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Focus: Governance Efficacy

Student Voice – A Key Element in Effective School Governance and Accountability

by Rosana G. Rodríguez, Ph.D., and Abelardo Villarreal, Ph.D.

A systemic view of policy and practice change requires inclusion of the most important stakeholders in the educational process: the students. Student voices are fundamentally critical in any successful school reform effort. If we want to reduce student attrition and ensure greater participation and engagement of students resulting in higher academic achievement and college readiness, we must listen to them, gain their confidence and commitment, and collaboratively set goals and objectives. We cannot ignore what often are voices in the wilderness and must genuinely factor them into schools’ decision-making processes and school governance.

Two landmark court cases, *Mendez vs. Westminster* and *Brown vs. Board of Education*, demonstrated the need for school governance to critically look at school systems, policies and practices, and examine how these affect the power of schools to hold on to students and the quality of education provided all students. Considering community, parent and student voices is inherently implied in these cases.

IDRA’s Quality Schools Action Framework™ identifies an inclusive school governance model where parents and students play a major role as co-designers of a school system that ensures graduation and college readiness for all. It speaks to the need to embody democratic principles by keeping the public in public schools and engaging citizens, leaders and policymakers around a common vision

that calls us to act collectively in strengthening four key school system indicators: parent and community engagement, student engagement, teaching quality, and curriculum quality and access. (Robledo Montecel & Goodman, 2010)

Recently, students from Canton High School in Mississippi participating in IDRA’s Pathways project, funded by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, shared their photojournalism skills to make a riveting case for what must be addressed through effective school governance. High school students used the civil rights promises of the landmark cases to capture images depicting barriers and opportunities for graduation and college access (Posner, 2012). Their compelling images inspired the adults into collective action and graphically illustrated the need to expand pathways to higher education around several dimensions, including affordability, student preparation, institutional persistence and resources. Excerpts of their poignant stories and photographs are on IDRA’s website, along with images, essays and articles from other students throughout the Southwest involved in the larger initiative.

IDRA’s Pathways project keeps student voice at the center of action planning, building on IDRA’s Mendez and Brown Fulfilling the Promise Blueprint Dialogues, which has gathered together cross-sector Latino and African American leaders (cont. on Page 2)

“Governance efficacy strengthens school holding power when administrative and supervisory personnel have the capacity to deliver quality educational services to all students. Also needed is the policymaking and pro-active support of a school board to hold on to every student.”

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

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throughout states in the South and Southwest to develop joint action for closing gaps and preparing students for college success.

Students as co-designers of a college-going culture in their schools

Student voice is a fundamental element in planning for effective governance as communities collaborate with their schools in identifying and addressing barriers to graduation and college going. When given the opportunity to do so, students can play a fundamental role in informing school governance from key perspectives: (1) as informed recipients of the type of education being provided who can offer insights that are key to teachers, administrators and school boards; (2) as partners in the teaching and learning process who can describe the effectiveness of the school's efforts to prepare students for college and career; and (3) as pro-active advocates for relevance in both teaching quality and curriculum quality.

Students partnering with schools in mutually beneficial educational activities

Student and community voices are indispensable elements in educational governance and accountability systems. As diverse stakeholders in the educational process, we must begin to listen to youth voices through enlightened relationships based on mutual respect and recognition of their perspectives and needs as the next generation of leaders. Their voice is critical to sharing in the creation of stronger school systems and in the overall economic and social health of our communities.

Students as evaluators

Effective businesses regularly check in with customers to learn how their product, service

or business is faring. Similarly, the perspective of students is essential in ascertaining the effectiveness of the teaching and learning process. Students' sense of efficacy and preparedness for graduation, college and career has been documented as a key factor for future success. Therefore, we must strive to include their perspective and feedback at key points in the continuum of learning through age-appropriate and multi-dimensional means that can include student forums, essays, poetry, photography and theatre. Dynamic governance includes students on school committees to interact and exchange ideas in the planning process with teachers, administrators, parents, boards and community.

Students as pro-active advocates for rigor and relevance

Schools and colleges much reach out to their community and business leaders to check for relevance in the curriculum and preparedness of students to respond effectively to local needs and a more global economy. Conversely, students who are preparing for college and career can provide insights as to the relevance of their preparation, the quality of the teaching they are receiving, and the access they have to a curriculum that will prepare them well to compete and succeed in college and enter the world of work and meaningful civic engagement.

