



## Focus: Teaching Quality

Dual Language Means Two .....	3
Court Rules Again .....	5
IDRA Research for Teaching Quality .....	7

# An Elementary School's STEM Success Story

## IDRA Technical Assistance Empowers Teachers with Strategies to Impact Student Learning

by Nilka Avilés, Ed.D., and Juanita C. García, Ph.D.

Picture fifth graders gathered around a table where teachers are modeling the effects of sand erosion by wind and water. They then plan a set of learning centers that they themselves will lead for fourth graders. This scene is Science Camp at Gus Guerra Elementary where fifth graders participated in an engaging series of learning centers to master science concepts.

IDRA's South Central Collaborative for Equity has partnered with the school to engage in changing the campus culture to one that is child-centered, college going and highly engaged with parents and community. Every child, regardless of characteristics and identified needs, is challenged to reach high standards and is given requisite pedagogical, social, emotional and psychological supports.

The major goals are to increase the school's effectiveness in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) and to increase academic language by particularly integrating the linguistic demands of the STEM areas into the curriculum. Through intensive language development and strengthened core content instructional programs designed to increase comprehensible input and acquisition of academic language among all student groups and across grade levels, the campus is succeeding in preparing primary grade students for upper elementary grades, middle school, high school and college.

This is being accomplished through a well-aligned multidisciplinary approach and strengthened instruction that incorporates dynamic and highly interactive instruction for all fourth and fifth grade students. IDRA's approach to professional learning values the role of teachers, administrators, parents and students as co-creators of a campus culture where student voices are heard and incorporated into the curriculum and other campus activities designed to strengthen both students' academic pursuits and non-cognitive factors that are crucial to their engagement and academic success.

### Why STEM in Elementary School?

Children inherently have inquisitive minds and are natural scientists and problem-solvers. They make sense of the world around them by using all their senses to discover, take apart, build and create. This kind of learning is fun and exciting. This excitement must continue as children enter school and progress throughout their educational journey to ensure skilled workers in STEM-related fields who are equipped to lead and sustain our economy. The best way to ensure returns on these investments is to start fostering these skills in young children. Evidence has been growing over the last decade showing the significant effect of math and science experiences as early as (cont. on Page 2)

*“Teaching quality is more than the teacher as a person. Specifically, teaching quality is based on strong content knowledge and effective pedagogy, quality decision-making in the classroom, self-efficacy, innovation, and capacity to teach diverse students, and is grounded in community and institutional support.”*

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

(An Elementary School's STEM Success Story, continued from Page 1)

prekindergarten on later learning and attitudes toward STEM (NSB, 2010; NAEYC & NCTM, 2010).

Effective teachers play a vital role in nurturing the natural enthusiasm for scientific learning children bring. How can elementary teachers make STEM part of what their students do in the classroom every day? Our collaborative partnership involved four critical elements that teachers have embraced and adapted to lead

their students to a successful STEM education.

### 1. Shifting the Paradigm from Teacher-Centered to Student-Centered Instruction

Student-centered instruction has its roots in constructivist theory of learning. In constructivist classrooms, students build their understanding of the world as a result of their actions. IDRA staff educators and Gus Guerra Elementary School teachers and administrators

reviewed areas of need in math and science and agreed on the topics to be modeled in their classrooms. Armed



with research-based and highly-interactive strategies for engaging all students, including English language learners, IDRA modeled lessons and debriefed with teachers on what they observed. The teachers committed to create an environment where STEM was a natural and real part of the curriculum. When a classroom operates with student-centered instruction, students and teachers share the focus interacting equally.

### 2: Empowering and Valuing Teacher Strengths

Teachers have a profound impact on students' lives. IDRA recognizes the tremendous capacities all teachers have acquired through their years of experience. The best teachers believe in their students, challenge and inspire them, and urge them to take risks in learning.

The climate established at Gus Guerra Elementary School is that of respect, valuing (cont. on Page 7)

## Educators Reflect on their Experience with IDRA's Role in School Transformation

"It has been rewarding to observe the students taking ownership of their roles as they worked cooperatively in guiding each other to accomplish their tasks."

