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Focus: Actionable Knowledge

Our Schools ~ The Power of Data and Grassroots Organizing

by Laurie Posner, MPA

Charting the Course

When you walk into the offices of Southern Echo in Jackson, Mississippi, one of the first things you notice is the maps. Southern Echo is a non-profit that organizes grassroots African American leadership in Mississippi to secure a justly-funded, high quality public education for all children. A grantee of the Marguerite Casey Foundation (as is IDRA), Southern Echo works to assure that families have a voice in shaping the public policies that impact them.

Echo's maps (<http://southernecho.org>) plot school funding levels and the results of Mississippi's Quality Distribution Index, giving families and educators contextualized data on education quality and equity. Accountability is central for Echo, not defined narrowly as high-stakes testing but as "putting community interest over self-interest." It is built on "transparency, respectfulness, active listening and sound reasoning."

Data maps are a commanding method and metaphor. They don't just say: Here is the territory and these are the outcomes. They say: This is our home, our school and, collectively, we care about what happens to everyone here. Through organizing and data, Southern Echo and its partners are changing the terms of the home-school-community relationship. It is the kind of change that is long overdue.

Families Matter

If ever there was a real question about whether families matter in improving educational outcomes, it has long since been settled. More than a decade of research shows what Southern Echo organizers have always known: the vast majority of families of all cultural and economic backgrounds care about their children's education and hold high aspirations for their children's futures (Boethel, 2003; Torres & Márquez, 2005; Pew Hispanic Center/Kaiser Family Foundation, 2004; Caspe, et al., 2006-2007), and there is a clear and strong association between family involvement and academic improvement (Dearing, et al., 2006; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). A recent longitudinal study of 400 Chicago schools underscored the conclusion, finding that strong parent-community-school ties are "essential ingredients" to school turnaround success (Bryk, 2010).

But many models, whether framed as *engaging* or *involving* families, fall short: They neither engage nor transform. In some cases, the problem inheres in the approach. Where family engagement is conceived as a rescue mission or an add-on program – or where families are considered passive partners – engagement may not just fail but exacerbate the very problem it purports to solve.

(cont. on Page 2)

"Real, lasting change in schools comes when people are engaged at all levels, from state capitols to board rooms, from classrooms to community centers and kitchen tables, and when people have the knowledge they need to take the right steps on behalf of all children."

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

(Our Schools – The Power of Data and Grassroots Organizing, continued from Page 1)

New models are needed that knit together families, schools and communities around shared concerns for children and joint leadership; build long-term trust; and bring clarity, analyses and sound information to bear on critical questions of how to improve education (Robledo Montecel, & Goodman, 2010; Montemayor, 2013).

This is particularly true where communities have been torn up by the twin histories of inequity and racism. Elena Lopez notes: “Although standard parent involvement practices...are linked to students’ positive academic and behavioral outcomes...they are oftentimes insufficient to boost the achievement of low-income children in troubled schools.” She goes on to say: “Community organizing intentionally builds parent power – it equips parents...to leverage a more even playing field when it comes to tackling educational issues and shaping solutions.” And peer (family-to-family) organizing can bring to bear “significant grassroots power, sophisticated solutions to polarized policy options and long-term dedicated attention that holds public servants accountable” (Sanchez & White, 2011).

Recognizing the value of community organizing, Lopez and other researchers are delving into questions about how grassroots community-based organizations and organizing strategies forge the kinds of school-home-community bonds that impact education policy and practice. From Boston, Chicago, Oakland, Philadelphia, Miami, to Los Angeles, San Antonio, and the Lower Rio Grande Valley, new models – like those taken up by Southern Echo in Jackson – are springing up across the map.

From Involvement to Informed Collective Action

The Kenwood Oakland Community Organization in Chicago (also a Marguerite Casey Foundation grantee and Equal Voice member) found that federal policies to promote the privatization of public schools were having a “disparate negative impact on communities of color.” “What were initiated as laboratories of innovation,” KOCO found “have devolved into cash machines for private interests.” Following more in-depth analyses, KOCO collaborated with family leaders in 18 U.S. cities to file civil rights complaints. The partners mobilized more than a thousand people to Washington, D.C., and have launched a network of low-income, working families to advocate for high quality public schools (Malone, 2013).

Analyzing public education in Boston, the Boston-area Youth Project (BYOP), has mobilized for appropriate state education funding levels, more guidance counselors and increased federal funding for education. BYOP, which focuses on increasing youth power for positive social change, convenes citywide meetings, summer institutes and retreats around key information youth leaders need to strengthen education (Renée & McAlister, 2011).

