



Focus: Actionable Knowledge

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What Parents Want to Know about the New Texas Graduation Guidelines

by Rogelio López del Bosque, Ed.D.

The new Texas graduation guidelines went into effect with incoming ninth grade students in the 2010-11 school year with major implications that parents, educators, students and community members need to be aware of. The three tracks are the *minimum* high school program, the *recommended* high school program and the *distinguished* achievement program. Although there are only three programs, parents should be made aware that a fourth path, "Career and Technology," is interwoven within the recommended program. Educators need to be ready to answer questions for parents as to whether or not the Career and Technology path will prepare students at their high school for college.

House Bill 3 defines *college readiness* as the level of preparation a student must attain in English language arts and mathematics courses to enroll and succeed, without remediation, in an entry-level general education course for credit in that same content area for a baccalaureate degree or associate degree program. What does this really mean? And do parents know which tracks will prepare their children for college? What about the students? Do they know?

Through our work in parent engagement, IDRA has been providing information related to the new graduation guidelines and college readiness, and we have heard many questions parents are asking. We encourage parents to carefully review

and critically analyze each track. IDRA has always taken the stand that every child should be given an opportunity to go to college, and be able to graduate from college. Our guidance to parents and schools reflects this stand in all of our work. Based on the questions parents are asking about the new guidelines, here are some quick facts for educators to convey for their students' families.

How many credits are required for each track?

Twenty two credits are required for the minimum program (not a college track), and 26 credits are required for recommended and distinguished programs.

The minimum track only requires 22 credits, but my district is requiring 26 credits for the minimum track. What additional courses will be offered in this track?

Each school district determines which, if any, additional courses it will require. They could be other courses in science and math.

How do I know if my child has been placed in the right track?

Parents must be pro-active and inquire at the beginning of each school year or term. Schools have an obligation to give parents the information they need to make the right decision for their children's education and future. But when that information is not as thorough or clear as is
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"Real, lasting change 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

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needed, parents will have to let school officials know and make sure they are getting what they need to support their children.

For example, parents and students must know that the minimum high school plan ensures that a student will *not* be on a college track. Students with a minimum diploma also are not eligible to apply for some financial aid programs, grants or scholarships. This should be of concern when schools encourage this track for special populations of students who are minority, low-income or English language learners. The minimum high school program will definitely increase graduation rates for schools but will do little for students who may later wish to go to college.

How will I know if my child is placed in the minimum track?

Schools have an obligation to inform parents, and they must do so in the language parents understand. Schools also must have parents' *written permission* to place their children in the minimum track – given that it will take their children off the college track – and certain conditions must be met beforehand.

Who is available to help me discuss and plan the appropriate path for my child?

Each school should designate a grade level counselor or other administrator. This should be someone who knows the curriculum and has access to student information, such as scores, conduct and attendance. This person also should be one who recognizes the positive traits of the student and insists that your child is not placed in the minimum high school plan.

Will the school provide me with any paperwork for any plan?

Each school should provide a graduation plan for

each student that outlines the courses required for each program. The graduation plan should ensure all students are following the correct sequence of courses so that they graduate college ready. However, in some schools, paperwork is only provided for students who are being placed in the minimum track.

Is it possible that my child will be changed from one track to another during the year, and will there be enough time to do so?

The school must provide parents with information regarding any changes made in a designated plan.

Who is the person we must contact for this process or to make any changes?

In most instances, notify the grade level counselor or principal.

What if we do not agree with the track being recommended?

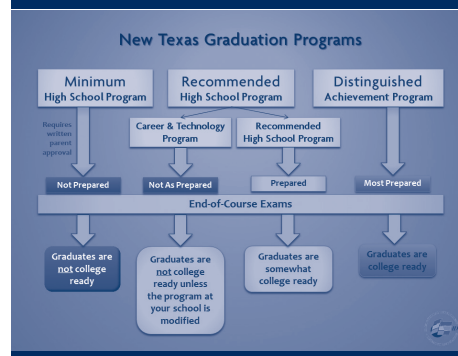
Parents have recourse to the principal, area office or district office. You can get phone numbers on the school and district websites. Start with the principal and then go to the district office if needed. If all else fails, do not be afraid to contact the superintendent. Note that the law requires all students entering the ninth grade to be placed in the recommended track. Then students can be moved to the distinguished track and students who were moved to the minimum track have the right to re-enroll into the recommended track at any time.