— Teacher, Gus Guerra Elementary School

"The experience with IDRA was second to none. We are looking forward to working with IDRA in the years to come."

— Teacher, Gus Guerra Elementary School

"The experiences that have been provided by IDRA have been priceless when it comes to student engagement and the level of critical thinking students have exemplified."

— Campus instructional coach, Gus Guerra Elementary School

"For several years now, IDRA staff have mentored and coached teachers in fourth and fifth grades and has been instrumental in empowering teachers with strategies and tools to positively impact student learning. We have begun to reap the rewards and have begun to transform each classroom into a powerful teaching and learning community. We have made significant gains in the area of science. Last year, we were one of only seven campuses in PSJA ISD that met Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Although we have much to celebrate, we must remember, *Todavía no podemos cantar victoria*. We still have much to accomplish. We believe that with IDRA's collaboration, we can continue to transform our students, our school and our community."

— Rebecca Sánchez, principal, Gus Guerra Elementary School

## 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](mailto:contact@idra.org).

Additional resources are available online at [http://www.idra.org/South\\_Central\\_Collaborative\\_for\\_Equity/](http://www.idra.org/South_Central_Collaborative_for_Equity/)

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# Dual Language Means Two –

## Reflections and Guidance for Teaching in Two Languages

by Adela Solís, Ph.D., and Kristen Grayson, Ph.D.

With the new school year begun, Suzanne Irujo, now a seasoned teacher, reflects on her first year as a third and fourth grade bilingual teacher: “I worried about how I would learn to teach reading and math, but I didn’t worry about when to use English or Spanish in my classroom. Nobody else did, either. They just said, ‘Here’s your classroom, these are your students, go teach.’” (2004)

In schools that work for English language learners, where transitional bilingual education or dual language maintenance programs are in operation, the students’ primary language is central to the goal of teaching English and to meeting the primary language goal specific to the program. If these goals are to be met, teachers need to pay attention to how much time they devote to each language. Research has shown that when bilingual teachers don’t consciously monitor their language use, they tend to use much more English than they intend or thought they were using (Bruce, et al., 2000; IteachIlearn, 2004).

This results in the native language not being developed sufficiently to provide a solid base for transfer to English. It additionally undermines the core rationale of bilingual education: to strengthen and provide instruction in the stronger language as students are learning English. In this situation, subject matter knowledge will not progress since the students probably do not understand as much from English instruction as they would from primary language instruction. This situation has a negative effect on the learning of English and impacts the students’ education in general (NABE, 2014).

Freeman & Freeman state, “For optimal use of the two languages in a bilingual program, a structure should be developed that allows for use of both languages in literacy and other academic contexts” (2006). How much each language is used and the ways in which it is used must be the result of deliberate planning and thoughtful delivery. Bilingual teachers should then seek the

(cont. on Page 4)

*Research has shown that when bilingual teachers don’t consciously monitor their language use, they tend to use much more English than they intend or thought they were using.*

## Resources and Ideas for Teaching Spanish in Bilingual and Dual Language Classrooms

**Semillitas de Aprendizaje™** is a bilingual (Spanish/English) supplemental early childhood curriculum by IDRA that is based on the art of storytelling. See box on Page 8.

### Spanish Teaching Standards and Assessments

National Spanish Examination Standards

[nationalspanishexam.org/index.php/exam-content/standards](http://nationalspanishexam.org/index.php/exam-content/standards)

Standards for the teaching of foreign languages (in the United States)

[www.actfl.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/public/StandardsforFLLExecsumm\\_rev.pdf](http://www.actfl.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/public/StandardsforFLLExecsumm_rev.pdf)

Spanish Language Arts and Reading Standards (Texas)

[ritter.tea.state.tx.us/rules/tac/chapter128/ch128a.html#128.11](http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/rules/tac/chapter128/ch128a.html#128.11)

Spanish Language Arts Standards (Illinois)

[www.isbe.state.il.us/bilingual/pdfs/WIDA\\_spanish\\_la\\_standards.pdf](http://www.isbe.state.il.us/bilingual/pdfs/WIDA_spanish_la_standards.pdf)

Spanish Assessments and Tests [www.cal.org/twi/assessments.pdf](http://www.cal.org/twi/assessments.pdf)

(cont. on Page 4)

(Dual Language Means Two – Reflections and Guidance for Teaching in Two Languages, continued from Page 3)

appropriate guidance to structure state-of-the-art instruction in both languages. Teachers should always remember when planning their teaching in bilingual classrooms that dual language means two languages.

