



Armed with Data, PTA Comunitarios3
Teacher Leadership in Science in Schools.....5
Six Teens Win 2014 National Essay Contest Award 6

Focus: Actionable Knowledge

IDRA’s New CollegeLink App Connects Transition Counselors with New College Students as they Navigate Confusing College Systems

by Hector Bojorquez

Consider this scenario: Mario Contreras, who is the first in his family to attend college (a “first-time-in-college” student), attends his first day of class and is told by his professor that his name is not on the class roster. Mario assumes that it is a small glitch and goes to his next class and is, again, told that he is not registered. He begins to panic and goes to the admissions office. The lines are long because it is the beginning of the semester and many students have questions. After a 45-minute wait, he learns he is in the wrong line. He is sent to the registrar’s office where, after a two-hour wait, he is told that there is a hold on his records. He goes to the financial aid office and, after more waiting, is told to come back the next day. Mario does so and the problem is resolved. But they mention that if he had come later in the week, it would have been too late and he would have had to wait until spring to register for classes. Mario was lucky. The unfortunate fact is that many students are not so lucky and, because of mix-ups, miscommunication and general bureaucratic issues, a high percentage of students simply “stop-out.”

It would seem that in this day and age of high tech solutions, dilemmas like these wouldn’t happen with such great frequency. Yet, as any first-year college student will tell you, it happens all the time. The preceding scenario is actually one of the simpler problems that students encounter but that take a maddeningly long time to solve.

Students are hit with much more complex problems ranging from arcane ID systems, to class counseling mix-ups, incorrect schedules, random holds on financial aid, etc. If most services and institutions that adults deal with were as complex as college systems, very few of us would have checking accounts, utilities, cable or even a library card. Yet, many of our students are presented with badly-organized bureaucracies and outdated modes of communication in their quest for a college education.

Now consider an alternative scenario: Anna Reyes, a student at a Lower Rio Grande Valley college in Texas, arrives for the first time on campus and goes directly to her first class. She is excited, prepared and ready for this new journey. But the professor says that she is not on the roster. As Anna investigates the problem, she finds out that a delay in financial aid approval has caused the computer system to drop all her classes. Anna does not panic. She takes out her smart phone, clicks on “CollegeLink,” a new IDRA app being piloted in the area, and sends a message to her counselors who immediately tell her to log back in to the college’s financial aid web site and to click “accept” for her financial aid. The counselor tells her that now she should come in to her office to re-enroll in the classes she had registered for. The crisis has been addressed in a short period of time. The counselor sends Anna a calendar
(cont. on Page 2)

“We must connect school outcomes – graduation and college readiness – with who and what produces those outcomes – connecting actionable knowledge to support engaged citizens, accountable leadership and enlightened public policy that leverages change.”

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

(IDRA's New CollegeLink App... continued from Page 1)

notice that will alert her of the date and time they are to meet. The counselor decides to send out an alert to all her students, reminding them of some crucial steps they must take before attending their first day of class.

This is the vision being ushered in for students in the Pharr-San Juan-Alamo school district (PSJA) who are attending South Texas College and the University of Texas at Pan American. Students are beginning to use the CollegeLink app designed by IDRA to assist transition counselors as they help students navigate the confusing and unnecessarily complex systems at institutions of higher education.

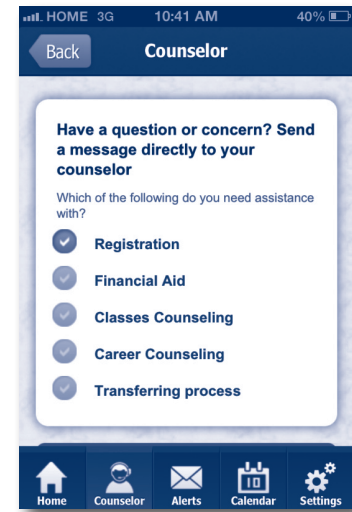
This app is the result of IDRA's collaboration with PSJA, a school district that has taken on the responsibility for student success beyond high school graduation to college and beyond. It is the result of shared vision between IDRA and PSJA. At PSJA, a shift in perspective has occurred that has resulted in new challenges, new solutions and, ultimately, success. A complete account of their transformation can be found in IDRA's recent report, *College Bound and Determined*.

