The Lens for Viewing the Full Dimensions of Families

by Aurelio M. Montemayor, M.Ed.

The 3D Glasses

I'm old enough to remember the first 3D movies with the special glasses that we were given out to viewers. Whether it was Bwana Devil or House of Wax, the screen was blurry without the Polaroid plastic lenses. You just couldn't get the full effect without them. In fact, when the film was shone later on TV, the scenes that were meant to jump out at you were uninteresting and made little sense in terms of the story line. You totally missed the novelty of a ball leaping from the screen straight at you. Similarly, if you want to get the full effect of IDRA's family leadership activities, you need to see them through the lens of our principles.

Live Action: Families and their Children

The broad umbrella of families' connection to the education of their children has many strands, each with its own goals: for newborns and very young children the focus of services, information and support is primarily around health and safety. New parents

need and want this support.

As the child develops, the early stages of child growth and development become the focus. Discipline, limits and social behaviors are of concern, as are language development and communication. When the child is of school age, education takes the center focus for most families.

The Root Beer Bottle Bottom Lens

We can choose to gaze at families dealing with their children during these stages and look through the lens of limitation and ignorance to see the families as needing and the children as hurting. We can list, as some popular writers and consultants do, the assumed characteristics of poor families and see the families and children through that lens. This chosen lens colors the viewer's attitude and dictates his or her actions. If something is seen as broken, then the action is to fix it; if lacking, then fill that void.

This deficit stance has been present in our schools for many generations and is reborn for each new generation with perhaps new colors and shiny gloss. But it is still the

same old same old. Twenty years ago, a well-known and respected research firm approached IDRA's president about a survey on dropouts they were conducting. The survey instrument was a long catalog of the many possible deficits the students might have that were considered possible reasons they had dropped out of school. Might a set of questions about the *institution* have revealed a different set of data?

It can be termed as common sense, pointing out the obvious, quoting the internalized self-recrimination of some families, getting children from poor neighborhoods to attest to the horribleness of their existence, etc. Sadly, this point of view is held and nurtured across the political and class spectrum.

In addition to being a distorted and inaccurate (and certainly unfair) view, it also isn't practical. It doesn't work.

So some consultants get hurrahs and hosannas from educators as they reap such high-paid contracts. Why not? Their presentations and advice

echo what was already suspected by the participants and is artfully reinforced by the presenter. And all because we care so much about these poor, abused, needy and scarred children. "These poor parents, they've been a mess, but what do you expect? They're poor, not just economically, but in spirit, in language, in culture, in civility, in social skills, in their limited expectations for their children." Ad nauseum.

Another Set of Glasses

IDRA has shown the opposite from our valuing point of view and with dramatically different results. Our constant challenge has been to get the teachers of the students in the program to change glasses... to view the students as they really are: valuable assets rather than as at-risk, close-to-being-lost-by-the-school problems.

When families partner with school people and the broader community participates, there is a greater possibility for a sustained and positive reform of a campus.

This is why our principles are so important. Each one is interrelated with the others but also stands by itself as an important premise and undergirding of our actions in support of parent leadership in education. Following is an overview of IDRA's principles for family leadership in education.

1. Families can be their children's strongest advocates. This premise is based on the natural universal inclination in families to defend their children. It points to the potential that all families have in speaking for, defending and supporting their children. The advocate role requires little explanation or rationale when addressing any group of families. The conversation usually shifts to *how* and *when* to do it effectively. Just as all children are valuable and none is

In This Issue...

Parent and Community Engagement

Dear reader,

Our country is experiencing something new: we have a shared sense that everyone can achieve to a high level. This is such a critical step that we have taken as a country to know this and to work toward assuring that all children learn to a high level. This is a breakthrough in the thinking of the United States. Now it needs to be supported by action so that we can educate all children in a way that is competitive globally. I believe this can only be done when schools and parents and communities work together. In fact, schools belong to their community.

Often, the voices of community members and parents are not heard when important educational decisions are being made. They are made to feel inadequate and unwelcome in many school settings, especially those whose culture, home language or economic status is not mainstream. But effective community engagement builds partnerships based on respect and a shared goal of academic success for every child. It depends on the meaningful integration of community members and parents into the decision-making processes of schools.

In his article, "The Lens for Viewing the Full Dimensions of Families," Aurelio M. Montemayor, M.Ed., describes IDRA's principles for family leadership in education, which are based on the understanding that parents and members of the community are assets to the school and that they bring a strength that can transform the neighborhood school. Rosana G. Rodríguez, Ph.D., presents a research base for critical components of effective engagement in "What Parent and Community Engagement Means for Quality Schools." And in "Technology Community Centers for Minority College-Bound Students," Leticia Rodríguez, Ed.M., tells the story of IDRA's TECNO project in the Edgewood community of San Antonio. This is an exciting effort that is providing information and assistance to high school students who once thought their dream of going to college wasn't possible. Now it is.

