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Education as Pathway Out of Poverty

by María "Cuca" Robledo Montecel, Ph.D.

As a nation, we often seem to talk about poverty as if it impacts a small number of people. But today, close to 50 million Americans are poor. And for the first time in more than 40 years, low-income children "constitute a majority of public school students in the U.S. South" (Suitts, 2008).

Education has been and is a way out of poverty, especially for minority students. Students with a college degree have fared far better (even during the last recession) than those who either left school before graduation or earned only a high school diploma.

Yet we continue to miss the mark of preparing all students well – and this disproportionately impacts low-income and minority students. *The Economist* summarizes: "America is one of only three advanced countries which spends less on the education of poorer children than richer ones" (Minton-Bedoes, 2012). Even as a child's zip code continues to play such a big role in that child's future, education has become more essential.

By providing high quality education for all students, we can leverage opportunity, if we know how to focus our efforts. The good news is that we do know how.

In a recent issue of *Time*, former President Bill Clinton lays out a case for optimism in tumultuous times based on learnings from the Global Initiative (2012). I believe that a case for optimism

can also be made at the intersection of education and poverty for at least five reasons: education is a stated priority; educators are showing what works; technology connects us, and courage can be catching; many views of poverty aren't true; and contributions of young people are inspiring.

Education is a Stated Priority

Many people around the country and around the world care deeply about education. Even at the height of the last recession in the United States, while jobs and the recovery of our economy were top priorities for Americans, nearly seven in 10 Americans say that education should be a top priority for Congress and the President (Pew Research Center, 2012).

Youth are making education a priority and putting their futures on the line for a quality education. From Langley Park, Maryland, to Maricopa County, Arizona, thousands of young people – brought to this country as children but whose families are undocumented – have risked detention and deportation to speak out about their dream to stay in school and become citizens. Youth are risking arrest and deportation for that dream.

And young people across the world are risking their lives. At 14, Malala Yousafzai has faced death for speaking out for the most fundamental access to education for girls in Pakistan.

(cont. on Page 2)

"We must ensure that Texas provides equitable access to excellent education – to high quality curricula, good teaching, support services and facilities – for all students in all school districts. We can't compete in the global marketplace if we do not get serious about creating top quality schooling for all students."

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



(Education as Pathway Out of Poverty, continued from Page 1)

So while not all ideas for promoting equity are effective, more and more people recognize why we must keep at it, understanding that quality and equitable education is the civil rights issue of our time.

Educators are Showing What Works

When it comes to transforming education, there is no need for wild guesses: educators are already showing what works. If you look at all of the best, high-impact innovations, none involve stop-gap, slap-dash or silver bullet solutions. Rather, they all have demonstrated a set of key features:

- they value youth of all backgrounds, without exception,
- they are built around sound information and metrics,
- they engage families and community members as key partners in academic success, and
- they assure that students have access to quality teaching and a high quality curriculum.

Based on empirical evidence – and our 40 years’ of experience in the field – IDRA developed a change model that we call the Quality Schools Action Framework™ (Robledo Montecel & Goodman, 2010). The model is featured in the book, *Courage to Connect: A Quality Schools Action Framework™*. The framework shapes an online data tool called OurSchool 2.0. This data portal helps schools and communities assess whether or not they are on track and what they must do to improve conditions for all students at in their own schools.

Here is just one example of the power of this kind of comprehensive approach from a school district serving a high poverty community in South Texas.

Looking at dropout data, the Pharr-San Juan-Alamo school district found out that 40 percent of students dropping out of PSJA were doing so in their senior year. Under Superintendent Dr. Daniel King’s leadership, the district undertook a plan to bring students back to school by knocking on doors and talking to parents. Before doing so, though, the district created the College, Career and Technology Academy in partnership with South Texas College. The students were then encouraged to come back – not to the same schools and conditions that had them drop out in the first place, but rather to come back and finish high school and at the same time begin college coursework. Many did.

The district has reduced its dropout rate by 75 percent in two years, and PSJA has become a leader in connecting high school students to college with more than 1,500 students participating in dual college credit courses during the last school year.

PSJA 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 their approach. No “students cannot learn” or “parents don’t care” or “they don’t speak English” or “we can’t do it, we have too many minorities,” or “they’re not college material.”

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.

Technology Connects Us, and Courage Can Be Catching

Social media and new information technologies

are no panacea. People around the world still wake up hungry, in poverty, at war. But there can be no doubt that new technologies – and new uses of existing technologies – are dramatically changing our sense of connection with one another and our sense of the possible.

