Focus: Accountability and Civic Engagement

Will States Use ESSA to Undermine Communities of Color as Some Have for Voting Rights?

David G. Hinojosa, J.D., and Jerry Wilson, M.A.

More than 50 years ago, Congress passed two landmark pieces of civil rights legislation aimed at tackling systemic inequalities in the states. The *Voting Rights Act* of 1965 prompted federal intervention to overcome state and local barriers in accessing the voting booth for racial minorities. The *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA) used federal funds as an incentive to urge states to desegregate their public schools and to provide more equitable funding for educating poor and minority schoolchildren.

Fifty years later, control has returned to the states both in the voting booth through a 2013 Supreme Court ruling and in the schoolhouse through the *Every Student Succeeds Act* passed in 2015.

The Voting Rights Act and Shelby

The *Voting Rights Act* sought to restore the right to vote for people of color whose rights had been stifled through various state and local measures, including literacy tests, poll taxes and grandfather clauses (Coleman, 2016). Section V of the Act restricted the power of local authorities to discriminate against Black and other minority voters by requiring certain states, counties and cities with histories of chronic racial discrimination to obtain permission from the Justice Department or a federal court before altering voting regulations (known as "preclearance") (Thurgood Marshall Institute, 2016).

The Supreme Court's decision in *Shelby County, Ala. v. Holder* in 2013, however, struck down the Section V preclearance requirement, thus return-ing extensive control to the states and localities. No longer required to obtain preclearance from the federal branches, many state and local officials across the country sought to enact laws that would suppress minority turnout, including redistricting and photo identification laws, decreasing the number of polling places, switching from single-member to at-large voting districts, and reducing the number of early voting days and/or hours (Thurgood Marshall Institute, 2016).

According to the American Civil Liberties Union, seven of the nine states that were excused from federal oversight by the Shelby ruling have since implemented new restrictions on voting that disproportionately affect the poor and voters of color.

The ESEA and ESSA

Like the *Voting Rights Act*, the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* of 1965 sought to reduce discrimination against minorities, but in schools. The ESEA did this by providing significant funding to the states educating low-income children but requiring that states and local education agencies desegregate their school systems in order receive the funding.

Over the years, the ESEA evolved and added testing, accountability and other educational reforms purportedly targeted at closing achievement gaps. In its current form, the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA), signed into law by President Obama in December 2015, potentially rep-

"We must connect school outcomes — graduation and college readiness — with what it takes to produce those outcomes: actionable knowledge to support engaged citizens, accountable leadership, and good public policy that leverages change."

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

(Will States Use ESSA to Undermine Communities of Color, continued from Page 1)

resents a major shift in federal policy by returning significant control on implementation of required accountability and intervention to the states.

Some critics of the ESSA's predecessor, the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB), argued that it was overly punitive and proscriptive, giving the federal government significant influence over state education policies. ESSA gives states and districts much more flexibility in setting standards and learning goals, determining school quality ratings, designing supports for under-performing schools, and deciding how to spend resources. Supporters hope that returning control over school accountability to state and local agencies will improve outcomes for students. Yet, lessons from the *Voting Rights Act* caution such optimism.

Even under NCLB, most states adopted policies that engaged the most severe sanctions against underperforming schools and local educational agencies (Institute on Education Law and Policy, nd). These sanctions included stripping power from locally-elected school boards and transferring control of schools to non-public charter operators, or educational management organizations, or to city- or state-appointed authorities (Trujillo et al., 2012).

Oftentimes, these actors have zero accountability owed to the local community, and the local community no longer has a voice. This runs counter to the research showing how actively engaging communities can create greater equity in helping to turn around low-performing schools while not sacrificing the democratic process (Trujillo et al., 2012).

Although these more drastic takeover interventions are exercised far less frequently than other interventions, like school turnaround or school transformation, when they are engaged, they often target high-poverty, urban communities of color (Hurlburt, et al., 2011). Some of these schools taken over by states and others include: El Paso, Flint, Memphis, New Orleans and Nashville. These are just a few examples where students and communities of color make up a strong majority of the schools taken over (see, e.g., Sen, 2016).