Both IDRA and PSJA believe that all students should be afforded a college-going future and that our educational institutions must change to ensure that all students are college and career ready. It is with these two understandings in mind that PSJA began a program where counselors from the district are housed at local colleges to assist former high school students as they transition to college. This has, in actuality, signaled a complete change in the nature of the relationship between public education and students. In this new educational model, public schools extend their influence beyond 12th grade and reshape how they serve students. IDRA's own asset-

based recommended practices and programs are grounded in the notion that institutions must change themselves rather than trying to change students.

Through those shared values, IDRA designed CollegeLink, which is a student-centered, counseling communication mobile app that enables counselors to help students more efficiently. This app was designed to help PSJA's transition counselors communicate with their "case load" so that more PSJA students would make it through that crucial first year. The app is designed to be simple, elegant and intuitive. Because the app collects information about the nature of the problems being consulted on, data are continuously being compiled that can be used to identify areas of concern. The app's features are as follows.

- Students are able to send messages to counselors through a tool that resembles chat rather than email. This function is key because it leverages students' familiarity with social media. It also helps counselors keep a record of communication in a more organized way than long email conversations that don't document the nature of the discussion.
- Counselors communicate with students through an administrator portal where they can receive and send messages.
- Counselors can communicate with students through mass and individual messages.
- All contact is automatically logged through a web-based system.
- Counselors can send alerts to all students.
- Counselors can set up calendar events.
- All communications show up as notifications on students' smart phones so that communications aren't missed.



- Counselors can review data on the kinds of issues that should be pro-actively addressed as well as simply documenting the conversations themselves.
- The app is available for both Android and iPhone devices.

After a pilot phase, PSJA is poised to make the app available to all graduating high school students. This communication system holds the promise to transform the way in which counselors and students communicate. This tool is quickly garnering interest from colleges across the state and country that are looking for ways to deepen their engagement with students. If you are interested in a demo of this app please email hector.bojorquez@idra.org.

Resources

Bojorquez, H. *College Bound and Determined* (San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development Research Association, 2014).

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Armed with Data, PTA Comunitarios Work with Schools for College Preparation

An IDRA OurSchool Portal Story

by Hector Bojorquez and Aurelio M. Montemayor, M.Ed.

IDRA's OurSchool portal was designed to inform families, parents and educators about educational outcomes in Texas high schools. Parents visit the site to see how well students are prepared for college by looking at SAT and ACT scores, the numbers of students actually going to college, and the percentages of students having to take remedial courses. The data have been a powerful catalyst for parent groups to approach schools with questions, concerns and ideas for collaboration. One excellent example of this type of collaboration is how the burgeoning PTA Comunitarios in the Lower Texas Rio Grande Valley have used the data to kick start community efforts and collaborations with schools.

A PTA Comunitario is a community-based PTA that is not tied to one particular school but rather is housed in a community organization. IDRA and ARISE, a partner community-based organization in South Texas, have collaborated for nearly six years in piloting this concept in *colonias* (unincorporated neighborhoods), some of the most economically disadvantaged areas in Texas. Through an Investing in Innovation (I₃) grant from the U.S. Department of Education, IDRA is leading an effort in the Lower Rio Grande Valley to expand the concept to multiple school districts.

The PTA Comunitario process recognizes that once parents have solid comprehensible educational data, they become well-informed advocates interested in collaborating with schools. IDRA's OurSchool portal has been the source for educational data from the inception PTA Comunitarios. An early accomplishment of the ARISE PTA Comunitario was to form a solid relationship with superintendents in the Pharr-San Juan-Alamo ISD and Donna ISD to focus on the very real issue of dropouts they had noted in the OurSchool portal.