The emergence of social networking and crowdsourcing initiatives in philanthropy, for example, are demonstrating some ways people are developing muscle around these new capabilities to benefit society. Examples include Kiva, Kickstarter and the Knight Foundation’s Knight News Challenge.

There also is reason for optimism in education because many are taking up these same technologies to promote equal educational opportunity. IDRA’s Transitions to Teaching projects are funded by the U.S. Department of Education. Through these we partner with universities across Texas to train and place highly qualified, bilingual teachers in mathematics, science and bilingual education in high need classrooms. We (cont. on Page 7)

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/

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Highlights of IDRA's Expert Reports and Testimony Presented in the Texas 2012 School Finance Court Case

Editor's Note: The following highlights are derived from research conducted by IDRA and reported in a series of studies entitled, "Extent of Equity in the Texas School Finance System and Its Impact on Selected Student Related Issues." The IDRA research team included Dr. María "Cucu" Robledo Montecel, IDRA President; Dr. Albert Cortez, IDRA Director of Policy; Roy L. Johnson, IDRA Director of Support Services; Héctor Bojorquez, IDRA Education Associate; Charles A. Cavazos, IDRA Education Assistant; and Christie L. Goodman, APR, IDRA Communications Manager. The testimony was prepared and presented by Dr. Albert Cortez.

On December 3, 2012, Dr. Albert Cortez, IDRA's Director of Policy, presented testimony in the *Texas Taxpayer and Student Fairness Coalition vs. Michael Williams, et al.*, school funding trial in Austin. The testimony was based on a series of expert reports IDRA prepared for one of the plaintiffs, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, between August and November 2012.

Using Texas public school district data from the Texas Attorney General's Office, IDRA conducted analyses for the 2009-10, 2010-11 and 2011-12 school years. We particularly focused on school funding equity, program funding for educating English language learners and low-income students, and the impact of special population program cuts adopted by the 2011 Texas legislature. This article provides highlights of our analysis and testimony presented at the trial. More detailed information is available online at www.idra.org.

Methods

To assess the extent of funding equity across school districts of varying property wealth per weighted student (WADA), IDRA rank-ordered school districts by their property wealth per WADA and then divided them into 10 groups with each containing 103 districts, except the 10th decile, which had 97. IDRA tabulated the total

wealth for each district group and divided this by the group's total number of weighted students to arrive at a weighted property wealth per WADA for each group of districts.

In a similar manner, IDRA calculated the average maintenance and operations (M&O) revenue per WADA for each group by totaling each district's 2011-12 revenue at its 2011 adopted tax rates and dividing that by the group's cumulative WADA. Using similar methodology, IDRA calculated the group average M&O revenue based on the projected revenues that would be available if all districts were taxing at the maximum \$1.17 rate allowed under existing state law.

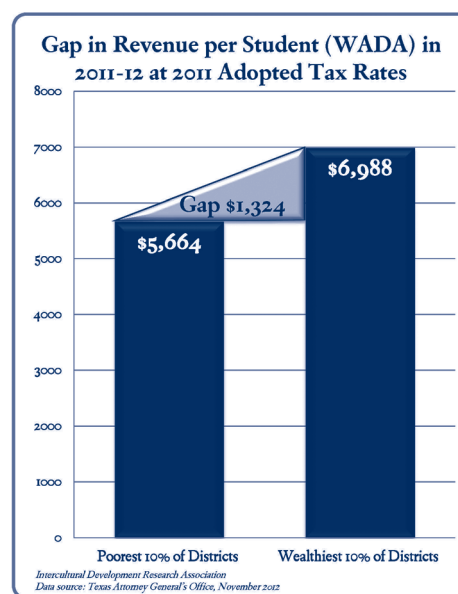
School Funding Disparities in Texas School Districts in 2011-12

IDRA found that there was a property wealth difference of \$980,078 per WADA between the lowest and wealthiest property wealth deciles of school districts (see box on Page 4). This notable difference clearly impacted the amount of M&O revenue per WADA found in all groups of school districts, but it was most striking in the \$1,324 gap found between the highest and lowest property wealth groups. In 2012, at districts' adopted tax rates for that year, the poorest group of districts generated only \$5,664, compared to \$6,988 in the wealthiest district group (see graphic).

Multiplying that \$1,324 in a class of just 20 students produces a disparity of \$26,480 per classroom. In a school with 30 classrooms, the disparity grows to \$794,400. This disparity occurred even as the lowest wealth district grouping exerted average M&O tax efforts that were 10 percent *higher* than the \$1.00 adopted tax rate average found among the state's wealthiest school districts.