Clearly there is more information available for teaching in English than for teaching in Spanish in bilingual and dual language programs. Nevertheless, there are available resources to guide the balanced planning and delivery of excellent Spanish instruction. (See the listing in the boxes on Pages 3 and 4 and see IDRA's website for active links.) Meeting the challenge of addressing the primary language part of dual language instruction means seeking out the standards, curriculum, and ideas on teaching methods (Solís, 2012).

### Resources

Bruce, K.L., & R. Lara-Alecio, R.I. Parker, J.E. Hasbrouck, L. Weaver, B. Irby. "Inside Transitional Bilingual Class-

rooms: Accurately Describing the Language Learning Process," *Bilingual Research Journal* (2000). 21, No. 2/3.

Freeman, I.S., & D.E. Freeman. *Teaching Reading and Writing in Spanish and English in Bilingual and Dual Language Classrooms*, second edition (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 2006).

Irujo, S. "One Classroom, Two Languages: Which Language When?" *ELL Outlook* (Amesbury, Mass.: 2011-2012 Course Crafters Guide to the ELL Market, 2004) pg. 229-232.

ITeachILearn.org. Case Studies: Small Rural Bilingual Program, web page (ITeachILearn.org, 2004).

NABE. What is Bilingual Education, web page (Silver Spring, Md.: National Association for Bilingual Education, Website Resource Center, 2014).

Solís, A. *Teaching Spanish in Texas Schools: The Spanish Language Arts and Reading (SLAR), Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) and Other Resources for Teachers of Spanish* (San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development Research Association, 2012).

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- Quality Schools Action Framework™
- Video: Ensuring High Teaching Quality to Tap Into Students' Strengths
- Information about *Good Schools and Classrooms for Children Learning English*
- Dashboard with live Texas school finance news

Visit [www.idra.org](http://www.idra.org) for more information.

## Resources and Ideas for Teaching Spanish in Bilingual and Dual Language Classrooms

### Teaching Pedagogy for Bi-literacy Development

"Teaching Literacy in Spanish," by K. Escamilla in *The Power of Two Languages* 2000

Teaching Reading to ELL: Differentiating Literacies, by S.G. Herrera, D.R. Perez, & K. Escamilla (Pearson 2009)

The Differences between English and Spanish  
[esl.fis.edu/grammar/langdiff/spanish.htm](http://esl.fis.edu/grammar/langdiff/spanish.htm)

### Spanish Books

Del Sol Books [www.delsolbooks.com](http://www.delsolbooks.com)

Zona Latina Books [www.zonalatina.com/Zlchild.htm](http://www.zonalatina.com/Zlchild.htm)

Resources for Libraries [www.reforma.org/libresources.html](http://www.reforma.org/libresources.html)

Biblioteca Virtual del Español (con una sección para literatura infantil)  
[www.cervantesvirtual.com/index.jsp](http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/index.jsp)

### Other Teaching Ideas on the Web

Bilingual Teachers Clubhouse Blog [bilingualteacherclubhouse.blogspot.com](http://bilingualteacherclubhouse.blogspot.com)

Idea board and pins from Pinterest  
[www.pinterest.com/pepepato/bilingual-teaching-activities](http://www.pinterest.com/pepepato/bilingual-teaching-activities)

Lesson plans that coincide with foreign language teaching standards in ACTFL  
[thespanishteachers.com/lessonplans.htm](http://thespanishteachers.com/lessonplans.htm)

A bilingual website for families and teachers of English language learners  
[www.colorincolorado.org](http://www.colorincolorado.org)



# Court Rules Again— Texas School Funding Must Serve All Students Equitably

## *IDRA Statement on the Texas District Court Ruling on Texas School Finance System*

The Texas District Court, Judge John Dietz presiding, ruled in August that the Texas school finance system violates the Texas Constitution. Judge Dietz ruled that the current funding system is “constitutionally inadequate, unsuitable and financially inefficient” (pg. 4).