From their inception, the PTA Comunitarios were concerned with math scores on the state-

mandated exam (then the TAKS) and with SAT/ACT scores. Across area school districts, PTA Comunitario members surmised that high school math scores reflected a grim reality and that SAT/ACT scores were dismal. The rates of students scoring at or above criterion were in the single digits even for schools that had with good TAKS scores. As some participants observed, "How can our schools say they are passing the TAKS test, but our students aren't prepared for college entrance exams?" Parents concluded that schools were actively preparing students for a minimum skills test but not for college. This key insight gave parents grounding and understanding how many schools actually fail to prepare students for college.

In 2011-12 with support from TG, IDRA upgraded the OurSchool portal to include college-going rates and developmental education performance. This information showed the number of students going to college from any high school and how many were required to take developmental or remedial courses once they started college. These costly courses can take several semesters for students to finish while providing no college credit, leading many students to eventually abandon their dreams of college graduation.

Parents in the PTA Comunitarios were prepared with this new information. They understood the data with little need for explanation. So deep was their understanding of the data that they became part of an advisory board that provided input on the portal. The new data showed that, while more students were going to college, a high number were going to two-year colleges and that many were not prepared for college as evidenced by their having to take developmental classes.

For PTA Comunitarios, knowledge of this and all of the data provided by IDRA's OurSchool portal was crucial in developing a consciousness about what was happening in their schools. It
(cont. on Page 4)

For PTA Comunitarios, knowledge of the data provided by IDRA's OurSchool portal was crucial in developing a consciousness about what was happening in their schools.

(Armed with Data, PTA Comunitarios Work with Schools for College Preparation, continued from Page 3)

was with this new awareness that they initially approached the PSJA and Donna school district superintendents (Montemayor, 2012). While the results of these initial meetings have allowed for deeper relationships with school districts, their full results were still to come.

The Texas legislature's passing of House Bill 5 marked a historical turning point in Texas education where an already unsatisfactory, inequitably funded educational system was further weakened by lowering curricular standards and returning to thinly-veiled system of tracking and vocational education. As a result, the default curriculum in Texas no longer satisfies minimum requirements for college access and success.

It is at this juncture that the PTA Comunitarios' use of the OurSchool portal became indispensable. Since the fall of 2013, new PTA Comunitarios have been forming across the Lower Rio Grande Valley. They began their meetings by reviewing educational data, particularly scores in the new state-mandated test (the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness, STAAR) in Algebra I and Algebra II and college-going data. The data showed that very few students were passing the Algebra I and Algebra II tests and that students were not prepared for college.

To the parent groups, the obvious response was to ask: "What can we and the schools do to better prepare our students?" Parents were astonished to find that the new curricular requirements no longer even require Algebra II and that the paths

to college were obfuscated by a new system of "endorsement," or specialization, career and job paths. This new regime was universally unacceptable to all PTA Comunitarios in San Benito, Donna, PSJA and Rio Grande City.

The strategy was to show parents the state of education for them to become better advocates for their students. In the latest case, parents were shown the outcomes of a weak educational system and, when presented with current educational law, the conclusions were clear: without community action, schools are poised to take the path of least resistance and not work toward college for all. And now, PTA Comunitarios are acting. Armed with powerful data and strong positions, they are making their presence known.

Advocating for students, PTA Comunitarios have collaborated and or initiated the following activities.

- Presented at the *Mesa Comunitaria Educativa* Rio Grande Valley community convening in January, where PTA Comunitario's positions of "college for all" were shared with parents, school administrators and college presidents (Bojorquez & Montemayor, 2014; Bojorquez, 2014).
- PTA Comunitario statements were presented in testimony to the Texas State Board of Education (Montemayor, 2014).
- The first PTA Comunitario, ARISE South Tower, held a press conference in March with all the leading Spanish-language media in

South Texas. Eva Carranza and Anita Gonzalez, past and present organization presidents, stressed the importance of preparing all children for college and given real choices.

- Members of new PTA Comunitarios visited San Benito schools and presented their deep knowledge about graduation requirements and educational outcomes and were invited to present to five parent groups in the district.

The actions taken by PTA Comunitarios are clear, direct and targeted toward assuring that communities are informed about the new Texas graduation requirements. This would not have occurred had it not been for the consciousness that was formed by quick and easy access to data. The informed parents are now taking action.