If all school districts were to tax at the maximum allowed rate of \$1.17, IDRA found that the disparity would be even greater. The poorest districts

(cont. on Page 4)



In Texas, the quality of schooling still is markedly affected by the neighborhood in which you happen to reside.

(Highlights of IDRA's Expert Reports and Testimony in the Texas 2012 School Finance Court Case, continued from Page 3)

would generate an average of \$5,866 per WADA, while the wealthiest decile would generate an average of \$7,578 per WADA – for a disparity of \$1,712 per WADA. This difference is notably greater than the disparities found in the Texas funding system in 2006 when the Texas Supreme Court issued its last ruling on this issue.

Impact of Increasing ELL and Low-Income Student Funding Weights

IDRA reviewed funding practices and studies related to educating English language learners (ELLs) and low-income (or “compensatory education”) students in states around the country and some that focused specifically on Texas. Based on this comprehensive review, it was recommended that the state increase funding for educating ELL students from the current 10 percent weight to a 40 percent weight and increase compensatory education funding from the current 20 percent add-on weight to 40 percent. IDRA's analysis projected the resulting revenue for each school district. These estimates were based on 2011-12 district funding in each program with amounts adjusted upward to reflect the impact of the 40 percent add-on funding level.

The most important observation is that all groups of school districts enroll some number of ELL and low-income students, and all groups would benefit by increasing funding weights. The mid-groups (second through ninth deciles) show between \$450 and \$404 per WADA in increased revenue (see graph). The lowest wealth grouping of districts – having the highest concentrations of ELL and low-income students – would receive the greatest benefit per WADA (\$501) compared to the wealthiest group of districts (\$277).

Special Program Cuts and District Property Wealth Disparities

A final area examined in IDRA's analyses involved assessment of special program cuts (specifically programs funded outside the Foundation school program and usually included as riders in the Texas appropriations bill) that were the subject of \$1.2 billion in cuts in the 2011 Texas legislative session. Among the special program cuts were the following.

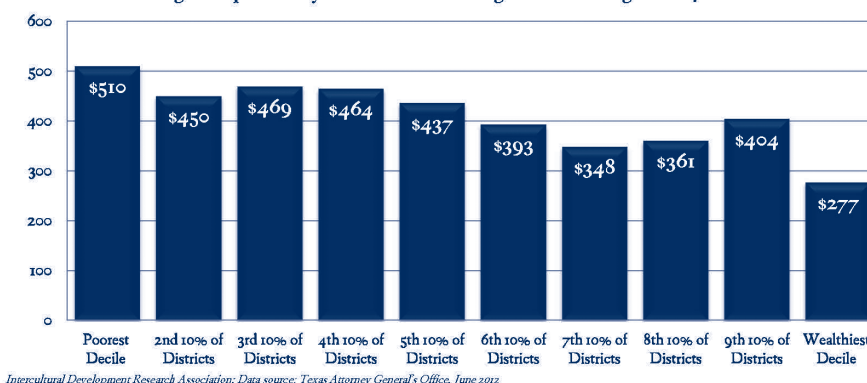
- Student Success Initiative, which supported programs targeting students at risk of academic failure;
- Educator Excellence Award Program;

Average Property Wealth per WADA in 2011-12 Shows Large Gap Between Poorest and Wealthiest Deciles of School Districts

School District Groupings	Property Wealth per WADA Used for State Aid in 2011-12
Poorest Decile	\$76,129
2nd 10% of Districts	\$128,923
3rd 10% of Districts	\$158,789
4th 10% of Districts	\$188,995
5th 10% of Districts	\$213,862
6th 10% of Districts	\$252,712
7th 10% of Districts	\$300,189
8th 10% of Districts	\$379,769
9th 10% of Districts	\$505,122
Wealthiest Decile	\$1,056,207
Gap	\$980,078

Intercultural Development Research Association. Data source: Texas Attorney General's Office, November 2012

Additional Revenue per Student (WADA) Would be Produced in All School Districts by Increasing Compensatory Education & Bilingual/ESL Weights to 40% Add-on



Intercultural Development Research Association; Data source: Texas Attorney General's Office, June 2012

- Texas High School Completion and Success program, which focused on dropout prevention;
- Pre-kindergarten Early Start Programs; and
- Texas High School Project, which concentrated funding for college readiness and STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) initiatives.

Using data acquired by the Mexican American Legislative Caucus from the Texas Education Agency and merged with school finance data provided by the Attorney General to MALDEF, IDRA calculated revenue losses for individual school districts and aggregated the data in the same property wealth deciles used in earlier

(cont. on Page 6)

Fair Funding & Vouchers – Public Monies Must Go to Public Schools

by Aurelio M. Montemayor, M.Ed.