Effective governance and accountability demands student inclusion

Certainly as educators, one of our greatest privileges is preparing students for graduation and success in college. Effective governance and accountability demands inclusion of student voice as we seek research and policy solutions aimed at changing the status quo. It calls on us to initiate a new and

enlightened relationship with students, recognizing that their voices are critical to illuminating and guiding the change process to ensure access, equity and excellence in education. We must more purposefully seek and create new mechanisms to engage and listen to these new voices for the wisdom they can provide.

Our students possess unique insights and powerful gifts, that when combined with educators, parents and community perspective, can help us build stronger schools together. Failure to do so places our society and nation at risk. It is time we recognize the blessing of student voice in co-designing a better future.

Resources

Posner, L. "Canton, Mississippi Youth... On Opening Pathways to College," *IDRA Newsletter* (San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development Research Association, March 2012).

Robledo Montecel, M., & Goodman, C.L. (eds). *Courage to Connect – A Quality Schools Action Framework* (San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development Research Association, 2010).

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Communities, School Boards and Education Policy

by Albert Cortez, Ph.D.

At a recent session with a group of community-based advocacy organizations and while noting the behind-the-scenes operations that characterize education policy development, I saw the intense interest of community members in the intricacies of the often inaccessible education decision-making process. At the local level, school administrators work with school board members and with a sub-set of supportive community leaders. At the state level, organizations with their army of paid lobbyists tend to dominate the process, often excluding community-based groups whose voices should be heard.

With this significant disconnect between educational professionals and their communities, it is little wonder that alternatives, such as charter schools, home schooling and even cyber-schools, have managed to gain a foothold in delivering educational services in many communities.

Public education has long been dependent on support from local communities. And for the most part, that support has been forthcoming. It is reflected in growing public concern about Texas policymakers' recent cuts to public education. It is also seen in community support for local initiatives to increase local taxes to support day-to-day operations or to build new schools.

Though still a visible ally for public education, IDRA's interactions with local community-based organizations suggest that such strong community interest in supporting and improving public schools is a highly underutilized resource at both the local and state levels. Taking steps to connect with this tremendous community force *effectively* may be an essential new strategy if public schools are to survive what has seemed to be an ongoing public policy onslaught ranging from untried and untested alternative education delivery models, to dwindling local and state policy leadership and related weakened financial support for public schools for all students in all communities.

Why do we have this disconnect between school

leaders and communities, and more importantly what is needed to re-establish and strengthen their connections? A recent article raises a key issue when it poses in its title: "How do we make inclusive education happen when exclusion is a political pre-disposition?" (Slee, 2012). While referring to the issue of including special needs students in regular education programs, the concept also implies that exclusion of such communities' advocates is inherent in the existing education policymaking process.

A review of the literature on engaging communities in education reveals many examples where the focus has been on bringing community members in to concentrate on a particular predetermined strategy, such as to improve student instruction, reduce dropout rates or deal with some other challenge. These often involve some effort where the parent is brought in by the school to supplement or implement someone else's ideas. Seldom in the literature are studies cited where the community is an equal partner in *defining* the issues at hand and provides substantive input into addressing key issues (Weiss, et al., 2010).

The marginalization of families and communities in the policy decision-making arena is not new, but as minority and non-traditional families have come to represent increasing percentages of the school population, the gulf between schools and communities – particularly communities of color – seems to be increasing. This has led to continuation and expansion of top-down policies emphasizing standards and accountability, most with little or no community input into the decision-making process. No doubt the mismatch between the economic and racial groundings of school leaders (policymakers at state and national levels, superintendents, school boards, etc.) and local community leaders has exacerbated such challenges. Tensions between schools and communities in turn require skill sets that may involve what one author describes as negotiating skills that take into account the

(cont. on Page 4)

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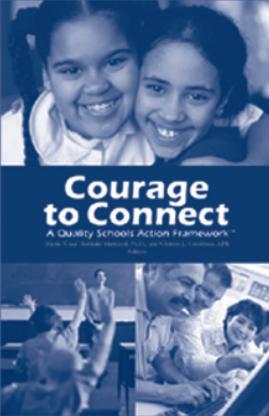
(Communities, School Boards and Education Policy, continued from Page 3)

“dynamics of minority community engagement” (Jasmin, 2001). These challenges are further compounded by what are perceived (and executed) as unequal power relationships – with policymakers and educators at the top levels of the pyramid and communities at the bottom.