If we select the recommended or distinguished diploma track, will my child be moved to another track if he or she has problems with a course, or will the school provide resources to help my child succeed?

The school can move a student to another track.

Texas Graduation Plans

Visit www.idra.org to see an overview graphic of the new Texas graduation programs



However, students who are having difficulty with a course and are enrolled in the distinguished plan should first be provided with the necessary resources, such as tutorials and additional assistance from the teachers, so that they may succeed in the course and program.

Will my child be prepared for college?

Not necessarily. Only the recommended and distinguished plans can lead to college readiness, with the distinguished plan providing the strongest preparation.

Schools must provide the proper information and strong guidance for students and parents in the selection of graduation plans. It is our mutual responsibility to ensure that parents, educators and students are familiar with the new guidelines and aware of the different programs and consequences related to each.

Building college readiness in students is the school's responsibility. It is an investment in the (cont. on Page 8)

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Establishing Home-School Partnerships for Success in Science

by Rosana G. Rodríguez, Ph.D., and Veronica Betancourt, M.A.

Building strong home-school partnerships is an effective strategy for success in supporting children's achievement in science. IDRA recently outlined seven umbrella research-supported strategies to help English learners achieve in the science classroom. The strategies are presented in detail with their research base in *Science Instructional Strategies for English Learners – A Guide for Elementary and Secondary Grades*, which is available from IDRA. This article describes one of the strategies: establish home-school partnerships for mutual success in teaching science.

Specifically, this article outlines teaching and learning premises undergirding the importance of parent and family engagement with references to research support for this approach. It also suggests essential competencies that reflect a positive approach in operationalizing this strategy and offers techniques for implementation. Additional resources are provided online to help in creating a culture of effective parent engagement in schools.

Teaching and Learning Premises

Educators are beginning to recognize the importance of effective parent engagement as a strategy and innovation in and of itself to improve student achievement. Pedro Portes explains that parent engagement is a key mediating factor that accounts for school achievement more than any other single variable because it reflects the interaction of a host of less visible factors" (2005).

Several premises undergird this concept, primarily that parents as children's first teachers have valuable information that teachers and administrators need. In sharing common goals with parents, they can plan together for academic success. Ultimately, the future well-being of schools and families are inextricably linked. Parent engagement matters on several fronts, among them are higher student achievement, social skills and behavior, and working together to prepare for graduation and college readiness (Henderson &

Mapp, 2002). When families and schools establish a true partnership using a valuing and asset-driven approach, children, schools, families and communities all benefit.

Research Support

Research confirms that bridging home-school partnerships empowers families (López & Donovan, 2009), and schools with greater teacher awareness and acknowledgement of cultural diversity and community characteristics experience greater success with diverse student populations (Marshall, 2006). Promoting meaningful and positive working relationships with parents ultimately contributes to an increase in parent participation and improved student success (Ramírez, 2003).

The W.K. Kellogg Foundation (2002) outlines elements for effective partnerships that help frame how schools and families can set goals together with parents for effective partnerships and gauge their success in an ongoing basis. Their elements for sound collaborations conclude that effective partnership: see their present and future well-being linked; respect the history, culture, knowledge and wisdom of the other; collaboratively plan and design mutually beneficial programs and outcomes; engage in reciprocal learning; create structures that promote communication and equity; have high expectations for their involvement with each other; and value and promote diversity.

Essential Engagement Competencies

Some basic assumptions must be embraced for schools to take the important steps necessary to create a culture of effective engagement with parents. First is the recognition that parents and community have unique contributions to teaching and learning. The strengthening of teacher competencies in parent engagement begins with understanding that effective partnerships

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Schools can purposefully create parent partnerships that promote the success of science learning at all levels and encourage interest in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) areas for the broader community.

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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with parents must be created around a valuing perspective that is based upon trust and built over time. Boethel (2003) and Colton (2002), offer some perceived barriers to effective parent engagement that include: logistical issues; deficit focused interactions with schools; and student's age and the locus of power in schools (i.e., who is valued and who is not). These must be addressed and replaced with high expectations for successful partnerships.