A key fundamental element in our Quality Schools Action Framework and the central issue in the founding of IDRA, is fair funding. It is not the sole element, but it is fundamental and will be an ongoing and challenging goal to reach. States must fund public schools at a level that achieves excellence and equity for all children.

The many arguments to syphon public money away from public schools range from “look at all we’ve invested and gotten no returns” to “money doesn’t make a difference,” from questioning the efficiency of how the dollars are used to the claim that putting money into “those schools” for “those kids” is putting good money after bad. Ultimately the argument boils down to “money does make a difference but only for ‘our’ [affluent] children.”

Un-fair Funding

One huge attack on having excellent public schools has been to under-fund them and then complain about poor results. In Texas, we had a critical reduction in the state public education fund by many billions of dollars with immediate negative effects on schools and children. The long-term effect will show up in reduced graduation rates, fewer students prepared for college, and fewer students entering and completing college studies.

Parallel to direct cuts in education funding is the major challenge from voucher proponents. Vouchers, under the guise of giving parents choices, actually weaken neighborhood public schools and reduce opportunities for children to have excellent neighborhood public schools. Attempts to set up a voucher system come and go in state legislatures. Texas will be facing it again this legislative session.

Outside Influences

When the term “parent choice” replaced “voucher,” policymakers began putting forward legislation to put public dollars into the effort. Many used the model legislative language supported by political organizations, such as

the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC). Some state legislators have been provided training, technical assistance and the actual wording for bills that present state incursions into diverting public money to private schools. As a consequence, the private charter school industry is growing, and states are pulling more tax dollars away from public schools.

Another element is to make it seem the effort is intended to help poor children and children of color. One ultimate goal is to give middle-class parents access to public money as a supplement to the fees they are already paying to send their children to private schools.

Behind the Voucher Curtain

Here is a list of reasons vouchers are bad for public education and bad for families, especially families who are wage earners or poor.

- Vouchers take money away from our neighborhood schools and the community.
- With vouchers, neighborhood public schools have less money and may have to increase taxes for property owners and businesses.
- Our neighborhood public schools must serve all children. Private schools don’t serve all children and can deny admission to any child. They often can exclude those they feel they can’t teach or don’t want for any reason.
- Key supporters of vouchers have been against public school programs and funding to help all children.
- Competition between private and public schools does not improve public neighborhood schools.
- Neighborhood public schools have to answer to the public. Private schools do not.
- Neighborhood public schools are an ideal place for parents to become involved and ensure quality instruction.

(cont. on Page 6)

“The best way to strengthen public schools is to strengthen public schools.”

– Dr. María “Cuca” Robledo Montecel,
“Defending Our Neighborhood Public
Schools,” Texas Freedom Network
Conference panel presentation,
September 21, 2000

(Fair Funding & Vouchers – Public Monies Must Go To Public Schools, continued from Page 5)

- Private schools in Texas, for example, have neither the capacity nor capability to absorb large numbers of poor students.
- Private schools are not held to the same rigid requirements as public schools. Many don't meet minimum state requirements.
- Often, the cost of a voucher does not cover the tuition at most elite schools.
- Vouchers will rarely pay for transportation, uniforms, books and other fees.
- Publicly funded vouchers create a dual system separate and unequal: one for the rich and one for the poor.

- The best way to strengthen public schools is to strengthen public schools.

IDRA's website has resources for public school advocates, including articles, sample statements and fact sheets (www.idra.org). It is critical that we say no to vouchers and actively support full and equitable funding of public schools to serve all children.

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

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- Video/slide show: How Your Texas Schools are Funded
- Fair Funding Now! initiative – Get news, share how funding cuts have affected your school, get funding info for your Texas school & download English and Spanish handouts

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(Highlights of IDRA's Expert Reports and Testimony in the Texas 2012 School Finance Court Case, continued from Page 4)

sections of our report.

The results exposed the fact that the state's poorest group of districts experienced the greatest overall cuts per WADA (\$253), while the wealthiest group of districts experienced the smallest cuts (\$19 per WADA). The special program cuts across all school districts averaged \$161. Lacking state support for these programs, it is up to individual districts to make up the cuts with local property wealth variances, meaning that the lower the property wealth of the district, the greater the tax effort it would need to raise such funding entirely from local sources.