This is not to suggest that low-performing schools should not be required to address their shortcomings or that, occasionally, more invasive efforts may be needed to help schools improve learning or where they are not appropriately carrying their financial fiduciary duties. To be clear, accountability and interventions are critical measures that should be spearheaded at the federal level where states and local education agencies also must address inequitable and inadequate educational opportunities, including funding and staffing (Cortez, 2010).

But putting aside the valid argument that current accountability systems focus too narrowly on test data, the critical failure of the "takeover" movement is the absence of local community control (and not mere "input"). That is not only bad educational policy but bad democratic policy.

Hope on the Horizon?

But all is not lost in voting or education. In voting, while 16 states will have restrictive voting laws in place for the 2016 presidential election (Brennan, 2016), several other states and localities have undertaken efforts to expanding voting access. For example, many states are considering bills that would reverse the disenfranchisement of felons who have served their time (Brennan, April 2016). A growing number of states, including West Virginia, Vermont and Oregon, passed laws requiring automatic voter registration, and others are considering bills that would authorize online registration (Brennan, April 2016).

And in education, the same opportunities present themselves under ESSA. Many advocates begged for less-prescriptive federally-required accountability and intervention designs compared to the NCLB. Now is the time to seize this moment by operating with transparency in research-based designs and public reporting of school quality measures while seeking to meaningfully engage families and community members in each step of the process.

Instead of shifting control from local, minority communities to educational management organizations, charter school operators and state-appointed authorities, states could begin by ensuring that their accountability systems capture more measures beyond test scores since public education is a public good and exists not only to help students achieve academically but also to build stronger students civically and socially (Trujillo & Rivera, 2016).

Second, for those schools identified for intervention, states should measure and improve upon:

- the inequitable and inadequate resources and opportunities for all students;

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

www.idra.org

Project Based Learning –
Changing Learning Paradigms One Lesson at a Time

by Nilka Avilés, Ed.D., and Nadiah Al-Gasem, Ph.D.

Project-based learning (PBL) engages students! At one particular middle school in an urban city district in San Antonio for example, the results were creative thinking, high student involvement and improvement in 21st century skills. When teachers authentically engage students in content, attendance increases and behavior improves, as does student confidence and communication.

PBL creates dynamic classrooms in ways that grow cognitive and non-cognitive skills simultaneously. At this sample school, the projects had real-world impact, tapping students' empathy through collaboration beyond the walls of the classroom and the school. Students deserve to continue these types of learning experiences.

Research shows that schools benefit from PBL when school and district administrators are committed to the process and facilitate the time for teachers to collaborate, provide professional development and offer other financial resources (Toolin, 2004; Larmer, et al., 2015).

For example, beyond the collaboration, teachers in this middle school were supported by principal Greg Rivers, M.A., in developing hands-on activities requiring authentic problem solving that challenged the students while aligning assignments to the core subjects' learning goals. Their PBL work immersed the students in creative lessons that fostered inspiration and a thirst for learning and cultivating their knowledge base.

"I love PBL, it was hard when we first started, it didn't make sense. But now, it's a great way to really engage my students and boost their thinking skills and creativity," stated an ESL middle school teacher.

"PBL is perfect for math. It lets students see the numbers in real life," reported a sixth grade math teacher. This school had the unique opportunity to help students practice critical thinking, collaboration, communication and optimized teamwork in the classroom. Students directly planned and steered their projects, shared their ideas collaboratively, and deepened knowledge and skills as they were empowered to work independently.

"I want to do this again," said a seventh grader. "It was a lot of work; I had to really think."

Well-developed PBL lessons provide opportunities for students to use knowledge across content areas authentically. "My students had to apply what they learned, they couldn't just bubble their way through," expressed an eighth grade teacher.