In the Lower Rio Grande Valley in South Texas, community leaders who are part of Equal Voice – Rio Grande Valley are using IDRA’s bilingual (Spanish/English) OurSchool portal to identify needs and gaps in graduation rates and increase college readiness. At ¡Ya Es Tiempo!, convened in 2010 by IDRA and its EV-RGV partners in collaboration with Gus Guerra Elementary at Pharr-San Juan-Alamo ISD, 140 parents, community leaders, students, educators, public

“Before, I didn’t have the information to really push back on initiatives or policies...but this is different now. I have knowledge, and that gives me power.”

– Parent organizers, Ofelia Sanchez and Leticia Barrera, from “Acts of Leadership” in Hong, 2011

officials and policymakers gathered for a day of listening, dialogue and data. Since then, IDRA and EV-RGV organizations have gathered youth, family and school leaders in community centers, backyards, school libraries and boardrooms to leverage data for planning and community-family-school conversations on improving education for children across the Valley. (See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WbFh4m3-Wcg>)

Our School-ness

When effective, community organizing in education succeeds, it is not – as some suggest – because CBOs are connected to low-income families and “get them to show up” at more school functions, but because these efforts fundamentally re-imagine and recast the terms of the home-school-community relationship. They bank on what is always, already true: neighborhood schools belong to the communities they serve (Robledo Montecel & Goodman, 2010), (cont. on Page 7)

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The Foundation for Using Technology for Learning in the Classroom is in Our Own Hands

by Hector Bojorquez and Juanita C. García, Ph.D.

So you say you want to take the next step in using technology in education? You've done Webquests, you've done Jeopardy PowerPoints, you've joined countless online groups, you may have even joined ePals and collaborated with teachers in far-away lands – like Ohio.

You've done it all... Maybe.

We are at a crucial point in the integration of technology education. Technology integration in the classroom has gone beyond Webquest, PowerPoint or even digital film making. It is a cliché to say that in our smartphones and tablets we have at least 10 times the computing power that took humans to the moon. We are more connected to each other than any humans in history. Yet, we can't get all kids to graduate from high school and enter college. We have at our disposal tools that can transform how we learn, but as educators, many have yet to use technology effectively. We must embrace the new mobile and portable technological world completely or we risk losing out on incredible opportunities. But what does this mean, and what steps should we take?

We will not tell you what classes to take, what staff development you need, what websites you need to visit, etc. Why? Because we must take some time to reflect on where we've been and what we already do.

Reflect on Our Current Use

As educators we must reflect on the following questions: "Are my students using technology mostly for PowerPoint presentations and online research? Am I mostly using technology in the classroom primarily to present concepts?"

If the answer is yes to either of these questions, perhaps it's time to re-evaluate the role technology plays in your classroom. The most basic problem that we have with technology in the classroom is that a very large number of teachers are using computers as a means of giving high-tech lectures or accomplishing traditional tasks

(receiving assignments online, communicating with parents via email, etc.). We are simply not using technologies in *engaging* ways that build learning.

When you assign your next research project that culminates in high-tech presentations, be they PowerPoints, movies or blogs, ask yourself: "Did the technology use really enhance the learning or was the result just a more sleek presentation?"

The irony is that we are at a point in time where we should know better. Why? Because we don't use technology in stale ways ourselves. We have become very sophisticated users of technology. Yet we often don't carry that into our classrooms.

Reflect on Your Personal Computer Use

A little over 10 years ago, there was a huge rush to train all teachers to adopt technology use in the classroom. Teachers across the country were trained on everything from basic computer use (using a mouse, computer folders, printing, using the MicroSoft Office Suite, email, web surfing, etc.) to creating the most rudimentary presentations with the tools at hand. This was a big step. A generation of teachers who had never thought of using a computer were suddenly given the task to learn and produce.

That level of training is no longer an issue. While there are people who still have a hard time navigating a computer's folder system, it is nearly impossible to function in the modern world without knowing even the most basic of technology tools.

The tools also have changed, and people have adopted them without the need for week-long training sessions on how to point and click. Smartphones and tablets are more powerful than the computers we were first trained on and are easier to use. Look around. Everyone is using these devices. What is amazing is that we now

(cont. on Page 4)

The answer to using technology effectively in the classroom already lies within you.