Techniques for Implementation

Setting the expectation for meaningful parent engagement falls upon teachers, administrators, principals and support staff to: (1) create an atmosphere of high expectations for success in the parent engagement process; (2) establish rigor to regularly measure and ensure that the quality of engagement is high and focused upon the anticipated outcome of success for every student; and (3) implement specific steps for effective home-school partnerships (Rodríguez, et al., 2008).

Among these steps, administrators must set the tone for creating a welcoming and positive environment for parents, publicly acknowledging and celebrating the contributions parents bring to the teaching and learning process.

Other techniques include: (a) establishing a trusting and collaborative relationship with parents; (b) integrating families into the instructional process; and (3) defining roles that teachers, parents and families can each play in a student's academic success.

Whenever parents are invited into the school as partners, possibilities for meaningful collaboration for student success increase. Schools must be intentional in planning for engagement and outline their intent in campus improvement plans (CIP) and in statements of vision and goals. Parents can serve on committees that promote a working relationship with school administrators and teachers in some decision-making processes. This can be a platform to build a trusting and collaborative relationship with parents by openly inviting parents to join and become a welcome voice on joint teacher-parent committees. Parents then become the representative voice of other parents while working closely with the school and collaborators in the decision-making process.

Another method of encouraging and valuing parents as partners is to integrate families into the instructional process by inviting them to share in

how they utilize science concepts every day. For example, if a parent is an electrician, he or she can demonstrate how electricity flows through circuits and teach children how to safely build model series and parallel circuits. The demonstration and focus could be adjusted based on the states' given standards for that grade level. All work and professions of parents should be equally valued, as science is an intricate part of countless occupations. Similarly, it should be common practice for parents and other community members to be active participants in science fairs and related activities, attending, working with students and judging science competitions.

Schools can purposefully create parent partnerships that promote the success of science learning at all levels and encourage interest in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) areas for the broader community. Schools must consistently ensure that ongoing communication is taking place and find ways to keep the momentum of engagement going, checking and adjusting strategies, and moving forward together in mutually beneficial ways that always have at their core student graduation and college readiness.

Effective home-school partnerships is the work of all of us. It is imperative that we unite parents, communities and educators alike, creating a web of support from pre-K through higher education for graduation and college readiness of all students.

Resources

- Boethel, M. *Diversity: School, Family and Community Connections, Annual Synthesis 2003* (Austin, Texas: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2003).
- Colton, A.B. *Helping Parent Help Children Learn: Involving Caregivers in a Child's Education* (Grand Haven, Mich.: Council of Michigan Foundations, 2002).
- Henderson, A., & K. Mapp. *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Parent and Community Connections on Student Achievement* (Austin, Texas: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2002).
- López, C.O., L. & Donovan. "Involving Latino Parents with Mathematics through Family Math Nights: A Review of the Literature," *Journal of Latinos and Education* (2009) 8(3), 219-230.
- Marschall, M. "Parent Involvement and Educational Outcomes for Latino Students," *Review of Policy Research* (2006) 23(5), pp. 1053-1076.
- Portes, P.R. *Dismantling Educational Inequality: A Cultural-Historical Approach to Closing the Achievement Gap* (New York, N.Y.: Peter Lang Publishing, 2005).
- Ramírez, A.Y. "Dismay and Disappointment: Parental Involvement of Latino Immigrant Parents," *The Urban Review* (2003) 35(2), 93-110.
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Get More Online at the IDRA Newsletter Plus

- PowerPoint presentation on the Texas graduation tracks
- Classnotes podcast episodes on science instruction of English learners
- IDRA's Family Leadership in Education Center website
- Classnotes podcast episodes family engagement
- *Science Instructional Strategies for English Learners – A Guide for Elementary and Secondary Grades* details

Visit www.idra.org for more information.

Strategies for Success," *IDRA Newsletter* (San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development Research Association, November-December 20008).

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Professional Development in the 21st Century – Teacher Reflection and Action

by Juanita C. García, Ph.D.

Whether teaching is an art or a science, it is no easy task. A good teacher takes you from where you are and stretches your mind, ever onward, to the next step, the next insight, the next glimpse of knowledge. Good teachers reflect and evaluate their own practice, success and misgivings. Critical reflection is a key quality of effective teachers: “The ability to reflect on what, why and how things are done and to adapt and refine practice is essential for successful teaching and learning” (Rayford, 2010).