“Once again, the court has affirmed what researchers, communities and educators have stated for years: the Texas system for funding public schools is inequitable, inadequate and unacceptable,” said Dr. María “Cuca” Robledo Montecel, IDRA President & CEO.

The Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF) represented a sub-group of low wealth school districts and parents in the case, and IDRA conducted several research studies of the Texas school finance system in conjunction with the case. IDRA research found that the system is inequitable and fails to provide adequate levels of funding for educating English language learners and low-income students.

Dr. Albert Cortez, IDRA’s Director of Policy, provided key testimony in the *Texas Taxpayer and Student Fairness Coalition vs. Michael Williams, et al.*, initial trial that concluded in February 2013 and the subsequent hearings that examined the impact of changes to the Texas public school funding system adopted by the Texas legislature in 2013. IDRA also presented analyses at trial revealing that funding cuts to special programs disproportionately impact students in low wealth and major urban school districts. These cuts were not restored in the 2013 legislative session.

Among IDRA’s research findings, presented to the court, were the following.

- **Inequitable** – The Texas system fails to provide a similar return for similar tax effort, producing unacceptably high levels of inequity between the state’s wealthiest and most property poor school districts. Texas’ richest school districts have \$1,098 more per

student, which amounts to a gap of \$27,450 per classroom or \$823,500 per school to spend on teachers, curriculum, books, technology tools and supplies.

- **Inadequately funded** – School districts are not adequately funded to provide for the general diffusion of knowledge as required by the Texas Constitution, especially given increased standards and a more rigorous state assessment system. All students are expected to graduate college- and be career-ready, yet no funding adjustments were adopted that reflect what research shows is needed to achieve those outcomes.
- **Insufficient** – The state fails to provide sufficient funding for schools to effectively address the needs of a growing population of English language learners and low-income students. Programs serving ELL and low-income students are underfunded by 75 percent.
- **No meaningful discretion** – Because school districts must tax at maximum levels just to meet state requirements, school districts, in effect, lose meaningful discretion to local supplemental funding. Without meaningful discretion, local school taxes become the equivalent of a state property tax, a tax that is forbidden under the Texas Constitution. More than 200 school districts have already reached the cap on local taxing authority.

Judge Dietz concurred, stating in the ruling: “Based upon the competent evidence admitted at trial... the court finds that the Texas school finance system effectively imposes a state property tax in violation of Article VIII, Section 1-e of the Texas Constitution... that the Legislature has failed to meet its constitutional duty to suitably provide for Texas public schools because the school finance system is structured, operated and

(cont. on Page 4)

*“Once again, the court has affirmed what researchers, communities and educators have stated for years: the Texas system for funding public schools is inequitable, inadequate and unacceptable.”*

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

*(Court Rules Again, continued from Page 5)*

funded so that it cannot provide a constitutionally adequate education for all Texas schoolchildren... the school finance system is constitutionally inadequate because it cannot accomplish, and has not accomplished, a general diffusion of knowledge for all students due to insufficient funding, [and] the school finance system is financially inefficient because all Texas students do not have substantially equal access to the educational funds necessary to accomplish a general diffusion of knowledge.” (pp. 2-3)

Importantly, the ruling recognizes the substantial and growing population of economically disadvantaged and English language learner students in Texas and the impact of inadequate funding. “This court declares that the Texas school finance system violates the ‘make suitable provision’ clause in Article VII, Section 1 of the Texas Constitution because the system is not ‘structured, operated and funded so that it can accomplish its purpose for economically disadvantaged and English language learner children’” (pg. 7).

