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Mesa Comunitaria Educativa – Community Collaboration for Education Advocacy

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

On January 25 of this year, community members from across the Texas Rio Grande Valley gathered to discuss educational issues in their schools. Lourdes Flores, president of ARISE, stated in no uncertain terms: “All of us want all our children to be ready for college. Anything else is unacceptable.” This was in response to the growing concern many families are expressing about how Texas is in the process of lowering expectations for students. The statement was followed by thunderous applause in a room full of parents, educators and university administrators. To community leaders like Ms. Flores, the current dumbing down of core curricula and reviving of vocational education by the Texas Legislature and State Board of Education is yet another attempt to dismantle equity in an already inequitable system.

Through House Bill 5 passed in 2013, students will no longer be required to take higher level math classes, such as Algebra II. And incoming high school students will be asked to choose an “endorsement path,” which focuses certain courses in areas of interest or potential career fields. Within each endorsement, students can end up either on a vocational track or a college track.

This was not the case in the recent past when the state required students to take at least four high school math and science classes with the goal of

having all students graduate college ready. But the Texas Legislature has now watered down graduation requirements and brought back a system that, by design, reduces the number of students getting a high quality education and being prepared for college.

Throughout the last 15 years, IDRA has worked with community-based organizations in south Texas, providing educational information and policy updates. This work has culminated in the formation of community-based PTAs, PTA Comunitarios, that are presided over by members of south Texas grassroots organizations. Now, as IDRA and the Rio Grande Valley community move forward in collaborating with school districts, community organizations and colleges, a new effort is taking shape, called *Mesa Comunitaria Educativa*. This initiative is bringing together educational stakeholders from across the Texas Rio Grande Valley to collaborate on community concerns surrounding education. Currently, the community is concerned with the planned implementation of HB5, which is poised to gravely impact the quality of Texas’ secondary curriculum.

Our families and communities are protesting the weakening of curricula. They have been part of decisions and projects and, with their first-hand accounts of positive change, have become
(cont. on Page 2)

“To deliver curriculum quality and access, our schools must make sure that the particular programs of study and materials are available to students of all types so that students are not tracked into lower level courses.”

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

(Mesa Comunitaria Educativa – Community Collaboration for Education Advocacy, continued from Page 1)

vocal advocates. Families are powerful allies in preventing HB5 from doing permanent damage to educational equity in our state. They must be engaged with dignity and integrity as has been the case among the PTA Comunitarios. This is what the *Mesa Comunitaria Educativa* is designed to accomplish.

Representatives of community-based organizations have come together in the *Mesa Comunitaria Educativa* and focused on two educational issues: the effect of the new legislation on quality curricula and equitable funding for all schools.

The next step took place on January 25 at the South Texas College Cooper Center where district personnel, college administrators and community members met to discuss the assets, challenges and possible solutions facing the lower Rio Grande Valley. This sort of education community board serves as a model for other communities as they monitor funding equity and curriculum quality in their schools.

The process at this meeting was to first examine educational data for the region, followed by break-out sessions designed to have school district staff, higher education administrators and community members look at the assets the Rio Grande Valley has to offer. These assets cover a wide spectrum: one of the nation's most innovative districts, Pharr-San Juan-Alamo ISD, and its efforts to become an early college school district; higher education's collaborative spirit with the community; and several PTA Comunitarios engaging parents as part of the solution rather than the problem. After reviewing assets, groups brainstormed possible collaborations and set goals.

Seventy community members attended the

Mesa Comunitaria Educativa. Among them were members of the RGV's Equal Voice Network; the president of the University of Texas at Pan American, Dr. Robert Nelsen; and district personnel from the PSJA and La Joya school districts. The discussions were rich, and a summary of the outcomes and next steps is forthcoming. Community-based organizations, like ARISE and LUPE, shared the extent of community outreach in the Valley, which comprises close to 30,000 families.

However, the main concern of all participants was the obvious negative consequences of HB5. Participants of *Mesa Comunitaria Educativa* know that the policy brings back vocational education and lowers graduation requirements for students. The measure and its proponents hold steadfast to their belief that schools do not need to prepare everyone for college.

But Lourdes Flores emphasized: "We expect all our children to be prepared for college. All of them. We have not struggled this hard for our children to have less than that."

As a result, the *Mesa Comunitaria Educativa* drew up plans to collaborate with local school districts and colleges to inform the community about the implications of the new policy. The plans include forming monitoring committees with school districts, collaborating with colleges to disseminate information about opportunities, and pressing school districts to maintain the highest rigor and expectations for all students, not just the top 10 percent of students. This kind of community involvement and collaboration will hold schools accountable.