This is a new day in our nation. And while the challenges we face in education can seem overwhelming, there is an amazing power in our communities to do the hard work that needs to be done hand-in-hand with school leaders to make sure all of our students graduate prepared for college and life. This investment in the future of our young people will have a lasting positive impact on our communities and our country as a whole.

María Robledo Montecel

Quality Schools Action Framework
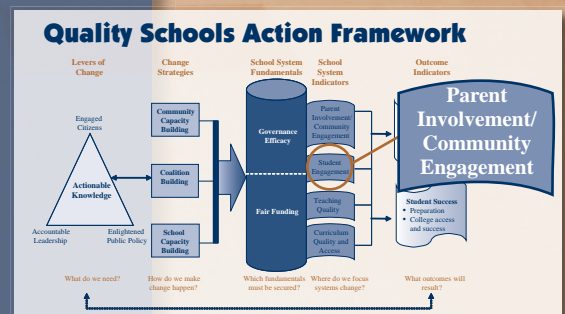
What Parent and Community Engagement Means for Quality Schools

by Rosana G. Rodríguez, Ph.D.

President Barack Obama has said that the chance to get high quality schooling and a college education must not be a privilege of a limited few, it should be a birthright of every single American. This mantra should be adopted by every school. Parent involvement and community engagement are critical vehicles through which the promise of a quality education will be fulfilled. Our definition of engagement must extend far beyond a narrow catch phrase toward a genuine partnership of parents and teachers working together and making decisions together within the teaching and learning process that will have a lasting impact on the future of students.

Current theories regarding the relationship between community involvement and increased school efficiency and student learning are based on the premise that in traditional society, the community is often the provider of children's education (Bray, 2000; Williams, 1997) and therefore, the public owns its schools.

When considering public education, the literature on community participation provides many theories of participation that shed light on the relationship between community

> **Administrator and teacher attitudes are key to establishing a culture of engagement that encourages full participation by all the community members.**

involvement and increased school efficacy and student success. Some of the models, such as IDRA's Parent Leadership Model (Montemayor, 2000), offer dimensions in which a community can positively impact its schools: parents as teachers, as resources, as decision makers, and ultimately leaders and trainers of other parents. Within these domains of community participation, the impact of parent involvement can be felt beyond the classroom.

Jennifer Swift-Morgan (2006) suggests that there are at least six domains for community participation in schools: infrastructure and maintenance, management and administration, teacher support and supervision, pedagogy and classroom support, student supervision, and student recruitment. Jimenez (2002) underscores the importance of the community's role in school administration and management. Muskin (2001) considers the advantages of the community's role in participation in school curriculum. IDRA's President, Dr. María "Cuca" Robledo Montecel

(2005), presents a Quality Schools Action Framework where parents and communities play "vital roles in every school reform effort – from fighting for fair funding to making sure that students are not ignored or punished because of the language they speak. As partners in education and catalysts for education policy and funding reform, their role can be critical to helping local neighborhood schools turn the tide of student attrition."

Some theorists develop categories of involvement in education, such as Shaeffer (1994) who offers a ladder of involvement that ranges from the lowest, being the mere use of a service in a school, to the highest, representing true responsibility and power that is described as participation in real decision making at every stage of education. This decision making includes problem identification, feasibility studies, planning, implementation and evaluation. And Williams (1997) makes the important distinction between who in the community is participating: Are only the officials involved or "only the rich with the clout, time and means to participate?"

Swift-Morgan (2006) reminds us that the international community recognizes the importance of community participation as a critical ingredient for educational access and quality. Viewing engagement from

an international perspective offers worthwhile insights into the scale of community participation as well as potential domains of engagement where parents and community can have greater impact working with schools to ensure they are responsive for all children. Throughout the world, just as in our nation, under- resourced communities are calling for financial incentives as well as technical assistance to assist in learning how to encourage broader based community participation that can lead to improved high school graduation rates and higher access, persistence and graduation rates in higher education.

The international research done by Swift-Morgan (2006) with rural communities delves further into what constitutes community participation and what the impact on schooling is. In her extensive focus group discussions, she proposes forms of engagement for the future that include the following, which are certainly relevant within the U.S. context:

- participation in ongoing dialogues with school staff on issues of enrollment, academic performance and general school improvement;
- participation in awareness-raising and community participation; and
- assisting with teaching on topics, such as culture and language.

Emerging forms of participation include advocacy work, such as parent leadership training, that seeks to identify key issues that relate to quality schooling and raising awareness for changes in policy and practice at the school or state level.

In its advocacy work over the past 35 years, IDRA's parent engagement model and parent leadership training makes the case for all parents – particularly those whose voices are most often not heard – to fully participate in the decision making process. This is especially true in the highest form of parent engagement where parents serve as advocates and trainers of other parents. On this level, parents see the importance of their participation not only for their children, but for themselves, their schools and for the entire community.