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

(The Foundation of Using Technology for Learning in the Classroom is in Our Own Hands, continued from Page 3)

carry in our pockets and briefcases the most incredible computers. Smartphones enable us to collect data (pictures, sound, video, voice-to-text notes), immediately communicate in at least three ways (voice, text, video) as well as explore an ever-growing body of apps that do everything from movie creation, GPS navigation, drawing, scanning documents, finding constellations, and on and on and on.

Yet, as educators we go in the classroom, turn on the PowerPoint, go through our lecture, talk for an entire class period, and ask students to create digital versions (PowerPoints again) of very traditional assignments. And at the end of the week, we text, instant message, Facebook and Facetime our colleagues and friends about this generation's inability to grasp concepts. Our students go home and text, instant message, Facebook and Facetime their friends about how boring the week was in Mr. B's classroom.

What is wrong with this picture? We, students and teachers, use these incredible tools every day, everywhere, almost all the time except where we could benefit the most – the classroom.

It is time that we reflect on technology use in the classroom by examining how we use it ourselves. We suggest that, as a first step to transforming our practices, we re-evaluate how we are using technology in the classroom in light of how we use technology in daily life. Technology no longer belongs to an exclusive club in the same ways that it did in the past. While digital gaps exist between the economically disadvantaged and the middle class, technology is no longer esoteric. Almost everyone uses computers now – be it in the form of smartphones or tablets. And we all are experiencing transformation in how we do things in the world because of these tools.

We suggest the following, as a start: Keep a journal of how you are using technology every day. Don't exclude any kind of technology – from GPS in your car, that special app you use to keep track of exercise, the Facetime you used to talk to your niece, to that app you use to record voice memos. Do this for a few days. Then put the journal aside for a few days.

Now ask yourself, "What exactly was I doing?" If you are like the average mobile device user, you will find the following sorts of activities and verbs: communicating, researching, logging to accomplish a task (budgets, lose weight, exercise), and

IDRA 40th Anniversary

IDRA's work to attract and keep teachers in the profession spans 40 years and has evolved over time. In the 1980s, IDRA was funded by the Texas Education Agency for the project, Achieving an Ethnically-Diverse Teaching Force. Leaders of the effort recognized the multi-phases to be addressed – recruiting, preparing, inducting and retaining – along with the multi-sector roles of university, public school personnel, community and business. In 1998, IDRA and the Mexican and American Solidarity Foundation created Alianza, a model teacher preparation and leadership development program with funding from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. This binational effort enabled more than 300 teachers to become leaders in bilingual and bicultural settings. Within the first four years, 70 Alianza graduates were positively impacting more than 6,000 children in bilingual classrooms and reducing the shortage of bilingual education teachers in Texas alone by 10 percent. Participating universities in several states expanded their bilingual curricula to include courses of study and practical experiences that enhance the abilities of teachers, parents, administrators, school board members, and community leaders to collaborate effectively. This work has evolved through IDRA's several federally-funded Transition to Teaching accelerated teacher certification programs, including the current Caminos and Teachers for Today & Tomorrow (T3) projects. As a result, IDRA has added more than 1,000 bilingual, science and mathematics, English as a second language (ESL), and bilingual-special education teachers in more than 20 high-need urban and rural Texas school districts over the past decade.



Alianza teacher in training works with his young students.

recording moments to share with friends and family (pictures, video).

And now think about how you would have done things without these tools. You will probably make this discovery: you did it with pen and paper, the phone, the library or not at all.

Now ask yourself, which world does your classroom most resemble: the world where you did everything either with paper or not at all or the modern world?

The point of this exercise is simple. The answer to using technology effectively in the classroom already lies within you. You don't need to wait for another training or staff development session. All you need to do is let your students learn in the ways that you and they already move within the world. Have them record with their phones, communicate with their tablets, research on the spot, log experiments on the fly. The possibilities

are only limited by your willingness to let students use technology in the ways that everyone already does.

We are not saying that you do not need to think about new things to learn; there will always be new things to learn. We are simply saying: look within your own world for the knowledge you already possess instead of waiting to be taught.

Hector Bojorquez and Juanita C. García, Ph.D., are IDRA education associates. Comments and questions may be directed to them via email at comment@idra.org.

Federal Grant to Help Expand Relationship Between Parent and Community Groups in the Rio Grande Valley

The Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA) hosted an Investment in Education (i3) grant kick-off event recently to announce the development of community-based PTAs in five communities in the Rio Grande Valley.