Resources

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Get District- and High School-Level Data at IDRA's OurSchool Portal

Designed to help educators and community members find out how well their high school campus is preparing and graduating students, what factors may be weakening school holding power, and what they can do together to address them.

What's Included...

- Key data to help you determine whether high dropout rates and weak school holding power are a problem for your school.
- Actionable knowledge and key questions to spark conversations and action planning around: teaching quality, curriculum quality, attrition, college readiness, college access and college sending.
- Real-time data collection features via surveys (e.g., to measure parent engagement).
- Social networking features you can use to share data with others and attach charts or graphs, keep track of your own notes, or call a community-school meeting to work on a specific issue.
- Bilingual (Spanish/English) content.
- Texas data on college persistence, developmental courses and success of Texas high school students.



www.idra.org/OurSchool



Teacher Leadership in Science in Schools with Diverse Students

by Kristin Grayson, Ph.D.

Student achievement in science in U.S. public schools is at the forefront of recent educational reform initiatives. Having effective science teachers who can improve science achievement for all students is of utmost importance. There are many factors that contribute to effective instruction, including resources, pedagogical practices, teacher content knowledge, class size, curriculum, etc. In my 2014 dissertation study, I focused on teacher classroom leadership. What kind of leadership behaviors and belief sets do effective science teachers have? How confident are science teachers in their ability to teach and help all students become successful learners of the complex scientific knowledge and processes contained in school curricula? How do teachers lead their students to attain scientific proficiency?

Few quantitative studies have focused on teacher leadership at the classroom level (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). However, over the past 25 years, many studies have been done on teacher self-efficacy. Tucker, et al. (2005) defined teacher self-efficacy as “the beliefs that teachers have about their individual skills and abilities to create desirable outcomes for students.” Higher levels of teacher self-efficacy have been consistently correlated with higher levels of student achievement.

A variety of studies have been conducted about teacher leadership. In the 1970s there was a focus on teacher leadership at the classroom level. Pounder (2006) spoke about the change that occurred in teacher leadership studies shifting from that of the relationship between teaching and leadership in the classroom to that of leadership of teachers (first wave). This was followed by a period of study of instructional leadership within a school organization (second wave), and then a period of study that he calls leadership as a process of influence (third wave). We have now moved to a fourth wave of studies that are back to studying how teachers lead students in the classroom.

Therefore, with this combined history of teacher research, my dissertation examined the relationships between teacher leadership behaviors, teacher self-efficacy, and student science achievement in culturally diverse schools (based on the percent low socio-economic status and percent non-White, percent English learners). This is one of the first studies to attempt to show relationships between teacher self-efficacy and teacher leadership and to look for relationships between those two independent variables (at the school level) and student achievement.

Findings from this study were interesting but not necessarily surprising. At the teacher level of analysis, higher teacher self-efficacy beliefs predicted higher teacher initiating structure (such as classroom management), and at the school level of analysis the study affirmed that school demographics cannot be ignored. Higher percentages of low SES students and English learner students predicted lower science achievement. Of course, that does not presume that low SES students and English learner students cannot learn science, it just means that the methods currently being used are not addressing the students’ needs. Teachers themselves reported their lowest self-efficacy beliefs and expectations in their abilities to teach science to English learners.

The findings imply that more research needs to be done to clarify relationships between teacher classroom leadership, science teacher self-efficacy, and student achievement especially at the teacher level of analysis. Findings also indicate the importance of developing instructional methods to address student demographics and their needs so that all students, despite their backgrounds, will achieve in science.

To help address this need, IDRA created the Science Smart! professional development model for teachers in classrooms serving English learner students and diverse populations. Several Texas schools have seen double-digit gains in standard-
(cont. on Page 7)

Teachers themselves reported their lowest self-efficacy beliefs and expectations in their abilities to teach science to English learners.