If nothing like this is happening in your community, there are concrete steps to becoming an

engaged citizen. Take up the call. Analyze your high school's data via IDRA's OurSchool Portal (for Texas), form your own parent organization, hold your own *Mesa Comunitaria Educativa*, engage your school and district by asking about scores and college-going rates at school board meetings. It is your right and responsibility. Ask your school, "Why aren't more students going to college from our schools?" Ask to monitor the number of students who are graduating college ready. Form committees to monitor all success data. Advocate and be engaged. Ask to collaborate with schools, ask to see more data if you think it necessary. Form your own PTA Comunitario, as many are doing in South Texas (IDRA can help). Like them, hold school boards and superintendents to high standards for all children. At a time when the nation seems ready to give up on our students, hold the system accountable. Repeat the phrase from our south Texas parents: "All of our children are college material."

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Distinguished as Default – Real Choice is Preparing All Students Well

by Laurie Posner, MPA

The Texas State Board of Education, which oversees the public education system, approved final graduation requirements under House Bill 5 in January. The new plan sets out a 22-credit foundation portion and four credits in one of five endorsements in: (1) STEM, (2) business and industry, (3) public services, (4) arts and humanities, and (5) multidisciplinary studies. This plan takes effect for students beginning ninth grade in the fall of 2014. They will select one of the five endorsements, though school districts are only required to offer the multidisciplinary studies endorsement.

Importantly, completion of this new graduation plan does not automatically qualify students for Texas' Top 10 Percent public college admission or the Texas Grant unless they earn a "distinguished level of achievement." Also, the state board has removed the Algebra II requirement and now only calls for Algebra II in two circumstances: for students seeking the STEM endorsement and the "distinguished achievement" designation.

In addition, as IDRA noted in testimony to the board, while the new plan appears to promote district-level flexibility, the authorizing legislation makes no provisions for addressing intra- and inter-district inequity nor does it assure that the endorsements provide the preparation students need for college or an emerging, globally-competitive workplace (IDRA, 2013). As it stands, the Texas public education system maintains a more than \$1,098 gap in per pupil funding between its wealthiest and poorest 100 districts. Without addressing structural inequities, flexibility is, by definition, more flexible for those school districts with more resources for faculty, curricula and facilities.

Research by the Center on Education and the Workforce and Georgetown University shows that, while we as a nation have been moving toward expanded college access in recent years, we continue to create "two post-secondary pathways: one for White students and another

for Hispanic students and African American students." In *Separate and Unequal*, Carnevale & Strohl (2013) note: "The post-secondary system mimics the racial inequality it inherits from the K-12 education system, then magnifies and projects that inequality into the labor market and society at large. In theory, the education system is colorblind; but, in fact, it is racially polarized and exacerbates the intergenerational reproduction of White racial privilege."

Texas Higher Education Commissioner Dr. Raymund Paredes pointed out: "There is no assurance that the [Texas] foundation curriculum will provide all students a solid academic foundation... We expect a decline in college readiness" (McKenzie, 2013).

Dr. Paredes' concerns are shared by civil rights, education and business leaders across the state and stem from the fact that only one in four graduating Texas students today is considered college-ready, and that Texas scores 38th in SAT math. And while 45 states, the District of Columbia, four territories, and the Department of Defense Education Activity are increasing mathematics rigor, Texas has opted to go in the opposite direction.

While Texas policy responds to the concern by a few that its curriculum had "forced" too many children into a college-ready path, mounting research shows that children without college preparation pay a serious price. And the college-advantage is growing. Pew Research finds: "On virtually every measure of economic well-being and career attainment – from personal earnings to job satisfaction to the share employed full time – young college graduates are outperforming their peers with less education. And when today's young adults are compared with previous generations, the disparity in economic outcomes between college graduates and those with a high school diploma or less formal schooling has never been greater in the modern era." (2014)

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"There is no assurance that the foundation curriculum will provide all students a solid academic foundation... We expect a decline in college readiness."

– Texas Higher Education Commissioner
Raymund Paredes

(Distinguished as Default – Real Choice is Preparing All Students Well, continued from Page 3)

Many educators, families and business leaders across Texas want all children to have an equal shot at a good education that prepares them for the full range of college and career options. And a growing number of people are calling for just that.

For example, in January, the Austin Independent School District, with the support of the 2,900-member Austin Chamber of Commerce and the Texas Association of Business (TAB), announced that it would establish the “distinguished diploma as the default” for every high school student. As AISD Trustee Robert Schneider stated: “The thing about the distinguished plan is that [for] every kid, we automatically know that they’re doing everything that they need to do to get into college, and it’s not that way with some of the other options” (Weldon, 2013).

