



Focus: Student Voices

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Raising Expectations – Building College Intention into Dropout Prevention

by Linda Cantu, Ph.D.

As a nation, we need our children to be successful in school, to graduate, and to have options to attend college. We need this for all of our children not just a select few. It's not uncommon when school policies and systems slip into a pattern of operating from a student deficit frame that begins with assumptions of what students appear to lack (e.g., motivation, capacity, intelligence), often due to underlying biases. These assumptions can inappropriately guide interactions between teachers and students and become a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure (Robledo Montecel & Bojorquez, 2015).

The IDRA Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program on the other hand has a different, and more true, approach to students, particularly to those who have been identified as being in at-risk situations. The program's philosophy builds positive interactions between teachers and students. Activities that are the essence of the program give students an opportunity to grow their skills as students, contribute to their school and community, begin a process of examining their futures, and build skills and dreams that lead them there.

As educators we need to remember: "All students inherently have the ability to think critically, solve problems, interact socially and persist in tasks. They are creative and resilient. When the adults and institutions that surround them support, nurture and encourage these competencies with

trust, high expectations and respect, students' non-cognitive skills blossom." (Avilés, 2015)

The IDRA Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program is an internationally-recognized, cross-age tutoring program with an unusual twist. This dropout prevention program works by identifying junior high and high school students who are in at-risk situations and enlisting them as tutors for elementary school youngsters who also are struggling in school. Given this role of personal and academic responsibility, the Valued Youth tutors learn self-discipline and develop self-esteem, and schools shift to the philosophy and practices of valuing students considered at-risk. Results show that tutors stay in school and have increased academic performance, improved school attendance and advanced to higher education.

The program's instructional strategies and support strategies help schools successfully impact students in schools. The instructional strategies include: classes for tutors, tutoring sessions, educational field trips, mentors and role models, and student recognition. All of the strategies are important to helping the students improve academically, gain confidence and connect to school.

Three of the instructional strategies in particular help to reinforce a college-going philosophy and career goal environment. For the weekly classes (cont. on Page 2)

"In an effective school, all students feel welcomed, valued and above all achieve both academically and socially. Student engagement, then, is integral – not a sideline – to learning."

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

(Raising Expectations – Building College Intention into Dropout Prevention, continued from Page 1)

for tutors, a tutor workbook highlights activities that help students plan for their future: graduation, college and career. The activities have students research and discuss how to get ready for career and college.

The role models are persons from various professional careers who talk to the students about how they entered their career and why. Guest speakers discuss the obstacles and factors that led to their success. Many of the guest speakers are from the students' own communities, giving the students the awareness that these professionals are from "my" neighborhood.

The field trips are to nearby colleges and universities. Students participate in a Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program Leadership Day event at a nearby university. They sit in college classrooms engaging in activities focused on college and career. University leaders, such as vice presidents, college admissions staff and current college students, speak to the students about college. The tutors tour the campus and become familiar with the college environment. And they begin to develop a comfort level at the university, realizing it is within their reach.

Every year, schools that are implementing the IDRA Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program incorporate leadership, career awareness, and college and university field trips in their year-long activities. The colleges and universities are becoming active partners with our Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program sites. They host events, have college students lead leadership activities with tutors, and participate on panels to tell tutors who they are as college students and where they came from – many from their own neighborhoods.

In 2014-15, tutors from 19 of our Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program sites toured universities in their local communities. The colleges hosting these events were, in Texas: Palo Alto College (San Antonio), University of Texas – Rio Grande Valley (Edinburg), University of Texas Permian Basin and Texas Tech University. Additionally, tours for tutors were held by Lehman College in New York City; University of California Long Beach; Sacramento College; De Paul University (Chicago) and Wayne State University (Detroit). Many of our Coca-Cola VYP sites visit more than one college or university during the school year.

In a dramatic example, an official from the University of Texas – Permian Basin attended an Odessa High School Leadership Day or end-of-year event and awarded each of the high school students who went on the tour a \$500 scholarship to enroll at the university. The UTPB president has often attended these events to give encouragement and stress higher education as part of tutors' futures.