Teachers integrated their assessments seamlessly using tools for measuring student understanding from the beginning to the end of a project via rubrics. This experience allowed for a more student-centered environment, where teachers guided students in their learning through inquiry rather than using lectures and traditional techniques that focus on the learner as passive recipient of information. Instead, teachers focused on engaging students with a relevant curriculum while creatively addressing the state standards.

Students explored and presented solutions to authentic, real-world, challenging problems. Teachers collaborated across content areas to design lessons that were truly interdisciplinary.

Celebrating the Outcomes –
Spotlighting Energy Conservation

The student projects culminated in an Exposé Fair. Eighth grade students designed a new cell phone device with features to make their product more marketable. They conducted the research, designed, created and presented their invention in the fair to community members who judged their work and findings and gave feedback. Students explained the outcome of their experience and knowledge gained and worked to convince the judges through their persuasive presentation in their selection.

Sixth grade students created a public service announcement (PSA) for energy conservation in the city of San Antonio. These were the students' first public products, and they were excited to talk to professionals about their PSAs. "When are they coming?" asked a smiling sixth grader, as her two teammates rearranged their posters and iPad five times within two minutes. "They are judging

Effective PBL requires a team effort and incorporates educators with community experts to contribute to student learning. It shifts from printed textbooks to authentic real-world situations where students think, analyze, reflect and create.

Students present their projects to administration and community experts.

other groups, but they are coming," was the response. The diminutive sixth grader took a deep breath and moved the posters yet again.

Students were excited and ready to present; they wanted to be heard by adults from outside the school. It was refreshing seeing students take such pride in their work and yearning to share their knowledge with others.

One judge at the Exposé Fair shared her personal experience as students' presented their findings. She described the process she was going through to have 32 solar panels installed at her home. The students asked many questions, so the judge offered to videotape the process of installation at her house to share with them.

Lessons Learned

In these successful PBL units, teachers set clear goals, planned strategically, made students accountable, gave them concrete deadlines, shared rubrics in advance, monitored their progress and reflected on their methodology. Teachers exposed students to a realistic problem or project aligned with students' skills and interests and required that the learning be clearly defined with the content and skills using protocols, or exemplars from local professionals and input from students.

Teachers also created opportunities for multi-faceted assessments for students to receive feedback and revise their work via collaborative discussions, benchmarks and reflective activities. Students were required to provide presentations that encouraged participation and signaled social value via exhibitions, portfolios, performances and reports. Teachers participated in a professional learning network, collaborating with others and reflecting upon PBL experiences with colleagues.

"I really like presenting to the real people," stated a sixth grader. "When are we doing this again? It was fun," was a statement echoed by several students in different grade levels.

Community-Businesses Partner with Schools to Improve Teaching and Learning

This community of learners believed that students and schools can benefit from the support and expertise of local businesses, community organizations and individuals who live in the neighborhood.

One result was a presentation by Mr. Bryan Shellenberger, President & CEO of APEX Home

---

Design a Project-Based Learning Implementation Plan

Project-based learning is a student-centered pedagogy that involves a dynamic classroom approach in which students acquire a deeper knowledge through active exploration of real-world challenges and problems. It provides context to learning and offers students opportunities to grow noncognitive abilities as well as academic abilities.

Research shows better learning – Studies comparing learning outcomes for students taught via project-based learning versus traditional instruction show that, when implemented well, project based learning increases long-term retention of content, helps students perform as well as or better than traditional learners in standardized tests, improves problem-solving and collaboration skills, and improves students' attitudes toward learning.

What does project-based learning look like?
• Classrooms with students working collaboratively in self-directed groups
• Students giving constructive criticism and positive feedback to each other
• Students presenting to the city council, local officials or to industry professionals
• Transformative approach to teaching and learning that sets up group collaboration in real-world exercises that meet the needs of 21st century learners

IDRA can work with your campus to design a Project-Based Learning Implementation Plan, identify needs and support project based learning through professional development and coaching.