The Texas Latino Education Coalition has called for “distinguished as default” for all students. TLEC includes IDRA, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF), Texas League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), the National Council of La Raza (NCLR), Mexican American School Board Members Association (MASBA), Texas Association of Mexican American Chambers of Commerce (TAMACC), Texas Hispanics Organized for Political Education (HOPE), Texas Association for Bilingual Education (TABE), Texas Association for Chicanos in Higher Education (TACHE), the Cesar E. Chavez Legacy and Educational Fund, and the Hector P. García G.I. Forum.

Mesa Educativa Comunitaria, a coalition of education, community, family and civil rights leaders in Texas Rio Grande Valley, including RGV Equal Voice and IDRA’s grassroots PTA Comunitario network, and representing some of the lowest-income communities in Texas, has called for “distinguished as default” for all children in the Rio Grande Valley (see story on Page 1).

Many proponents of the exclusion of college-readiness requirements, such as Algebra II, in Texas’ graduation plans have argued that they are encouraging student engagement. But experience does not bear this out.

As Texas A&M President Rey Keck, pointed out in testimony to Texas State Board of Education, students are not becoming more disengaged by taking more challenging mathematics, “Kids all

over the world are learning Algebra II...you just need a better structure to learn it.”

In the Rio Grande Valley, Pharr-San Juan-Alamo ISD graduates 95 percent of its students on the Texas “4x4” plan through a whole cloth commitment to “All students [becoming] college ready, college connected, and complet[ing] college.” With this approach, the district has since 2007 doubled the number of graduates and halved its dropout rate. As IDRA – which works in partnership with the district on STEM, dropout prevention and college-readiness strategies – reports in *College Bound and Determined*, PSJA ISD “firmly rejects the idea that some students do not have the capacity to pursue college.” (Bojorquez, 2014) (See Page 7).

And IDRA’s Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program, which keeps 98 percent of participants in school by valuing youth and fostering youth leadership, shows that students are not disengaged by new challenges that accompany greater hope and risk. They are disengaged, we find, when adults give up on them. And we and our partners across the state, with a vision of educational excellence for all children, never will.

Resources

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PTA Comunitario Growth Prospects in Oklahoma

by Kristin E. Grayson, Ph.D.

The IDRA PTA Comunitario concept is growing in the Rio Grande Valley. At the same time, this approach to parent engagement is being considered by the Oklahoma City Public Schools. A team from its Language and Cultural Services Department recently visited IDRA to learn about this model. The team also traveled to Pharr, Texas, to meet the pioneers of the ARISE PTA Comunitario, to hear their history of advocacy and courage, and to brainstorm ways this approach could serve Oklahoma City families.

The PTA Comunitarios in the Rio Grande Valley are based on IDRA's model in which the major feature includes being based with a community-based organization instead of a specific school. They function so that, in this case, Spanish-speaking parents stay informed about school policies, initiatives and actionable data. Actionable data refers to data about the school that parents might want to question and take action on. These might include data about attendance, test scores and graduation rates. For example, if parents find that their school's graduation rate is low because students are not taking the proper sequence of required courses for the needed credit, parents can ensure that they help their children and others get enrolled in the proper courses at the proper time in order to graduate.

The PTA Comunitarios work to serve the community and the schools associated with that community. They are registered as official PTAs with the National Parent Teacher Association, but they have major differences from a typical PTA. They are community based and are focused on strengthening schools for all children. PTA Comunitario families stay informed about their children's schools, initiate community programs to help their children, while at the same time they inform the area schools about their families, their needs, and their questions and concerns.

Both of the communities in South Texas and Oklahoma are economically disadvantaged. In the Pharr-San Juan-Alamo school district in

Texas, for example, 89 percent of the students are considered economically disadvantaged, while in Oklahoma City that percentage is 91 percent.

While there are similarities between the Spanish-speaking communities in the Texas Rio Grande Valley and Oklahoma City, there also are substantial differences to consider in implementing the PTA Comunitario model in the two locations. Oklahoma City is not a border community and thus has a different geography and history.

Demographics are substantially different for students and staff. There are 40,904 students in the Oklahoma City public school district, of whom 18,000 students (45 percent) are Hispanic and more than 12,000 (29 percent) are English learners from Spanish-speaking homes.

PSJA has a student body of 32,051 comprised of 31,694 students (99 percent) who are Hispanic. Of those students, 11,702 (36.5 percent) use Spanish as a home language, and only 2,820 (8.8 percent) students are also English learners.

Other key differences in the demographics of the two locations are those of teachers and administrators. In PSJA, 92 percent of teachers are Hispanic compared to 4 percent in Oklahoma City.