In visualizing a future ideal “prosperous community,” Robert D. Putnam posits the notion that society must begin to move away from the concept that benefits must be disproportionately allocated among competing communities to an approach where “in tackling the ills of American cities, investments in physical capital, financial capital, human capital and social capital are complementary, not competing alternatives.” He continues, “Investments in jobs and education... will be more effective if they are coupled with reinvigorating community action.” (1993)

Reinvigorating community action in turn requires that school leaders, including local school board members, revisit their approaches to community engagement. In minority and low-income communities this means moving away from the traditional PTA model to exploring the *PTA Comunitario* innovation that is emerging in communities in deep south Texas, where the community initiates the conversations and meets with school leaders as equal partners in setting local school policy priorities (Montemayor, 2012). It may mean revisiting conventional meeting formats replete with official protocols and providing opportunities for informal community-based conversations between school staff, local policymakers and community members about the community’s priorities and concerns. Among state policymakers, it may mean complementing local and state capitol hearings with local community *pláticas* – or conversations about educational issues as seen from the people whose children are impacted on a daily basis. It may also involve unlocking the school doors that are so often closed from 4:00 p.m. to 8:00 a.m. to offer community members access to the array of community-based resources that sit unused for hours each day – offering meeting space, access to technology and expanding opportunities for adult learning experiences.

Long ago, schools were the center of community life, a place of and for the community as a whole. Many of those same feelings hold today. Witness the uproar and deep feelings of community ownership that accompanies any proposed school closure. Channeling this ownership requires re-evaluating



Courage to Connect
A Quality Schools Action Framework™

Edited by María “Cuca” Robledo Montecel, Ph.D.,
and Christie L. Goodman, APR

The Quality Schools Action Framework shows how communities and schools can work together to strengthen their capacity to be successful with all students. The framework is based on experience and empirical evidence that emerges from existing theories of change. It gives a model for assessing a school’s conditions and outcomes, for identifying leverage points for improvement, and for informing action.

“I believe it is time to dream together – to dream about education not for a lucky few but for all. And it is time to make the dream of education for all become fact.”
– Dr. María Robledo Montecel, IDRA President & CEO

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existing relationships and operational paradigms. Absent substantial changes in approaches, we can expect community members and parents who feel excluded and unwanted in the conventional school contexts to look elsewhere for options that make them and their children feel valued – despite lack of evidence of success.

Resources

Jasmin, Z. “Negotiating Equity: The Dynamics of Minority Community Engagement in Constructing Inclusive Educational Policy,” *Cambridge Journal of Education* (June 2001) Vol. 31, No. 2, pp. 239-69.

Montemayor, A.M. “Hosting Superintendents, Quizzing Candidates and Marking Maps – A Fully Engaged PTA Comunitario,” *IDRA Newsletter* (San Antonio, Texas:

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A Pocket of Excellence in a Sea of Diversity – Magnet School Success

by Bradley Scott, Ph.D.

A recent visit to the Medical Magnet Program at Carroll High School in Monroe, Louisiana, brought back memories of a research study the equity assistance center undertook almost two decades ago. IDRA published the report conducted in the Region VI service area of the IDRA South Central Collaborative for Equity, titled *Magnet Schools: Pockets of Excellence in a Sea of Diversity* (Scott & DeLuna, 1994). The study examined 11 magnet schools in Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas looking at 12 areas research identified as important indicators of effectiveness when magnet schools are used as a strategy for desegregation. The 12 areas are as follows.

Magnet School Indicators of Effectiveness

Staffing – highly skilled teachers with great experience and skills or those new teachers who have demonstrated potential for excellent teaching coupled with a high commitment to their students and their success.

Student selection (assignment) – students and their parents self select or are recruited to the magnet school or program because of the student's interest in its content and its positive outcomes.

Student selection (enrollment) – parents choose or the students see the magnet school or program as being a way of getting the best education available in the district and also perceive some value in the diverse educational experience the school or program can provide.

Student-teacher ratio – magnet schools and programs value a low student teacher ratio because such configurations can provide students with more individual attention as well as providing an opportunity for adults to respond to students' academic, social, emotional and psychological needs.

Curriculum – the curriculum is rigorous, unique, innovative and challenging and it operates at the higher levels of thinking, requiring more intense

decision-making, creativity and problem solving skills.