See our Project-Based Learning flier for details: http://budurl.com/IDRApblP

Energy Savings/NetZero, the company that installed the solar panels at the judge's house. Mr. Shellenberger brought with him a team of professionals: engineers, electricians and air conditioner and energy efficiency technical support staff. They presented on the equipment they use along with a PowerPoint and video on how solar systems operate. They engaged the students in the discussion asking them questions reaffirming the knowledge they have gained through the PBL activities.

The team of professionals also was excited as they were able to increase the students' knowledge and encouraged them to continue to strive academically in seeking a college education to get ahead in life and give back to their community.

"Of course, when they come and present, we can review the TEKS with the students," said the sixth grade science teacher when asked if it will be a problem to stop instruction for the presentation. The language arts teacher assigned students to write a reflective piece with editing peer groups to revise each other's work.

Effective PBL requires a team effort and incorporates educators with community experts to contribute to student learning. It shifts from printed textbooks to authentic real-world situations where students think, analyze, reflect and create. When educators dream big, with students in mind, the PBL projects connect students with real life and joyfully accelerate learning!

Nilka Avilés, Ed.D., is and IDRA senior education associate and director of IDRA's STAARS Leaders project. Comments and questions can be directed to her via email at nilka.aviles@ idra.org. Nadiah Al-Gasem, Ph.D., is a project based learning facilitator at the San Antonio ISD in Texas.

WEBSITE

Co-Leading and Co-Transforming Schools – School Administrators and Family Leaders in Education

by Aurelio M. Montemayor, M.Ed.

As our neighborhood public schools in the poorest areas of the country face the challenges of staying open, an opportunity to transform presents itself: Family leadership in education flowing from community-based organizations. Even though the traditional notion is still the norm where, at best, families are seen solely as volunteers and fundraisers, there are clear signs that families organized through community organizations are engines of change for the better.

Even among those who are from the community surrounding the school, it is not uncommon for school personnel to have inherited deficit views of the community. Coupled with scarce information taught about the value of authentic family engagement in educator preparation programs, the net result is ongoing prejudice against poor, minority, recent immigrant and English learning families. This bias is a barrier to authentic family engagement, but it is not insurmountable.

In the IDRA Quality Schools Action Framework, we define community involvement as the "creation of a partnership based on respect and the shared goals of academic success and integration of the community into decision-making processes of the school." In IDRA's framework, the strong family involvement includes the following elements:

- The community has an interest in becoming an integral part of the education community of the school.

- The community takes a pro-active role in ensuring that all students receive a quality education.

- The school actively promotes the involvement of the community in school activities and decisions.

- The school perceives community involvement as an essential partner in its campaign to teach all students.

IDRA's Family Leadership in Education model has evolved since the early 1980s and is embodied in the emergence of Comunitarios that today are present in several communities. The juncture of a school district that is transforming itself and that views the community and its children as assets and college material, is a community-based organization that is strongly supporting family leadership in education with an intermediary organization that provides information and training about critical educational issues. This meaningful work paints a picture of how collaborations can be transformative and beneficial to all.

Community-Based Family Engagement that Benefits Schools

IDRA and a community-based organization, ARISE, formed the first Comunitario in the spring of 2009. Soon, other organizations in the Rio Grande Valley – Equal Voice Network got word of this innovation. They started organizing meetings specifically to have the new Comunitario leaders tell the story of why they came together this way, what their goals are and what activities they are taking on.

Since then, the U.S. Department of Education supported IDRA through the Investing in Innovation (i3) initiative to expand and research our Comunitario model. Eight more groups have formed in five communities in South Texas. IDRA's i3 project has three major goals: form new Comunitarios, connect with schools, and conduct family leadership in education projects.

The Comunitarios have worked diligently to create group projects ranging from introductory school visitations to holding open hearings with school board candidates, and hosting large public events protesting huge cuts to the state education budget. None of the projects have been about local fundraising.

IDRA's Comunitario approach is designed to ensure that groups:

- Emerge from actionable data and related issues of concern to the families,

- Create opportunities for each individual to practice varied leadership roles,

School administrators and parents discuss graduation requirements at the Mesa Comunitaria event held by community organizations in the Texas Rio Grande Valley.