Think about the best teachers you have had. What did they do? How did they make you feel? What did you learn from them? Teachers can have either a profound positive or adverse impact on students’ lives. The best teachers believe in their students and challenge and inspire them. They free students up to take risks in their learning. They respect and value their students’ backgrounds and strengths, incorporating them daily in profound ways into the classroom. It is up to each individual teacher to become the best teacher he or she can be.

Reflective practice can be a valuable process in teacher professional development. This article reviews the concept and benefits of reflective practice and provides some guiding questions to assist the reflection process for teacher professional growth and lasting school change.

The Reflective Teacher

A common definition of reflection is simply thinking about things. In a professional setting, reflection is deliberate, purposeful and structured. It is linked to theory and practice about learning. Reflection is a conduit for change, and one can realize it in several ways (Fullan, 2005). According to York-Barr, et al., it is only through this practice of reflection that teachers experience growth (2001). Schon (1987) defines reflective practice as a critical process in refining one’s artistry and craft in a specific discipline. He recommends reflective practice for novices to assess alignment of their own individual practice

and that of successful practitioners.

Reflective practice is widely used by mentors and coaches as a way of involving teachers who are thoughtfully applying appropriate and applicable knowledge to practice. Smyth (1989) asserted that there are four sequential stages connected to questions that lead teachers to critical reflection: (1) Describing – What do I do; (2) Informing – What does this mean? (3) Confronting – How did I come to be like this? (4) Constructing – How might I do things differently?

The discourse from researchers is that critical reflection can occur individually, in small groups and in large groups and is followed up with thoughtful action that leads to professional growth of teachers and lasting school change.

Why Reflective Practice

Reflective practice occurs at each moment of the teaching and learning experience. It should not be only a one-time scheduled activity at a certain period of the day. Good teachers are continuously reflecting and adjusting the instruction. It is, however, not uncommon for teachers to spend some time after students have left to do deeper reflection of the entire day.

Reflective teachers ask themselves if there is anything they need to change in their teaching practices. They think about their teaching regularly, thoroughly and systematically. In other words, they become reflective practitioners. Reflecting on teaching practice is a way to re-think what and how we taught something, the impact it had on students, and the overall success of the teaching and learning experience. It is a type of self-assessment.

When Should Reflection Occur

It is important to help teachers know what to look for when reflecting on their teaching. It is not a haphazard event. It is a planned event with certain thoughts in mind. This article suggests a

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Reflective teachers ask themselves if there is anything they need to change in their teaching practices. They think about their teaching regularly, thoroughly and systematically. In other words, they become reflective practitioners.

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more formal designated time for reflection. This can be **before**, **during**, or **after** a lesson or series of activities. The time varies on the different situations. The guiding questions during each stage may assist the reflection process.

Before teaching or planning a lesson, it is important to understand the goals and objectives (especially language objectives for second language learners) and to develop a plan of action. Be clear on what the introductory or engagement part of the lesson will be. Think about students! What learning behaviors are most effective? Decide what works best for them: verbal interaction, hands-on manipulation, drawing, demonstration, working with a partner, etc. What thinking and understanding is expected from the students and what teaching behaviors are necessary?

Anticipate what might happen: how students might respond, how they might participate or not, what misconceptions might occur. Be prepared to react to these situations. Other key questions include:

- Did I take the time to prepare my students adequately before exposing them to new sources of information?
- Did I build background knowledge for understanding the lesson and activate their prior knowledge?
- Did I stimulate their curiosity to learn?

During teaching the lesson, implement a plan. An effective, reflective teacher does not think of teaching as a script to deliver and is willing to take the time to think about his or her teaching. A skilled teacher thinks about difficulties and areas of concern while teaching.

- Am I using enough wait time before and after responses to questions?
- Am I exploring alternative strategies to reach all learners?
- Am I using various forms of communication (listening, speaking, reading and writing)?
- Am I modeling and encouraging critical thinking?
- Are my students talking to each other – agreeing, disagreeing, challenging, etc.?
- Can my students explain their ideas clearly?
- Are my students willing to take risks in their learning?

IDRA Newsletter Available by Email in 2013

We're proud to announce that the IDRA Newsletter will soon be available to you by email.