Many of the tutors in the IDRA Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program will be the first in their families to attend college or to even believe college is part of their future. For many young people, the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program has been the first time they have been identified and gotten support and encouragement from someone in their schools to look at higher education for themselves. Stepping on a college campus, in a college classroom, in college hallways, and walking side-by-side with college students has given them an opportunity to see that it is possible and that they are capable.



South San Antonio High School, South San Antonio ISD leadership day and college tour event at Palo Alto College with Ms. Maria "Ludi" Ortega, Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program teacher coordinator



Odessa High School, Ector County ISD, leadership day event at the University of Texas – Permian Basin. All of the attending students (over 50) received a \$500 scholarship to UTPB.



Video: IDRA Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program Dropout Prevention that Works [12 min]

<http://budurl.com/IDRAvypVid12>

Resources

Avilés, N. "For School and College Success – The Power of Non-cognitive Skills," *IDRA Newsletter* (San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development Research Association, October 2015).

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“Our children could get lost”

Rio Grande Valley Parents Gather to Discuss Policy Implications

by Sofia Bahena, Ed.D.

With the adoption of substantial changes to Texas high school curricula in 2013 (known as House Bill 5 or HB5), a central question for Texas policymakers, education and business leaders, families, and students is how HB5 will impact college readiness and student success in Texas.

In order to understand how familiar the community was with the new high school graduation requirements in its first year of implementation, the Rio Grande Valley Equal Voice Network (a network of 10 community-based organizations focused on social change through civic engagement) and its Education Working Group administered a survey to more than 1,600 parents and community members who have children in 24 public schools across 30 cities and towns in the Valley.

Lourdes Flores, President of ARISE Support Center and chair of the RGV-EVN Education Working Group, explained: “After listening to different stories of our communities... and having personal experience, we feared that our children could get lost... that, at the end of four years, they would not be ready to enter college. This concerned us as a community group. So we decided to conduct a survey that would give us information about the understanding in the community of HB5.”

IDRA analyzed the survey data, which showed that the majority of parents (85 percent) knew little, if anything at all, about Texas’ graduation plans and tracking procedures. And 66 percent of parents who had children in either middle school or high school did not know which graduation plan would prepare their child for a four-year university. (The full report is available online at <http://budurl.com/EVRGVrptPDF>.)

These findings prompted the group to organize a second community-wide bilingual convening, known as Mesa Comunitaria, in August of 2015, at the South Texas College campus in Weslaco, Texas (the first was held in 2014). This event drew

more than 120 participants who included parents, members of community organizations, school district superintendents and family engagement staff, and college representatives representing 16 school districts. Among those present were members of the seven Comunitario PTAs that IDRA has been working with in the Rio Grande Valley area.

During the first half of the event, community members, parents, and school representatives shared their experiences in terms of high school graduation requirements. Some highlights from the documentation of the community stories emphasized the following.

- **Family involvement is critical.** Discussions reinforced the value and importance of family and parent involvement in education. Several noted common barriers to participation, including not receiving the invitation from the schools (either because the communication is in English or is only web-based) and lack of reliable transportation.
- **More information is needed.** There was a concern of lack of information, either because school staff do not have it or because it is not communicated effectively. Several noted that ARISE, Comunitario PTAs, and IDRA as alternative sources of information.
- **College-readiness is a priority.** Participants stressed the importance of college-readiness. Some observed that school counselors were spread too thin or were even discouraging their children from a college track.

Mesa Comunitaria attendees then drafted action plans with strategies for community-based organizations and school staff that required the following.

- **Changing the way information is shared.** All of the action plans involved changing the way information is shared with families in (cont. on Page 4)

“In its own way, the Equal Voice Valley community has created its own endorsement path – an intentional collaboration between parents, community leaders, students, teachers and administrators that will work to make college readiness an attainable goal for every single Rio Grande Valley child.”

– Michael Seifert, Network Weaver for the Rio Grande Valley Equal Voice Network (School Days, 2015: Making Sure Graduation Means Something,” Rio Grande Guardian, August 23, 2015)

IDRA South Central Collaborative for Equity

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

Additional resources are available online at www.idra.org/South_Central_Collaborative_for_Equity funded by the U.S. Department of Education

("Our children could get lost" – Rio Grande Valley Parents Gather to Discuss Policy Implications, continued from Page 3)

order to reach a broader audience in ways that are meaningful and effective. Some examples include having counselors host interactive workshops with parents and students, sharing information at community social events, and using a variety of media outlets (e.g., social media, press, radio, TV, mass text messages, videos, website).

