development modules through modeling and co-teaching support in the classroom. Student achievement and teacher competency goals are integrated during cooperative planning activities with IDRA consultants.

Our campus-based collaboration with teachers enables us to develop instructional strategies based on issues identified by individual teachers in order to enhance their instructional practice and success with students. IDRA provides opportunities for teachers to observe and discuss model lesson demonstrations. Each teacher then re-creates the lesson with another group of students using the lesson's strategies.

At times, we recommend that teachers be provided additional support or opportunities to visit other teachers or to team teach with others in a particular class. Coaching sessions are followed by reflective debriefing to maximize learning and implementation and next actions planning between the consultant and teacher.

Our evaluation measures include ongoing assessment that speaks to the overall effectiveness of our professional development efforts. This investigation enables us to review and revise our goals and actions as we progress through the coaching and mentoring process. For example, after each coaching and mentoring session, IDRA conducts a debriefing to capture each teacher's self-assessment of the lesson as well as reflect on their own performance (Johnson & Betancourt, 2013). This coaching conversation provides us input that may lead adjustments in individual support plans.

Included as a secondary evaluative method, we also gauge the level of growth of our participating teachers resulting from their experiences in the professional development offerings: Are teachers effectively transferring what they've learned into their classroom? Is there a need to redirect areas of support? Have others surfaced?

IDRA is a well-known provider of high quality professional development. We are continually striving to strengthen our professional development practices in order to provide research-informed, high quality learning experiences for teachers. Our mission is dedicated to strengthening public schools to ensure equitable educational opportunity for every child. Through our valuing professional development approach, we are empowering a 21st century generation of educational leaders to institute a valuing instructional model that will lead to the academic success of all students.

Resources

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Meet Ms. Laurie Posner, MPA

Director of IDRA's Civic Engagement Department

This year, the IDRA Newsletter is highlighting our staff's varied and diverse talents and backgrounds. Laurie Posner, MPA, directs IDRA's Department of Civic Engagement. Outside of her work at IDRA, Laurie has a deep interest in community collaboration and problem-solving in other countries. She has worked on a microenterprise development project for entrepreneurs with disabilities in San Salvador, El Salvador; collaborated on a women's leadership development and reforestation project in Managua and the Matagalpa Region in Nicaragua, and learned about equity and youth development projects in Sydney , Australia. With a particular interest in community-technology and knowledge-building, Laurie serves as a peer reviewer for the *Journal of Community Informatics*, which examines international research on the use of information and communications technology (ICT) by NGOs, foundations and governments.

Laurie's commitment to disability rights, access, and inclusion in the United States and other countries, builds on her work with the World Institute on Disability (where she helped to set up and run a center on economic development and disability) and as board chair for AXIS Dance Company, an international, physically-integrated dance company that creates an artistic and cultural home for leading choreographers and dancers with and without disabilities. She continues to support AXIS in its work to transform understandings of art, collaborative expression, and human interdependence. She has remained closer to home this past year, but hopes to visit family in Kolkata, India (pictured here with her brother, Andrew) and learn more about education and community-based technology projects in West Bengal.

Annual IDRA *La Semana del Niño* Parent Institute™

Family Leadership for Student Success

Liderazgo familiar en pro del éxito estudiantil

#AllMeansAll #TodosSonTodos

Bilingual Parent Institute • April 23, 2015 • San Antonio

This annual institute offers families, school district personnel and community groups from across Texas the opportunity to network, obtain resources and information, and receive training and bilingual materials on IDRA's nationally-recognized research-based model for parent leadership in education. This institute is interactive and participatory.

All presentations are bilingual (English-Spanish).

Prekindergarten–Grade 16 (College) Topics – Parent and Community Group Presentations

- Early Childhood Education
- Literacy Development
- Bilingual/ESL Education
- Dropout Prevention
- High School Graduation Requirements in Texas
- College Access
- Family Engagement

Highlights

- Bilingual presentations (English-Spanish)
- Roundtable educational presentations
- Parent interviews
- Live stream options
- Educational topics breakout sessions
- Refreshments and lunch
- Exhibitors, including service providers, college and universities and non-profit agencies

Administrator and Parent Liaison Track

There will be a special session for administrators and liaisons focusing on successful strategies for family engagement.

Event Registration

$50 per person

Registration includes presentations, materials, exhibits, refreshments and lunch

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- South Central Collaborative for Equity Center (SCCE)
- Seeding Equity in Education through Dialogue (SEED)
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