As before, the print version is still available by mail, and you can view the newsletter on our website (http://www.idra.org/IDRA_NL_current/). But starting in January 2013, you can get your news faster, see it on your mobile device and share it with others more easily. And we might even save a few trees in the process.

**Sign up now to get the IDRA Newsletter by email at
www.idra.org**

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.

After teaching, look back! Ask questions about the lesson. What worked, what didn't work, what could be done differently, and what can be done next time?

- What kinds of questions did I ask: Questions for which I do not know the answers or testing questions to find out what they know?
- Did I make the most use of the technology available?
- Did I integrate learning across the curriculum and help my students understand how it can be applied to the real world?
- Was my classroom arranged to facilitate discussion and maximum interaction?
- Did I encourage respect for and listening to other students?
- Did I give my students time to reflect on their experience and identify what they learned, what they liked and what they did not understand?

Final Thoughts

Changes in teaching practice take time. Perhaps one might not need to change everything about their teaching. Some things may be working. Look for the positives and work on the focus of the reflection. The more reflective a teacher becomes, the more aware he or she is of how capable the students are. Teaching can be a rewarding experience from which we learn every day.

Resources

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Next Generation of IDRA's Texas School Data Portal OurSchool Website Provides Info on College Success in Texas

IDRA's OurSchool website has been expanded to give community, family and school leaders a new level of high quality, accessible data to see how their schools are doing and plan ways to improve them. The OurSchool website originally provided high school-level data and, with support from TG Public Benefit, now includes college-level information.

The website (<http://www.idra.org/OurSchool>) provides key data for Texas school districts and high schools, including outcomes on ACT/SAT tests, college-sending rates, teacher certification rates, and district-level attrition rates. Designed around IDRA's Quality Schools Action Framework™, the site provides key questions to promote community conversations and a framework that local, cross-sector partners can use to plan joint action to improve school holding power. With 2.0 interactivity, visitors can keep a "my schools" portfolio and share results with local partners and policymakers. With its focus on Texas, the site is fully bilingual in English and Spanish.

The grant from TG Public Benefit made it possi-

ble for IDRA to upgrade the site with college persistence, success and developmental course success as well as make the site accessible for use with mobile phones. The site also has bilingual video tutorials for visitors.

Dr. María "Cuca" Robledo Montecel, IDRA President & CEO said: "At every level, from policy to practice, people need clear, accurate and timely information to assess what is needed to strengthen schooling, take action, and make sure the actions are producing results for students. The OurSchool website is a powerful tool for parents, educators, students, policymakers, businesspeople, and city leaders who are working together to strengthen schools to graduate all students and prepare them to succeed in college."

For cities like San Antonio that are committed to increasing graduation rates, the site is a valuable resource. San Antonio Mayor Julian Castro commented: "We are at a critical time in San Antonio and across Texas... Investing in our people will require everyone coming together in partnership. IDRA's effort to put useful data into the hands of the people who most need it is a key

element in helping parents advocate for the best possible education for their children."

Community organizations have been using the website to understand the obstacles to school success and to work together to address them. Mike Seifert with the Equal Voice Network in the Texas Rio Grande Valley said: "OurSchool portal data has been used in the Valley... Time and again, I have seen 'Aha!' moments when participants utilize this tool."

IDRA also is engaging school district and college administrators in dialogues leading to a smoother student transitions to college and greater participation and graduation of traditionally underserved students in the state.

"With this portal, SISD parents as well as parents across the state [will] be able to access comprehensible data on college participation, preparation and success, which are key to 'connecting the dots' and closing gaps between K-12 education and post-secondary outcomes," added Fernando Vasquez, Title I Specialist in the Socorro Independent School District.

Get District- and High School-Level Data at IDRA's OurSchool Portal

Designed to help educators and community members find out how well their high school campus is preparing and graduating students, what factors may be weakening school holding power, and what they can do together to address them.

What's Included...

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(What Parents Want to Know..., continued from Page 2)

future of all our children so they can have better opportunities for college and graduation. Even the career and technology track can be modified to meet college readiness standards.

We cannot undervalue the impact that parents and the community can have to transform a school. This connection is most valuable, but parents cannot become engaged in their children's education if they are not properly informed and given an opportunity to create a shared vision for success.

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