IDRA and the IDRA South Central Collaborative for Equity brainstormed with the Oklahoma City team about ways the PTA Comunitario model could empower Spanish-speaking parents in their district. In Oklahoma City, there are fewer Hispanic teachers and administrators to serve as role models, and there is a higher percentage of Hispanic students who need to master the English language. Additionally, the PTA Comunitario initiative is one that will be started by the school district in Oklahoma and individual schools instead of by a community-based organization, although leadership will come from the community.

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In Oklahoma City and in the border towns of Texas, the end result is what is important. Both want to empower parents to understand and know their schools, to inform schools of their strengths and needs, to participate in the educational process of their children, and to serve as the best advocates for their children's education.

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

Treating All Students as College Material – Family Leadership in Action

by Aurelio M. Montemayor, Ed.D.

Family leadership is most powerful at improving education for all children when collective efforts create solutions for the common good. This is one of the principles of IDRA's Family Leadership in Education process. Families are concerned about the quality of education their children are receiving. They are suspicious of any attempts to track their children in non-college paths. Rather than lower standards under the rubric of "college is not for everyone" they want their children supported and successfully taught to have the skills and courses necessary for college acceptance and eventually degree completion.

In Texas, graduation standards are returning to various tracks, many of which will not lead to college-acceptable transcripts when students receive their high school diploma. The forces that be and the actions of the elected officials have created an array of "choices" that, given institutional biases and inertia, will result in large numbers of economically disadvantaged students and children of color being pushed into tracks that will not lead to college.

Parents in south Texas who are participating in IDRA's PTA Comunitarios and are part of a larger network of community organizations, Equal Voice, have been requesting information, receiving training and informing their neighbors about the dangers in the recently passed regressive policies.

They have created checklists for families to evaluate the schools their children attend. Their ques-

tions begin with: "Is preparation for college and college success the principal goal of the school? Is the school promoting the college track endorsement for all students?" And they proceed to much more specific items that give families evidence of the support and motivation students receive for college preparation.

These same families requested and got specific information on what kinds of careers are available with a bachelor's degree and the average salaries for the different professions. They reviewed more than 180 professional titles in nine discipline areas. All were amazed at the information. A common sentiment was the lack of such information provided by schools to students and parents.

The energy coming from communities that are poor and Spanish speaking flies in the face of the common prejudices and institutional assessments made of those families and their neighborhoods. As the State Board of Education was deliberating about weakening course requirements these parents developed the following statement.

PTA Comunitarios Call for Algebra II Requirement

- "The PTA Comunitarios in Alamo, Pharr and Brownsville, Texas, do not agree with the petitions to exclude Algebra II as a required subject in high school.
- The PTA Comunitarios support all students being prepared for college as modeled by the Pharr-San Juan-Alamo school district.

"All of our children should be considered college-material and should be taught accordingly."

– PTA Comunitario families in the Texas Rio Grande Valley

- We support the 4x4 requirements that were in place before the new guidelines (4x4 refers to the previous requirements for Texas students to take four courses each in math, science, English and social studies).
- We are concerned that our children who come from the *colonias* will be counseled into tracks that are not of college-preparation quality.
- We think all of our children should be considered college-material and should be taught accordingly."

This is just one example of many where a collective effort is presenting a solution to the under-education and mis-education of children.

Aurelio M. Montemayor, Ed.D., is a senior education associate in IDRA Field Services. Comments and questions may be directed to him via email at comment@idra.org.

(PTA Comunitario Growth Prospects in Oklahoma, continued from Page 5)

Both IDRA and the Oklahoma City team agreed that the PTA Comunitario model holds great promise for the community in Oklahoma City. There and in the border towns of Texas, the end result is what is important. Both parties want to empower parents to understand and know their schools, to inform schools of their strengths and needs, to participate in the educational process of

their children, and to serve as the best advocates for their children's education.

Resources

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PSJA Proves that a School District Can Assure that All Students are College Bound

IDRA releases “College Bound and Determined” – A report profiling what happens when a school district raises expectations for students instead of lowering them

IDRA has released a new report, *College Bound and Determined*, showing how the Pharr-San Juan Alamo school district in south Texas transformed itself from low achievement and low expectations to planning for all students to graduate from high school and college. In PSJA, transformation went beyond changing sobering graduation rates or even getting graduates into college. This school district changes how we think about college readiness.

This transformation has resulted in the district doubling the number of high school graduates, cutting dropout rates in half, and increasing college-going rates. In fact, half of the district’s students are earning college credit while still in high school.