Conclusions

Based on our analyses, IDRA concluded that the Texas school finance system – with its continued support of unequalized funding and the target revenue mechanism that undermines the equity features of state's funding formulae – is inequitable, provides inadequate levels of funding for educating ELL and low-income students, has disparate impacts on low property wealth and major urban school districts, and suffered special program cuts that negatively impacted students in low wealth school districts.

All of these results suggest that Texas still has a long way to go to achieve the objective of providing equal educational opportunity for all of its students. In Texas, the quality of schooling still is markedly affected by the neighborhood in which you happen to reside.

Resources

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Albert Cortez, Ph.D., is director of policy at IDRA. Comments and questions may be directed to him via email at comment@idra.org.

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While you're at it, you can also sign up to receive our monthly bilingual Graduation for All e-Letter and our occasional IDRA eNews e-Letter.

(Education as Pathway Out of Poverty, continued from Page 2)

have launched an online statewide network for teachers to share curricula and best practices.

Through our educator network for example, we have been able to share widely the story of how Roland Toscano, a principal at East Central High School in San Antonio, worked to assure that under-served students at his school were given access to great teaching, excellent curriculum and strong support systems, strengthened by effective communication with parents. Those students have excelled beyond anyone's expectations. With these learnings, this high school has developed a college-going culture for all of its students rather than for a select few.

Technologies connect us, and courage can be catching.

Many Views of Poverty Aren't True

The Salvation Army found that, while an overwhelming majority of Americans believe people living in poverty deserve a helping hand, another 27 percent believe that laziness is a root cause of poverty (2008).

If such destructive beliefs about poverty like the laziness claim were true, there would be reason for pessimism. But the truth is, stereotypes are just that – stereotypes.

Let's look, for example, at the recently much-maligned "47 percent" for being our nation's "takers." According to *The Economist*, of these: "Over half have jobs and pay payroll taxes but earn too little to be subject to income tax as well. Another 20 percent are retired. Only 8 percent of households pay no federal tax at all, usually because their members are students, disabled or unemployed..." (Minton-Bedoes, 2012)

Then there's the myth that children growing up in poverty lack the native intelligence to succeed. It's a myth shattered by children themselves. One recent example: 11-year-old Paloma Noyola Martínez, a student at José Urbina López elementary school, lives in the community surrounding the Matamoros garbage dump and earned a 921 on Mexico's national academic achievement test – the highest score in the country. Martínez is among many children in the poorest parts of Matamoros who achieved the top test scores in the state (Brundage, 2012).

Contributions of Young People are Inspiring

The leadership and contributions of young

IDRA 40th Anniversary

IDRA founder, the late Dr. José Angel Cárdenas, tells the story of the founding of IDRA in the book, *Texas School Finance Reform: An IDRA Perspective*. 2013 marks 40 years of IDRA's work with educators, policymakers, parents, students and communities to fulfill the promise of equity and excellence for all students.

people themselves give us reason for optimism. In the United States and in many countries around the world, the poorest students and racial-ethnic minority students are lost from schools before graduation at alarming rates.

The dropout problem is severe and longstanding, but we know that students dropping out is not a fact of nature. Failing students is not a reality carved in stone. IDRA knew this in 1984 when we first began the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program. Over the last 28 years, the program has demonstrated that school transformation is possible in various social and economic contexts. The program works by putting the principle of valuing youth into practice.

Young people (pre-teens and adolescents) who are at risk of dropping out are selected to serve as tutors for younger children. As tutors, youth are provided academic support and the chance to create a strong connection with an adult who cares about them and their future at school. In countless interviews, Coca-Cola Valued Youth tell us that being chosen as a tutor was one of the first times they were seen as having something to contribute to their school. The Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program demonstrates the power of valuing students.

The Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program has benefited more than 128,000 children in the United States, Puerto Rico, England and Brazil since its founding by IDRA in San Antonio in 1984. It has positively impacted the lives of more than half a million children, families and educators. Through service, youth are valued. In being valued and supported, they begin to fashion a new vision of themselves and their future. Most importantly, the program works: 98 percent of youth who serve as tutors have stayed in school.

Optimism, knowledge and committed action can

and do work for both economic prosperity and opportunity. When you add optimism to leadership to the right kind of investments, even the small changes that begin in a child's life, a family, school, a city, and a region, can take on very big problems and make a major difference for all our children.

High quality education and economic prosperity depend on the right priorities, proven practices, courageous connections, debunked myths and valuing young people.

Resources

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Focus: Fair Funding

“How can we expect our neighborhood public schools to be not just successful, but highly successful, if we don’t equip them? We must have fair funding for the common good.”


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



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