- **Improving communication with schools.** Participants expressed a desire to have good communication with school representatives. They suggested inviting teachers and counselors to become members of the Comunitario PTAs; collaborating with parent centers and the Texas Education Service Center in Region 1; visiting schools; and communicating directly with counselors, district administrators and superintendents.
- **Taking community action.** In particular, the community-based organizations committed to playing a larger role themselves in helping to disseminate information by integrating educational components into their current community programming.

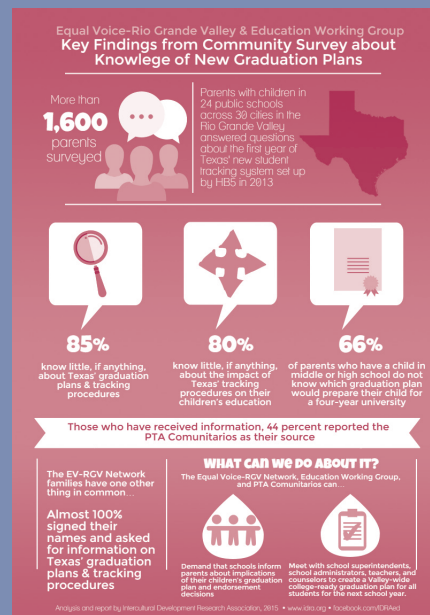
Community-led initiatives, such as the Mesa Comunitaria, are an embodiment of IDRA's Family Leadership in Education Principles, which – among other elements – state: "Family leadership is most powerful at improving education for all children when collective efforts create solutions for the common good" (Montemayor, 2007).

After participating in the Mesa Comunitaria, participants, including school staff, reported that they were more familiar with the high school graduation requirements than they were before the gathering. Participants also found the event useful for strengthening strategic partnerships and were able to identify clear action plans to better inform parents about the policy change and its implications for their children. Additionally, parents reported feeling more comfortable with reaching out to school staff to discuss the high school requirements as a result of participating in the Mesa Comunitaria.

In the next year, the different community groups and Comunitario PTAs will implement the strategies developed in their respective action plans. Some organizations have already begun planning more targeted gatherings similar to Mesa Comunitaria in partnership with their local school



Members of the Equal Voice-Rio Grande Valley Education Working Group collected more than 1,629 surveys across 24 school districts and 30 cities across the Valley finding that most parents had not received information on Texas' new graduation requirements, and they had been told little, if anything, about HB5's tracking procedures or its impact on their children's education.



<http://budurl.com/EVRGVigPDF>

districts.

Resources

IDRA. *Equal Voice-Rio Grande Valley Network – Education Working Group Community Survey about House Bill 5 Curriculum Tracking Plans: Key Findings* (San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development Research Association, 2015).

Montemayor, A.M. "IDRA's Family Leadership Principles," *IDRA Newsletter* (San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development Research Association, September 2007).

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Report: Community Survey about House Bill 5 Curriculum Tracking Plans: Key Findings

<http://budurl.com/EVRGVrptPDF>

College Students Describe What a School's College-Going Culture Really Means

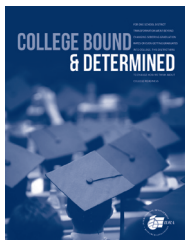
In a report, *College Bound and Determined*, last year IDRA explored how the Pharr-San Juan-Alamo school district in south Texas transformed itself from low achievement and expectations to planning for all students to graduate from high school and college (Bojorquez, 2014). This transformation went beyond changing sobering graduation rates or even getting graduates into college. IDRA examined data and conducted interviews with Superintendent Dr. Daniel 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.

Recently, we interviewed two graduates from PSJA who are now in college, about the district's college-going culture. Their full interviews are available online at <http://budurl.com/IDRAcbdS>.



Thomas Ray García,
*Graduate of the PSJA
ISD will complete his
bachelor's degree May
2016 from Princeton
University*

"It's extremely important for teachers to encourage students at a very early age to think about college and getting them aware of the benefits of a college education. I don't think it's unrealistic at all to encourage all students to go to college. There are many different kinds of colleges, universities, major and minor programs and certificates available to students from all walks of life. Students from barrios and poor families



deserve to go to college. Experiencing college, which will be different to anything they've been exposed to before, is crucial to their growth and development.