In addition, the judge found that the facilities funding provided to public schools is “constitutionally inadequate to suitably provide sufficient support for districts to maintain, build and renovate the classrooms necessary for an adequate education.” (pg. 9)

The court also once again rejected the charter school intervenors’ call for the court to mandate the lifting of caps on the number of charter schools or to mandate that the state provide funding for charter school facilities. The ruling observes that the legislature recently increased the number of authorized charters adopted in 2013, and the court re-stated its earlier position that the state has the authority to treat charter schools in ways that differ from traditional neighborhood public schools. The court also rejected the claims of the pro-voucher intervenors who were seeking court support for providing state funding for options other than public schools.

### What is Needed to Ensure Texas Provides High Quality Education for All Students

If past rulings are any guide, this latest case will very likely be brought to the Texas Supreme Court. The Texas legislature, however, has no reason to wait for court-imposed reforms. The legislature has the authority to act on its own accord to ensure that education meets the test of fairness, efficiency, and education quality for all

students. The priority could not be more pressing, as Texas schools prepare to serve growing numbers of low-income students and English language learners. These actions are needed now.

- **Fair funding now. What is needed are critical funding resources, not more time.** There is not a need for complete restructuring of the school funding system. Given the breadth of the court ruling and the compelling facts of the case, it is clear however that the adoption of an equitable school funding plan that provides all school districts the resources needed to educate children to the high levels is needed – and needed now.
- **Features that maintain inequity and that have been hidden within the state funding system for decades need to be eliminated immediately – no more phasing out.** The trial testimony made reference to the significant inequities that continue as result of target revenue funding. Elimination of this alternative dis-equalizing funding scheme is absolutely essential. Plans to phase out what are called “hold-harmless” features (money that school districts receive despite not qualifying for it under the regular funding formulae) over a multi-year span have always been used as an excuse to perpetuate inequities that were created as far back as 1993. The argument that high wealth school districts need time to adjust ignores the fact they have already had decades to do so.
- **Special population funding increases must be implemented now.** Funding weights based on real-world costs have been long overdue. Based on expert testimony, the court concluded that all schools serving the state’s special population students (particularly those who are learning English and those from low-income backgrounds) require higher levels of funding than provided in current state formulae. There has never been an adjustment since the weights were adopted in 1984. After decades of neglect, Texas needs to increase funding for compensatory education and ELL weights to 40 percent, as supported by the research literature.
- **Public funding must be reserved for public schools.** The court ruled that

funding for public schools must be made more adequate and more equitable. To achieve this goal, the state must not divert state funding to private schools by providing vouchers or tax breaks for businesses to divert tax monies to contributions designed to support private schools, or expanding corporate-run charter schools. Such proposals would result in diminishing the resources available to fairly fund public schools that has been mandated by the court. Diverting public money away from public schools would do nothing to address the current crisis and would create dual school systems: one separate for the few and one underfunded for the many.

- **Facilities funding priority should be given to public schools.** The state of Texas has long been negligent in addressing the facilities funding needs of the majority of its public schools, failing to provide new funding for facilities in the last several years. Priority in addressing long-neglected facilities needs should be given to those public schools that have waited patiently for their opportunity to get state support to remodel, upgrade or replace old, outdated classrooms, laboratories and similar instructional areas.

### The time for fair funding is now

Dr. María “Cuca” Robledo Montecel added: “The state of Texas has struggled with inadequate, inequitable education funding for far too long – perpetuating funding schemes that value some groups of schools and students over others. That was the old Texas. It is time for the new Texas – one that provides equal educational opportunity not for just some – but for all of its children.”

More information and resources are available online at <http://budurl.com/IDRAf814>

(An Elementary School's STEM Success Story, continued from Page 2)

backgrounds and strengths, and incorporating these daily in profound ways into the classroom. IDRA educators built on teachers' leadership capacities and capitalized on campus leadership, mobilizing the principal, teachers, support staff and parents as a force to share the responsibility for STEM education. Together they created a vision to reach high standards of excellence in conjunction with a meaningful professional development for teachers.