For the past three years, IDRA, Pharr-San Juan-Alamo ISD (PSJA) and ARISE have successfully partnered to implement the PTA Comunitario, a community organization-based PTA that gathers family leaders in Texas' poorest communities to engage them on education policies and educational opportunities for their children. As part of the grant, funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Investing in Innovation (i3) fund, five additional school districts will join the original partnership to expand these efforts. The five additional school districts are: La Joya ISD, San Benito ISD, La Feria ISD, Donna ISD and Rio Grande City ISD.

"Neighborhood public schools belong to their communities," says IDRA President and CEO, Dr. Maria "Cuca" Robledo Montecel. "The strength and vitality of any community is, in part, dependent upon the strength of its schools. And the reverse is true."

The PTA Comunitario model is based on IDRA's Family Leadership in Education process and decades of experience engaging parents and families in education. Parent engagement in education is critical for the academic success of English language learner students, so IDRA knew it had to transform the traditional PTA organizational model into a more effective vehicle for parents who had been previously excluded or underserved. Unlike traditional PTAs, which play auxiliary or fundraising roles in schools, IDRA's PTA Comunitario is a community-based parent-teacher organization whose sole purpose is to collaborate with schools and Spanish-speaking, Hispanic, working-class families to improve children's academic outcomes.

The program started with 35 families from *colo-*

nias where ELL students historically failed to complete high school, with many dropping out before completing middle school. The first cohort of 35 PTA Comunitario members report that all of their children, mostly children learning English as a second language, who were in high school and scheduled to complete their studies, graduated and those of college age went on to higher education.

"The PTA Comunitario proves that *colonia* families can be leaders and change makers in education," said Aurelio Montemayor, M.Ed., co-director of IDRA's i3 project.

With the support of the i3 grant, the PTA Comunitario approach to family engagement will be spread to the five additional school districts over the next four years. For the launch event in May, Congressman Rubén Hinojosa sent a letter of welcome and congratulations, stating: "Parents are integral partners in their child's learning... Programs like PTA Comunitario can provide a valuable bridge between parents and the school system." In collaboration with the five school districts, IDRA expects this exceptional approach to parent involvement will develop parent leadership in education through community engagement, supporting college access and success for all students, especially those learning English.



Aurelio M. Montemayor, M.Ed., IDRA senior education associate, presenting about the expansion of PTA Comunitarios.



Ramona Casas, ARISE advocacy lead, talks about her experience with the first PTA Comunitario.



Yadira Pedraza and Carolina Llana are interviewed by Tele-mundo about their work with the PTA Comunitario.



Six Teens Win 2013 National Essay Contest Award

“Pre-kinder kids calling me ‘Ms. María’ isn’t something I thought I would ever hear. I felt important, wanted and needed by someone in a positive way.” – María Armendariz

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.

- First Place High School Winner – Yesenia Villarreal, 12th Grade, South San Antonio High School
- Second Place High School Winner – Angelica Cavazos, 11th Grade, Odessa High School
- Third Place High School Winner – Heather Perez, 11th Grade, South San Antonio High School
- First Place Middle School Winner – Luis P. Acosta, 8th Grade, Dr. Javier Saenz Middle School, La Joya, Texas
- Second Place Middle School Winner – María Del Rosario Zuñiga, 8th Grade, Dr. Javier Saenz Middle School, La Joya, Texas
- Third Place Middle School Winner – Pedro Ramirez, 8th Grade, Dr. Javier Saenz Middle School, La Joya, Texas

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.

In her essay, **Yesenia Villarreal** wrote: “Since I started tutoring, I have grown more patient, and many have said I seem more caring. I have grown with the children and have seen them excel in their work. I enjoy working with them and seeing their reactions when they learn something new... Being in the Cola-Cola Valued



Youth Program has helped me think about my future and what I want to do with my life.”

“The Coca-Cola Youth Program is a great program. We tutors are teaching our tutees everything they need to know and what we know,” **Angelica Cavazos** wrote in her essay. “I loved all my little kindergartners. I



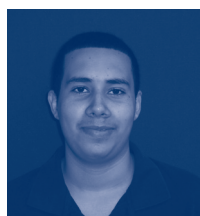
hate that the end of this year I’ll have to stop tutoring them. It just kills me. I don’t think you all will understand why I would hate to leave. These kids run up to me and hugged me every day that I go.”

“Since I became a tutor in the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program things started to change for me,” wrote **Heather Perez**.

“Things were not just about me, but it was now about my tutees and me. Just the feeling of seeing them every day was such an inspiration, because not only was I glad to see them but they were also glad to see me. Just getting the chance to tutor the children strengthens me in every perspective.”