"I've noticed slow but very important changes in climate of the high school I attended. There's always been a sense of wanting the students to be college-ready, but now there is more depth to the speeches and the environment. There is a big difference between putting up posters and talking about college to actually bringing in alumni to give students a first-hand experience beyond what the educators are telling them. Students are given more insights beyond considering a college degree a commodity and a way to get a job to more broadly and deeply seeing college as a place where they can grow socially and emotionally and know they've authentically grown as a person."



Pedro Nepomuceno,
*Graduate of the PSJA ISD
and a current student at the
University of Texas Health
Science Nursing School*

"Everyone seems to be taking notice of the Pharr-San Juan-Alamo school district with even President Obama honoring Dr. King, the superintendent. Not only is the dual-credit direction awesome, but so is the bilingual program. The student keeps her language and culture and graduates fully proficient in both languages. My sister attends the same high school I did, and she will graduate with enough college hours for a minor in Spanish. She has taken some of her content courses in Spanish beyond the Spanish language classes. I think everybody can go to college. Whatever your family's social and economic situation, college is doable."

Resource

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

Get More Online at the IDRA Newsletter Plus

- Essays by Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program tutors who share stories of the program's impact on their lives
- Report on the community survey conducted by Equal Voice-Rio Grande Valley network
- Podcast interviews of high school students on helping their peers apply for college
- Media coverage from Mesa Comunitaria event

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Read: College Bound and Determined
<http://budurl.com/IDRAcbdS>



Transforming a New York City Public School in the Bronx Through the IDRA Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program

by Nilka Avilés, Ed.D.

After launching the IDRA Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program at their school in the Bronx, teachers and students began to notice a transformation throughout the campus. As the program's tutors were being valued, educators were nurturing and cultivating students' inherent abilities. As a result, teachers' efficacy also began to blossom as they worked with their at risk population.

The PS/MS 279 Captain Manuel Rivera Jr. school in New York City started implementation of the IDRA Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program in 2013-14. The core team of leaders included the principal, Jean Dalton; the teacher coordinator, Michele Coyle; Melodie Mashel, district superintendent; Elizabeth Iadavaia, NYC Department of Education academic coach; and Dr. Anne Rothstein, partner from CUNY Lehman College. Through their leadership in the school, students have increased attendance, have a positive self-concept, and have shown a greater commitment to staying and succeeding in school. They also increased their aspirations and expect to seek a post-secondary career, expanding their vision in life as positive role models and contributing members of their community.

Eighth grade tutor Juan Sánchez said: "I started to be more responsible and to be more available to help my tutees. And that helps me a lot, because my teachers taught me that if you help somebody then that can help you too."

Johan Servones, a seventh grade tutor added: "I think being in the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program has been the best experience I've had in my life. The program helped me improve my grades. And it helps you think about what you want to do about your future, your life. And that's what I will share with others."

Other students began to ask about the program, which had funding for only a set number of students. The school leadership team decided to explore ways to create other levels of leadership among the student body to engage more students

in giving back to the community, demonstrating their skills and uplifting their social, emotional character and academic ethical behavior.

Teachers' efficacy is very powerful as it brings about student engagement and achievement in the midst of their life circumstances. PS/MS 279 teachers demonstrated their openness to the staff development provided by IDRA as they began to build a college-going and readiness culture among all of their students. Through interaction and relationship building, teachers are now more open to try new ideas and lessons that have been shared with them.

An eighth grade teacher told us: "I enjoyed your professional development because the lessons are meaningful, practical and relevant. You provide us with all the activities and materials ready for implementation. We also did the lesson as participants, and now all we have to do is implement the lesson with our own students."

Mrs. Coyle has seen first-hand the students' growth: "The Coca Cola Valued Youth Program gave us not only a framework and an opportunity for our students, but it also gave us something our school community was thirsty for, a positive purpose for our students to be proud of themselves as community contributors."