Magnet school image – schools continually ensure their image is one that projects success and finds it important that parents, students and staff believe in the effectiveness of the program. They talk positively about the program and feel driven to live up to the image of the program. Leadership is open, receptive and willing to listen and support doing what is necessary to get the job of equity and excellence done right. Teachers also see parents as partners who are willing to support the program and go the extra mile to help the students and the program to succeed.

Physical environment – the places and spaces for learning are well-kept and lighted. The appearance of the physical environment is not taken for granted. It looks like an important place for learning. Materials and equipment are appropriate to the theme of the school and program, in good working order and up to date.

Student outcomes – students' performance generally tends to be highly responsive to the theme of the magnet and they tend to perform at higher levels on all of the measures of student success including academic outcomes, cross-cultural relations, self concept and esteem, resilience, efficacy, school graduation, college-going and view of life success.

Student support – students receive a great deal of support for their success from counselors, staff members, teachers and principals in addition to adult volunteers, parents and adult magnet theme experts. The structures of supports are intentionally put into place and are monitored to ensure they produce the desired outcomes for students.

Race relations – the staff, parents and other adults work hard to create and support positive intergroup relations. Multicultural educational experiences and curriculum (cooperative cross racial, cross ethnic, etc.)

The Carroll High School Medical Magnet Program is becoming one of the showcase examples of what determination, dedication, focus, will and vision can produce for students even in the most challenging of circumstances.

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

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cultural learning and grouping approaches; and the use of democratic principles and social justice-based interaction all help to ensure an environment of equal status, knowledge and acquaintance ship, common goal and institutional fairness that translates to good race relations.

Parent and community involvement – parent and community involvement and engagement is actively solicited by the school and this program welcomes this engagement. Parents are involved in all facets of classroom operations, guidance and counseling, mentoring, clubs and other activities, task forces, monitoring groups, decision-making and problem solving and collaborative parent-teacher conference. Staff perceive parents as interested and excited about their children's success and therefore expend great efforts to keep parents informed and engaged.

Magnet and non-magnet school collaboration – good magnet schools and programs seek to transfer their best practices to non-magnet schools as a part of making the educational experiences of all learners better. This happens in reciprocal professional development sessions and coaching and mentoring settings when possible. Good leadership in non-magnet schools and good teachers reach out to magnet schools and programs and vice versa because of their academic success and the organizational supports and operation encourage such reciprocity. Neither strong leaders nor good teachers in non-magnet settings are threatened by the presence and the success of strong magnet schools or programs because they see, understand and embrace the quality, rigor and success these programs have to offer when they work well.

Shining Example in Louisiana

It was clear during this most recent visit that a pocket of excellence is emerging in Monroe City Schools that will serve northeastern Louisiana for years to come. They are creating success specifically in the indicator areas of staffing, student selection in assignment and enrollment, student-teacher ratio, curriculum, parent and community relations, and student outcomes.

The IDRASCE has worked with the staff to bring into focus and to shape the nature of the program and its design. Under the leadership of Dr. Kathleen J. Harris, superintendent; Ms. Patricia Johnson, director of the 21st Century Learning Center; and

Mrs. Shandra N. Smith, program coordinator for the Medical Magnet, the staff have launched an exciting, forward-thinking medical magnet program that is already producing exciting college and career opportunities for its students.

The magnet program is a unique four-year program designed for students who have a strong aptitude and interest in math and science, desire a challenging course of studies, and aspire to pursue higher education leading to a career in medicine or health-related fields. In operation for two years, the magnet program is housed at Carroll High School, whose principal is Patrick Taylor.

I was invited to participate in this year's course completion and pinning ceremonies for the six female students who had successfully completed the program. They received certifications as nursing and pharmacist assistants. The pinning ceremony dates almost as far back as Florence Nightingale.

Three of the students were offered jobs on the spot as they received their certification and were pinned. Their fellow students were excited for them. Their parents were understandably proud and overwhelmed by the impressive program and demonstration of appreciation for the young women. The graduates were honored by the mayor of Monroe with acknowledgements and certificates of achievement from the city council. They also were honored by the Louisiana state senate, including having their names read into the state record. And they received special acknowledgements from the medical magnet instructional team, including Catherine Johnson, R.N.; Georgia Jones, R.N.; and Matthews Williams, chemistry teacher.

The Carroll High School Medical Magnet Program is becoming one of the showcase examples of what determination, dedication, focus, will and vision can produce for students even in the most challenging of circumstances.