In his essay, **Luis P. Acosta** wrote: “The Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program made me a better individual all around. I used to be a big troublemaker who would not care about who I hurt, what grades I got or how rude I was to everyone around me, including teachers and my parents... I always believed that I could never do anything right. Every time I tried my best in whatever I did at school or at home, I failed... The Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program has transformed me into a smart, responsible,



caring and respectful individual not only within my school, but out in my community and at home... This program has guided me into even thinking of my educational goals beyond high school.”

“Life changed for me the first week of school this year. Our counselor informed me that I would be placed in a program called the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program...



My hopes and self-esteem went up by a lot. I was no longer the girl that was looked at by teachers as always failing. I was going to be somebody in life, and it started now...”

María Del Rosario Zuñiga wrote in her essay. “As the weeks and months went by, the checks started coming in, and it was a true blessing for my family and me. I started focusing more on my classes and made sure I was passing them. My attendance improved because having my own job didn’t mean I had to go and look for one to help out my family at home. I also was encouraged to pass my class because I wanted to become smarter for my elementary tutees.”

Pedro Ramirez wrote: “Every day in this program is a blessing to me... the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program... gives students like me an opportunity to shine and become better and more responsible individuals while at the same time getting paid. That’s why when I go to the elementary for tutoring, I feel like I have God in my heart, and He gives me the potential and the love to go teach my tutees. I have also seen the success my students have displayed in their learning.”



Honorable mentions were awarded to students in (cont. on Page 7)

(Six Teens Win 2013 National Essay Contest Award, continued from Page 6)

schools that submitted multiple student essays; these students had the highest score at their campus.

High School Honorable Mentions

- Steven Andre Mares – 12th Grade, South San Antonio High School, San Antonio
- Elaine Ovalle – 11th grade, Odessa High School, Odessa, Texas

Middle School Honorable Mentions

- José Luis Arrellano – 7th Grade, Ann Richards Middle School, La Joya, Texas
- Stephanie Cantu – 7th Grade, Irene M. García Middle School, La Joya, Texas
- Alicia Gonzalez – 7th Grade, J.D. Salinas Middle School, La Joya, Texas
- Krystal Johnson – 7th Grade, Abraham Kazen Middle School, San Antonio
- Elizabeth Miranda – 8th Grade, Dr. Javier Saenz Middle School, La Joya, Texas
- Robert Morales – 7th Grade, Robert C. Zamora Middle School, San Antonio

- Heriberto Quintero – 8th Grade, Dwight Middle School, San Antonio
- Danielle Ramirez – 8th Grade, César E. Chávez Middle School, La Joya, Texas
- Cristina Valdez – 8th Grade, Memorial Middle School, La Joya, Texas

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 787,000 children, families and educators have been positively impacted by the program.



Scan this code to see the full winning essays, or visit:

http://www.idra.org/Coca-Cola_Valued_Youth_Program.html/Student_Essays/

Get More Online at the IDRA Newsletter Plus

- Video interview by Telemundo from the PTA Comunitario launch event
- Winning essays by Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program students
- Podcasts on communities using data
- Links to resources on actionable knowledge
- Podcasts on using iPads in the science classroom
- *Courage to Connect: A Quality Schools Action Framework™*
- Video introduction on using the IDRA OurSchool portal

Visit www.idra.org for more information.

(Our Schools – The Power of Data and Grassroots Organizing, continued from Page 2)

building the “relational culture and shared leadership necessary for parents and students to engage as full partners in school decision making” (Annenberg Institute, 2012). They value a shared concern for what is best for children over turf, are grounded in analyses and actionable data, and reclaim the whole notion of accountability as a commitment – not to high-stakes tests – but to trust, transparency and mutual respect.

IDRA also is a grantee of the Marguerite Casey Foundation, providing capacity-building support and technical assistance to foundation grantees in the Texas Rio Grande Valley; partnering on education-related initiatives; and conducting a network assessment, which has included site visits and interviews with Southern Echo.

Resources

- Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University. *Getting Started in Education Organizing: Resources and Strategies* (Providence, R.I.: Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University, 2012).
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“As a child’s first teacher, parents must have an equal voice... At the end of the day, the goal is create an inclusive process in which parents and families participate – something we would like to see all across the country.”

– Jose Medrano, Co-Chair, Education Committee, Equal Voice RGV, 2012

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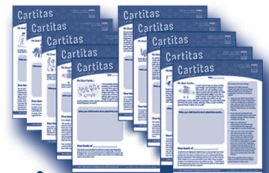
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