Principal Dalton, along with the leadership team, uses data and systems to monitor teacher effectiveness and student achievement to ensure students are succeeding in school. Having grown up in the Bronx, she can identify with the students and families of the community: "I focus on the assets of my community of practice to bolster literacy, critical thinking and problem solving along with the exposure to college for students who may not have seen graduation and college as a possibility. I also work with the parents and students to ensure they have a safe place to be, where they feel valued, cared for and are taught to believe in themselves."

(cont. on Page 7)

"I started to be more responsible and to be more available to help my tutees. And that helps me a lot, because my teachers taught me that if you help somebody then that can help you too."

— Juan Sánchez,
Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program tutor

(Transforming a New York City Public School in the Bronx Through the IDRA Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program, continued from Page 6)

The school staff provide the foundation for students to learn in a supportive environment so that they can make productive decisions. They have emphasized the importance of boosting family communication, valuing their children and increasing interpersonal skills in a school collaborative partnership and supportive environment.

Parents are excited for their children to participate in the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program, and they have experienced how it has helped their children become better students and improved the interactions among the members of the family at home. With a lot of pride they have shared: “My son now helps his siblings with school homework, helps others and is more serviceable with people”; “After being in the Coca-Cola VYP program, since my daughter has been tutoring other children, she has learned how to relate with others, is more communicative, has more friends at school, and is now more patient with her autistic sister”; “My daughter has become more responsible and trustworthy.”

The IDRA Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program uses a philosophical base, core components and support components that emphasize student and family engagement – vital elements for the success of the students. The program works in partnership with the school, community and higher education institutions focusing on classroom engagement, academic high expectations, and emotional and social support of students and their families to attain positive outcomes, as part of its research base (Gonzalez & Ballysingh, 2012; Martinez & Cervera, 2012). Reflecting the funds of knowledge framework (Gonzalez & Moll, 2002), social and cultural capital and support networks are three subcomponents of the funds of knowledge linked to rigor, relationships and relevance which are now part of PS/MS 279 school culture (Contreras, 2011; Howard, 2010).

Research indicates that efforts to address students’ disengagement that lead to dropout rates must be systemic. Systemic renewal is an ongoing process of evaluating goals and objectives related to school policies, practices, organizational structures and the impact on a diverse group of learners (Avilés & Villarreal, 2015).

This successful dropout prevention program bridges research and practice in a way that is influencing classroom practices enabling the school and district administration to improve the quality of students’ education (Cárdenas,

White House names IDRA Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program a Hispanic Ed “Bright Spot”

At a press conference in October, the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics recognized IDRA’s Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program. As a Bright Spot, the IDRA program is part of a national online catalog of programs that invest in key education priorities for Hispanics. The announcement was made by Alejandra Ceja, executive director of the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics at the launch of Hispanic Heritage Month and in honor of the initiative’s 25th anniversary in Washington, D.C.



The White House initiative named these 230 Bright Spots to encourage collaboration in sharing data-driven approaches, promising practices, peer advice, and effective partnerships, ultimately resulting in increased support for the educational attainment of the Hispanic community, from cradle-to-career.

“There has been notable progress in Hispanic educational achievement, and it is due to the efforts of these Bright Spots in Hispanic Education, programs and organizations working throughout the country to help Hispanic students reach their full potential,” said Ceja. The initiative was established in 1990 to address the educational disparities faced by the Hispanic community.



Bright Spots in Hispanic Education online catalog

<http://budurl.com/BrtSptCat>

et al., 2008). Through collective impact- and equity-oriented practices that embrace social and cultural capital, teachers have built their capacity to embrace transformational and distributed leadership modeled by Mrs. Dalton and Mrs. Coyle.

As a result, students are gaining self-respect, self-confidence, and the academic content knowledge and skills to navigate school and the college world successfully. Affording educational opportunities to students from diverse social and economic backgrounds through the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program provides a powerful model for educators and others interested in decreasing dropout rates, widening access to higher education and eradicating the achievement gap as we prepare our students to be competitive and productive in our global economy.

Resources

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Pinterest Board: What tutors have to say about the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program

<http://budurl.com/IDRApinVYPq>



Video: Ensuring High Teaching Quality to Tap Into Students’ Strengths, An interview with Jean Dalton Encke

<http://budurl.com/IDRApinVYPq>



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