(Co-Leading and Co-transforming Schools, continued from Page 5)

- Are SMART: Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant and Timely,

- Support rotating leadership and super teams (rather than a super parents), and

- Generate collective leadership by supporting all participants to engage in some aspect of taking action, carrying out planned activities, learning to work in teams and getting things done.

Education Projects by Family Groups Support their Schools' Mission

Last year, the spread of family leadership in education projects was overwhelmingly related to graduation requirements and ensuring that all students are being prepared for college. Working together with the RGV Equal Voice Network education working group, parents surveyed other parents about the information they had on graduation requirements and whether their children in secondary schools were on a college track.

IDRA analyzed the survey results and helped publish and disseminate them (2015). The central finding was that most families were unfamiliar with the new graduation requirements and were unsure of which path their children had been placed in – although all wanted a college-preparation path. Local school leaders were surprised and grateful to learn which of their district's communication efforts had been effective and which were not.

The parents decided to lead a collective event on the issue. The groups came together to host an area-wide Mesa Comunitaria, bringing together families from three counties and representing more than 15 school districts (Bahena, 2015). Superintendents and other school staff were among the participants to listen and dialogue in powerful new ways.

In addition, RGV La Raiz Comunitario members made presentations about graduation requirements to families in the parent participation rooms at several schools. The families are in semi-rural areas and have limited access to such information, so the presentations by their peers gave them very valuable information as well as modeling the kind of leadership that they could take on themselves.

The ARISE Comunitarios decided to approach the Pharr-San Juan-Alamo school district administration to plan a district-wide event to inform families about such topics as dual college credit, the biliteracy programs and other benefits that

would prepare students for college. The session was planned and led by a coordinating committee that included a school administrator, an ARISE representative and IDRA staff.

Several planning and practice sessions were held and school administrators supported all phases of the process. The master of ceremonies, presenters and facilitators were students and parents. Both the schools and the Comunitarios promoted the event. On a busy Saturday, more than 120 participants attended. It was a showcase partnership that illustrated the faith and trust given to the community by the school district and the power of students and families being the presenters.

As a result, the participants were armed with information and plans of action that would affect the hundreds of families they represent and are in contact with. Many are carrying out very authentic family outreach and were equipped with new information. The modeling of leadership by parents and students emboldened many participants to take on similar activities in spreading the word about the benefits of the ideas presented and modeled at the session.

As stated in the IDRA Quality Schools Action Framework, these communities have demonstrated their passion for quality education and have shown how they can take a pro-active role in ensuring that all students receive a quality education. The schools promoted the community involvement and now see the community

as an essential partner. It was an excellent, replicable example of co-leading and co-transforming schools by school administrators and community organization leaders.

Aurelio M. Montemayor, M.Ed., is a IDRA senior education associate. Comments and questions may be sent to him via email at aurelio.montemayor@idra.org.

REPORT

Read: Our Mesa Comunitario – One Year Later
http://budurl.com/IDRAyr2MC

"The cool thing about presenting here is that we are all parents, and we want the best for our children, so there is a deep understanding and there is no fear.

Annual IDRA La Semana del Niño Parent Institute™
Family Leadership for Student Success
Liderazgo familiar en pro del éxito estudiantil
Bilingual Parent Institute • April 27, 2017 • San Antonio

Set up a makerspace at your school

Makerspaces have been popping up in community centers, schools and public libraries all over the world with the goal of providing the space and tools for people to be creative while learning new skills. Schools are taking advantage of makerspaces to increase efficacy in the STEM disciplines for more students.

"Making" is a skill that should be afforded to all students, not just those in engineering courses. And having a campus makerspace is a great way to get started. Many schools have mobile makerspaces on carts, others set up in the library or have a dedicated classroom space.

Makerspaces can be used to enhance all areas of study from art to zoology!

Let IDRA makerspace expert, Mark Barnett, guide you through the process from ideation to implementation. Mark has started several makerspaces and is a national speaker on the subject. Be sure to check out his TEDx San Antonio Talk entitled Everyone is a Maker, but not Everyone has Access (http://budurl.com/TEDxSAmb16vid).