“Our vision can be boiled down to the phrase, College³, meaning that all students will be College Ready, College Connected and will complete College,” said Dr. Daniel King, PSJA superintendent.

Earning a college degree is more important today than ever before, according to a new Pew Research Center report on the rising value of a college degree and the rising cost of not going to college. The study found that “college graduates outpace those with less education on virtually every measure of job satisfaction and career success.”

Pharr-San Juan-Alamo is on the U.S.-Mexico border. It is 99 percent Latino. And it is extremely poor, serving colonias in Texas. “But you notice that there is no deficit thinking and no excuses in this approach. There is no students-cannot-learn or parents-don’t-care or they-do-not-speak-English or we-can’t-do-it,-we-have-too-many-minorities, or they’re-not-college-material,” said Dr. María “Cuca” Robledo Montecel, IDRA President.

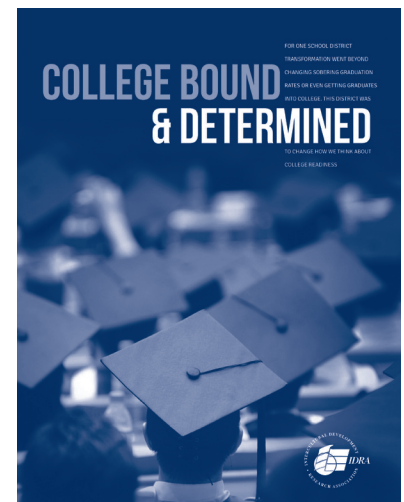
“Instead, at PSJA, you find thoughtful, data-based, coherent plans that connect K-12 with higher education and community to improve educational opportunities for all children,” said Dr. Robledo Montecel.

With funding from TG Public Benefit (TG), IDRA examined data and conducted interviews with Dr. King, school principals, teachers, counselors and students to explore how PSJA has achieved the kind of success that it has. IDRA saw that PSJA’s vision and actions, clearly and independently aligned, with IDRA’s own vision for change: the Quality Schools Action Framework™. This change theory helps communities and educators assess a school’s conditions and outcomes and identify leverage points for improvement and informing action.

IDRA’s Quality Schools Action Framework focuses change on what research and experience say matters: parents as partners involved in consistent and meaningful ways, engaged students who know they belong in schools and are supported by caring adults, competent caring educators who are well-paid and supported in their work, and high quality curriculum that prepares students for 21st Century opportunities.

The parallels between the framework, IDRA’s vision and PSJA’s processes are numerous, showing that when students are valued and seen as solutions, similar paths rise and converge. *College Bound and Determined* describes PSJA’s changes using IDRA’s framework and ideas as organizing principles.

In contrast with Texas’ weakening of high school curriculum and institutionalizing a system of tracking many students into low-level and vocational courses, families want more for their children. Members of PTA Comunitarios in the Texas Rio Grande Valley recently urged the Texas



State Board of Education to require the 4x4 higher level curriculum for all students, to support the PSJA model for all students to be prepared for college, saying “All of our children should be considered college-material and taught accordingly.” (The PTA Comunitario is IDRA’s model of family leadership in education that is based in the community.)

“In this publication we seek to make the case that all students deserve an equitable, excellent and college bound education. By using the Quality Schools Action Framework we tell the story of how one school district has brought that ideal closer to reality for all students,” added Dr. Robledo Montecel.



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IDRA Research – Curriculum Quality

In 2002, IDRA rigorously studied exemplary bilingual education programs in schools across the nation as determined by English learner academic achievement. Amid a backdrop of great language diversity among the students and parents that U.S. schools serve are schools with exemplary bilingual education programs and extraordinary individuals who are committed to equity and excellence. One of the 25 common characteristics that contribute to the high academic performance of students served by bilingual education programs is a quality curriculum. In the 10 schools IDRA studied, the curricula were planned to adapt instruction in ways that respect students' native language and reflect their culture. All of the classroom instruction was meaningful, academically challenging, and linguistically and culturally relevant. Teachers used a variety of strategies and techniques, including technology, that responded to different learning styles. Teachers and administrators reported their bilingual program was designed to meet the students' needs, including recognition of the need for alignment between the curriculum standards, assessments and professional development. Teachers were actively involved in curriculum planning and met regularly with administrative support to plan.

IDRA's study was funded by the U.S. Department of Education and informed IDRA's publication, *Good Schools and Classrooms for Children Learning English: A Guide*. IDRA continues to work with teachers and administrators to assure rigorous bilingual programs have high quality curricula that produce excellent outcomes for children. More examples and resources from IDRA's curriculum quality research and development work is online at http://www.idra.org/Research/IDRA_Research.

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