IDRA South Central Collaborative for Equity commends them for these accomplishments in two short years. We encourage them to continue moving forward in the other indicator areas of image, physical environment (as the programs grows and improves), student support, race relations (as non-minorities return to the system), and magnet and non magnet collaboration.

Clearly Carroll High School benefits from the presence of a highly successful magnet program

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as a part of its campus make-up, and the magnet program over time should benefit by drawing non-minorities back into a highly effective secondary campus in a city school district. We wish them continued success.

Resources

Scott, B., & A. De Luna. *Magnet Schools: Pockets of Excellence in a Sea of Diversity* (San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development Research Association, 1994).

Bradley Scott, Ph.D., is director of IDRA's South Central Collaborative for Equity. Comments and questions may be directed to him via e-mail at comment@idra.org.



Six Teens Win 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

SAN ANTONIO, MAY 18, 2012 – 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** – Lanala Hayes, 9th Grade, Phyllis Wheatley High School, Houston
- **Second Place High School Winner** – Sade Harnsberry, 10th Grade, E.L. Furr High School, Houston
- **Third Place High School Winner** – Omar Galvan, 10th Grade, E.L. Furr High School, Houston
- **First Place Middle School Winner** – María Armendariz, 8th Grade, Dr. Javier Saenz Middle School, La Joya, Texas
- **Second Place Middle School Winner** – Yamileth Gonzalez, 8th Grade, Dr. Javier Saenz Middle School, La Joya, Texas
- **Third Place Middle School Winner** – Pedro Sanchez, 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, **Lanala Hayes** wrote: “I was a kid with no thought of what I would be doing after high school, a kid who didn’t care about my grades... But, soon enough, the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program helped to change me... I was starting to think of what would happen if I didn’t get my high school diploma or if I didn’t get enough credits. What type of job or college would I get into? If I

didn’t go to a good college would it affect the type of job I could apply for? Would I have to work at a fast food place all my life? ... I started trying harder in school, striving for A’s and B’s, and my teachers took notice.”

“Before I became a tutor in the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program, I lacked patience and I got upset if I had to wait for an absurd amount of time,” **Sade Harnsberry** wrote in her essay. “I realized that my tutees are only in second grade and they are still learning, so they will get off task... I also had to remember to be slow to anger because it wouldn’t be a good way to get the tutees’ attention. My tutees will do what they see me do, so I have to do what I want them to do.”

“I finally got to see how teachers struggle just to teach, because I tutor younger students, and it’s a struggle,” wrote **Omar Galvan**. “I see all the little children eager to learn and that shows me that I shouldn’t let go of opportunities that easily... The Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program has helped me change not only in the classroom but also helped me open up my eyes to the real world and how we need to change to leave a good example for the younger ones behind us.”

In her essay, **María Armendariz** wrote: “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. I have learned that it is a privilege to be in this program and not to mess it up because my tutees from the elementary school really need my help in order for them to succeed... My tutees not only served as a learning tool for me, but they also served as a motivation for me to want to be someone special in life. That’s how my life changed since I got in this program.”

“I used to feel worthless and that I was not good at anything I did... Coming into this school year, things weren’t looking so great for me. It seemed like no one needed me or wanted me,” **Yamileth**

Gonzalez wrote in her essay. “I see a lot of myself in my tutees because I also used to struggle with math and reading... They make me realize that I *am* needed and I *am* wanted by someone... I can honestly put my head up high and say proudly that Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program has made a huge difference in my life.”

Pedro Sanchez wrote: “I was very nervous to start school because my English was not fluent... I often held my head down, almost ashamed of being myself... I was assigned to a teacher where I would have three kids who were impatient, stubborn and easily distracted – sort of like me in my regular classes. I soon began to comprehend that my behavior in school was something that needed to change because I was affecting not only my classmates and teachers, but also myself... I hold my head up high now, and I thank the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program for that sense of accomplishment.”

Honorable mentions were awarded to students in schools that submitted multiple student essays; these students had the highest score at their campus.

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 32,000 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 735,000 children, families and educators have been positively impacted by the program.

The text of all of the winning essays are available online at: <http://www.idra.org/>.



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Focus: Governance Efficacy

“We must connect school outcomes – graduation and college readiness – with who and what produces those outcomes – connecting actionable knowledge to support engaged citizens, accountable leadership and enlightened public policy that leverages change.”

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

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