Learn more: http://budurl.com/IDRAmsP

Support English learners through Engagement Based Sheltered Instruction

Have your English language learners been meeting state standards and passing required tests? IDRA's research-based sheltered instruction model can assist you in improving the academic success of your English language learners.

The model focuses on student engagement. Engagement in the learning process is essential for academic success.

Because of English language learners' different English proficiency levels, teachers often struggle to find ways to have them actively participate in their learning. IDRA helps teachers learn, reflect on use, and adapt instructional strategies so that English language learners are engaged in the instructional process.

This dynamic professional development series focuses on extending the teacher's knowledge of ESL strategies and sheltered instruction to ensure that the English language learner is engaged in learning the academic content. Using technology to engage students is an interwoven feature of the training.

Learn more: http://budurl.com/EBSI

(Will States Use ESSA to Undermine Communities of Color, continued from Page 2)

- building systems for the development of a stronger teaching force and the equitable distribution and recruitment of high quality teachers;
- providing equitable and adequate school funding;
- creating a rigorous, culturally relevant curriculum;
- expanding college-readiness preparation for all; and
- supportive community engagement and parent involvement programs (Robledo Montecel & Goodman, 2010).

States also should provide critical expertise and support to local education agencies to help improve learning for all students and to design systems that develop better citizens, including efforts to racially and economically integrate students (Frankenberg, et al., 2016).

Many of these actions are supported by more recent efforts of the U.S. Department of Education and under the ESSA. For example, the depart-ment issued guidance on resource inequities, including access to high quality teachers for impoverished and minority communities and access to college-preparatory coursework (Llamon, 2014).

Under the ESSA, states and LEAs are required to address resource inequities for targeted support schools and comprehensive support. Under the new regulations governing the federally-funded equity assistance centers, the department listed socio-economic integration experience as a competitive priority and teacher equity experience as an invitational priority.

Ultimately, the diminishing role of the federal government under the ESSA means that state and local policymakers must ensure that with each decision, they are choosing policies that support high quality public schools and opportunities for all children. The research shows that market-driven accountability systems have not resulted in sustained, improved learning opportunities, and more equitable options should be explored (see, e.g., Trujillo & Rivera, 2016; Kirshner & Gaertner, 2015).

Rather than casting shame on underperforming, under-resourced schools and stripping control from local communities of color, states and LEAs should implement comprehensive support systems that address the education needs of all students and families.

David Hinojosa, J.D., is IDRA's National Director of Policy and Director of South Central Collaborative for Equity. Comments and questions may be directed to him via email at david.hinojosa@idra.org. Jerry Wilson, M.A., is a doctoral student in Education Policy, Leadership, and School Improvement at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In the summer of 2016, he served as a 2016 Ginny Looney SELI Summer Fellow at IDRA.

WEBSITE

See references for this article at www.idra.org/IDRA_NL_current/

PODCAST

Listen to the podcast episode: English Learners and the New ESSA Law http://budurl.com/IDRApod163

Focus: Accountability and Civic Engagement

Subscribe Today!

SUBSCRIBE
Sign up for IDRA's free email newsletters!
http://budurl.com/IDRAsubscribe

iTunes
Get IDRA's Classnotes Podcast via iTunes or online
http://www.idra.org/Podcasts/

Connect with Us Online

facebook.com/IDRAed

twitter.com/IDRAedu

slideshare.net/IDRAedu

pinterest.com/idraedu

budurl.com/IDRALinkedIn

flickr.com/IDRAedu

budurl.com/IDRAYouTube

Download Our Free News App

Get IDRA's email newsletters, Classnotes Podcast, videos, infographics and more!

Available now for iPhone, Android, Mobile Web, and Blackberry

Available on the App Store

ANDROID APP ON Google play

Scan this code or visit www.idra.org/apps

Assuring equal educational opportunity for every child through strong public schools that prepare all students to access and succeed in college