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 http://www.idra.org/South_Central_Collaborative_for_Equity/

funded by the U.S. Department of Education



Six Teens Win 2014 National Essay Contest Award

Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program Tutors Tell How the Program has Helped Them

“I never wanted to come to school, but those kids made me come to school every day. They are also the reason my grades are up, so that they can look up to me and say ‘He is really smart.’” – Nicholas Alderete

Six students received prizes in a national competition among participants in the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program, a nationally-recognized cross-age tutoring program of the Intercultural Development Research Association. Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program tutors wrote about how the program helped them do better in school and how they had helped their tutees to do better.

There were competitions at both the middle school and high school levels in the United States. Winners from each competition are being awarded \$200 for first place, \$150 for second place and \$100 for third place. Congratulations to the winners, and to their families, teachers and schools, and to all who participated in this year’s contest.

First Place High School Winner – In her essay, **Michaela Valdez** wrote: “Because of



my tutees looking up to me, I wanted to change for them. I went from the girl with depression who was alone and wore all black every day, to someone who is happy, social with friends and wears more color. I used to hide the real me from the world because I feared being judged. But spending so much time with my tutees, they taught me that it’s okay to be myself. So now, because of them, the real me is here. I’m not trying to be someone else anymore... I have gained my self-confidence back. I used to never have faith in myself, until now. Now that I have hope and faith, my grades have gone up dramatically.” (South San Antonio High School)

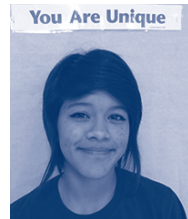
Second Place High School Winner – “The Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program has helped me see people different. In this program, I have seen that they actually care for me,”

Nicholas Alderete wrote in his essay. “These third graders have made me feel special. They



welcome me every day I go tutor with a jump of cheer and scream my name ‘Nicholas!’ It’s amazing how they do that and make me feel important... I have tutored them in math, reading and spelling. They have learned a lot and come to school every day. My attendance used to be off. I never wanted to come to school, but those kids made me come to school every day. They are also the reason my grades are up, so that they can look up to me and say ‘He is really smart’... My life has completely changed since I have started the program, and nothing will make me go back to the way I was.” (South San Antonio High School)

Third Place High School Winner – “The Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program really is life changing. It has given me a different perspective on what I want to do with my life,” wrote **Melina Martinez**. “Before I was introduced



to the program, I was a girl who would walk the halls of my school and feel so small and invisible. I was struggling with my classes... I feel not only did the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program change my life, it has changed my tutees’ lives too... My tutees are very bright young students, and I am happy to have the privilege to work with them. Knowing that I am helping better someone’s future brings a warm feeling to my heart.” (South San Antonio High School)

First Place Middle School Winner – In his essay, **Christian Ortiz** wrote: “That first day was when my whole world changed immense-

ly. I never thought that three little 9 year olds could inspire and motivate me in so many ways. That day, I went home and apologized to my mother, told her from now on I would do



my homework and chores without having to be told twice, and I also told her about my first day with the tutees. I told her I would give her \$50 from my first paycheck for the bills. She told me she was so proud of me... To this day, I thank my tutees for being my inspiration, and I no longer do it for the money. I do it for the tutees and me.” (Domingo Treviño Middle School, La Joya, Texas)

Second Place Middle School Winner

– “The first day of attending our elementary for tutoring, I was very scared yet excited to start,” **Gisel Salinas** wrote in her essay. “As



the months have gone by, the things these kids have learned have shocked me. I never thought I could make that much of a difference in the life of another student. When I am at home, I try and make little awards for my tutees so they know that I appreciate everything they are learning from me...The reward I have had from the experience in the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program has resulted in my confidence going up. I now feel more secure knowing that I am capable of one day being a teacher in life.” (Dr. Javier Saenz Middle School, La Joya, Texas)

Second Place Middle School Winner

– **Johan Servones** wrote: “In this tutoring program, I want my tutees to be inspired and start to think about what they want to be in the future, just like my teacher has inspired me...” (cont. on Page 7)

(Six Teens Win 2014 National Essay Contest Award..., continued from Page 6)

When I was given the opportunity to teach tutees from kindergarten, I realized that I was taking some important steps toward reaching my dream of becoming a teacher because



I was practicing...I love being in this program and spending time with my three tutees. Being in the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program has helped me think more about my own dream and has helped me realize that I know it will come true.” (Captain Manuel Rivera, Jr. PS/MS279, New York City)

Honorable mentions were awarded to students in schools that submitted multiple student essays. (See list online at: <http://budurl.com/VYPessays>). The Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program, created by IDRA, is an internationally-recognized cross-age tutoring program. Since its inception in 1984, the program has kept more than 33,000 students in school, young people who were previously at risk of dropping out. According to the Valued Youth creed, all students are valuable, none is expendable. The lives of more than 795,000 children, families and educators have been positively impacted by the program.