### 3. Building Trust and Fostering Confidence

Through coaching and mentoring experiences, teachers emerged to become more confident and comfortable in teaching STEM concepts. After observing IDRA staff, teachers took leadership roles by developing lessons that include strategies they had learned to foster innovation and cultivate problem solving and logical thinking. By integrating STEM activities in lessons, teachers experienced successful outcomes, such as increased student engagement in learning, improved benchmarks and STAAR results, self-accountability, gaining trust, and becoming confident and competent. These opportunities convinced them to nurture their creativity and become innovative risk takers to be successful. Teachers realized their enormous strengths and how they were able to build on them.

### 4. Establishing a Sustainable Cultural Transformation

The school administration and teachers are committed to transforming the role of STEM in the curriculum and the way they teach STEM areas, ensuring that all students succeed while creating a sustainable, robust and open pipeline for STEM. To sustain the effort, school staff gathered and shared ideas and resources and developed lessons to support this transformation. The vision and new culture at the campus has led to the promotion of engaged and motivated students who value STEM and are better equipped to face the role they play in our society to address scientific, social and the economic challenges of our world. The school has experienced a sustainable cultural transformation where teachers and students learn the same way scientists and mathematicians learn – by doing. Educating the next generation of scientists, technologists, engineers and mathematicians with the skills from high quality hands-on teaching experiences fosters criti-

## IDRA Research for Teaching Quality

As students return to school, this spotlight focuses on our research on teaching quality and its impact on student learning and long-term academic success of students. IDRA has outlined four dimensions of teaching quality:

- **Instructional Leadership:** Creating an environment accepting of and suitable for all students, where communication is key.
- **Instructional Focus:** Acknowledging the diversity of students and committing to meeting their needs. The educational community procures the proper materials and ongoing professional development.
- **Safe and Orderly School Climate:** Students and their families are treated with respect, the students feel safe in school, and they are afforded opportunities for leadership roles.
- **High Student Expectations:** Students feel valued and are aware of the high expectations of them.

IDRA's work in defining *teacher* quality emphasizes that this quality must also be accompanied by teaching quality in the context of a supportive school and community environment as exemplified in the Quality Schools Action Framework. Developed in 2005, the Quality Schools Action Framework™ is a change model for school reform that emphasizes that widespread, effective change can only happen when the many aspects of the system work together toward the success of all students. This requires valuing all learners no matter the color of their skin, wealth, religion, gender, national origin, language characteristics, or orientation.

IDRA moves beyond simply defining quality as credentials and includes teacher perspective, instructional strategies, and the surrounding organization of the school and community. Examples that highlight IDRA's persistent work in building teaching quality and school capacity are online at [www.idra.org/Research/IDRA\\_Research/](http://www.idra.org/Research/IDRA_Research/).

cal thinkers who adapt to change, an essential component to any future career.

Successful teaching and learning begins with a vision of providing quality and culturally relevant opportunities for all students. The principal of the school, Rebecca Sánchez, deserves much credit for motivating teachers to become leaders and risk takers.

### Resources

- Avilés, N. "Building College Readiness for All Students," *IDRA Newsletter* (October 2013).
- Avilés, N. "The Need for Minority High Schools with a STEM Focus," *IDRA Newsletter* (February 2012).
- García, J. & Rodríguez, R. "Building Interest in STEM," *IDRA Newsletter* (January 2014).
- Johnson, P. "A Valuing Professional Development Model," *IDRA Classnotes Podcast Episode 143* (July 28, 2014).
- NAEYC & NCTM. *Early Childhood Mathematics: Promoting Good Beginnings*, A joint position statement (Adopted in 2002; Updated in 2010).
- National Science Board. *Preparing the Next Generation of STEM Innovators: Identifying and Developing Our Nation's Human Capital* (National Science Foundation, 2010).

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## Semillitas de Aprendizaje™

### Early Childhood Bilingual Literacy Development

Semillitas de aprendizaje is a bilingual (Spanish/English) supplemental early childhood curriculum by the Intercultural Development Research Association that is based on the art of storytelling. It focuses on literacy development and has culturally-relevant materials for early childhood and primary grades.

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- Info on the 10 stories
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