Get More Online at the IDRA Newsletter Plus

- Video introduction on using the IDRA OurSchool portal
- eBook: The PTA Comunitario Approach
- Winning essays by Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program students
- Podcasts on communities using data and on how to start a PTA Comunitario
- Podcasts on using iPads in the science classroom
- *Courage to Connect: A Quality Schools Action Framework™*
- *College Bound and Determined* (pdf)

Visit www.idra.org for more information.

Learn More Online

Website: Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program – Learn more about the program and how to bring it to your school

Video: Dropout Prevention that Works – Quick overview of how the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program impacts students and schools. [01:30 min.]

TV News Story: IDRA's Dropout Prevention Tutoring Demonstration, by WOAI News 4 San Antonio TV

Newspaper Story: South San ISD student mentoring program draws national attention, by Francisco Vara-Orta at the San Antonio Express-News

www.idra.org/Coca-Cola_Valued_Youth_Program

(Teacher Leadership in Science in Schools with Diverse Students, continued from Page 5)

ized tests for elementary and secondary science after receiving one year of implementation of this model, which is designed to address specific equity issues that campuses face (e.g., equitable resources, greater access to science opportunities for minority students and females, and the transformation of teaching practices to meet the needs of a growing populations of English learner students). IDRA also has outlined seven umbrella research-supported instructional strategies to help English learners achieve in the science classroom. The strategies are presented in detail with their research base in *Science Instructional Strategies for English Learners – A Guide for Elementary and Secondary Grades* (Villarreal, et al., 2012), which is available from IDRA.

Having teachers lead students to be the scientists of tomorrow is of utmost importance. We must define what this leadership is, find ways to improve it, and how best to prepare current and new science teachers. All students deserve the

opportunity to choose to become the scientists of tomorrow!

Resources

- Grayson, K. "Leadership, Self-Efficacy and Student Achievement in Science Instruction in Culturally Diverse Schools," *Dissertations Abstracts International* (2014).
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IDRA Research for Actionable Knowledge

Ever since its first days over 40 years ago, IDRA has been conducting research to provide data to school leaders, policymakers and advocates in ways that are actionable. IDRA started by introducing readers into the complicated world of **school finance** in Texas. In 1974, IDRA created a database detailing the system to better inform the public and officials. It was designed using information provided by TEA and IDRA's own research initiatives to provide the capability for a district-to-district comparison of school finances, demographics and educational programs and services. Over the years, IDRA has continued to provide data on school funding equity to inform litigation and policy as well as to inform the public of the impact of proposals and debates. In the early 1970s, IDRA conducted the first study of its kind on the **costs of bilingual education**. Focusing on Texas, Utah and Colorado, we were able to put in policymakers' and advocates' hands concrete data how much bilingual programs should cost to inform funding decisions. In the mid-1980s, IDRA released the first-ever report of **high school attrition** in Texas. The data were provided by race-ethnicity statewide and at the county level. Annual updates of attrition in Texas schools have continued through today. The initial release of data led to action by the state legislature to require continued collection of dropout data and the establishment of dropout prevention strategies. IDRA's **OurSchool data portal** gives community, family and school leaders a new level of high quality, accessible data to see how their schools are doing and plan ways to improve them (see story on Page 3). Designed around IDRA's Quality Schools Action Framework™, the bilingual site provides key questions to promote community conversations and a framework that local, cross-sector partners can use to plan joint action to improve school holding power. More examples and resources from IDRA's research work are available online.

*Assuring educational opportunity for every child
through research, materials development, training, technical assistance, evaluation and information dissemination*