Throughout her extensive focus groups with multicultural and multilingual communities in southern Ethiopia, the factors cited by Swift-Morgan (2006) that encourage parent and community engagement in school include the following:

- Encouragement from staff to welcome parent participation;
- Staff expressing their respect for parents and the valuing of different community contributions;
- More meetings among school, parents and community;
- Financial resources allocated to support school expenses and improvement projects; and
- Technical assistance to help formal and informal parent groups manage schools better and facilitate parent and community involvement.

In Swift-Morgan's research, throughout all types of communities, parents expressed a desire for "co-ownership" of the school in partnership with school officials and governments. She found universal parent and community member willingness to contribute in-kind with their time, talent or personal knowledge.

Administrator and teacher attitudes are key to establishing a culture of engagement that encourages full participation by all the community members (Rodríguez and Villarreal, 2003a; 2003b). In areas of advocacy and awareness raising, the involvement of parents, communities and teachers working together through dialogue and action planning can positively impact teaching quality, access to resources for all students, governance and policy at the school and district levels.

In order to ensure that community and parent engagement will be embraced for the wealth of knowledge

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and support it can provide toward improving the teaching and learning process, institutions of higher education and schools of education also need to partner in preparing a new cadre of teachers who are fully committed to emphasizing teacher-parent relationships. Stressing this aspect is important in the preparation and certification of teachers, in training and retraining teachers, through professional development and through additional research and resources.

The great Spanish philosopher Jose Ortega y Gasset pointed out that every generation "has its own theme, its own preoccupation" (Max-Neef, 1991). One hopes that ours is a relentless quest for quality education for all children through effective community-school partnerships.

The promise of fulfilling every child's birthright to a quality education will become reality only when we fully embrace a vision of teachers and parents as co-leaders, co-creators of a new reality for schools. True partners learn how to work together as significant change agents to implement a Quality Schools Action Framework, (Robledo Montecel, 2005) and can have positive impact on schooling as well as on the quality of life in the surrounding community they serve for generations

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Student Voices

"They [my parents] just make me choose – do you want to be flipping burgers or someone that sits in an office?"

– high school student

"I recently got laid off from my job and they told me [it was] because I was in school. They said they needed someone there forty hours a week."

– college student

"They [parents, teachers, counselors] say not to give up, not to quit. That we think it's hard but at the end it pays off. They say education is the key to success."

– high school student

"I am college material."

– middle school student who had been once considered at-risk of dropping out

to come.

Resources

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Rosana G. Rodríguez, Ph.D., is director of Development. Comments and questions may be directed to her via e-mail at comment@idra.org.

TECNO Community Involvement Process
Technology Community Centers for Minority College-Based Students

by Leticia Rodríguez, Ed.M.

By the year 2050, the Hispanic population will triple to 133 million from 47 million. Already the largest minority group, Hispanics will more than double their share of the U.S. population to 29 percent. The Tomas Rivera Policy Institute reports that Latino children now comprise a majority or near majority of first graders in nine of the nation's largest cities (New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston, Phoenix, San Antonio, San Diego, San Jose and Dallas) (2009).

Nationally, children in low-income families are 32 percent less likely to attend college than those in families with higher incomes. Even though minorities constitute an increasing proportion of college students, they are still underrepresented in postsecondary education.

IDRA is focusing on improving college attendance for this burgeoning young Hispanic population by establishing the latest technology in community centers. These TECNO (Technology Enhanced Community Neighborhood Organization) digitally-based centers were designed to provide personalized online college planning after school hours in each center's computer rooms.

The goal of the project is to provide direct support services and information about college access and success through the use of technology to 600 low-income 11th- and 12th-grade Hispanic and other minority students and their families within the Edgewood community, a high-need area of San Antonio. The project works with participating schools, teachers, students and their families through four community-based centers: Benitia Family Center, Westside YMCA, YWCA and Edgewood Family Network.

Relying on best practices and national research for using current technology for college access, TECNO is being supported by JP Morgan Chase and TG (Texas Guaranteed Student Loan Corporation). TG is a public non-profit corporation that helps create access to higher education for millions of families and students through its role as an administrator of the Federal Family Education Loan Program (FFELP).

Since each community project is unique in its use of processes, practices and challenges, TECNO is applying three key actions: diligent scope planning and implementation, communication, and building and sustaining community relationships. The best practices from applying these principals are the focus of discussion here.

Planning and Implementation

Do lots of groundwork. Organize a SWOT (strengths, weakness, opportunities and threats) session with a cross section of people from within your organization. This process will help you identify the internal and external factors that can facilitate or impede the project timeline and outcomes.

Understand how to plan with the different types of team stakeholders. Look for feedback beyond the users and developers of the project. Conduct a wide sweep for people whose knowledge and expertise contribute to the project's success. The inner working group needs to have knowledge and information possessed by stakeholders in the outer circles.

Be adaptable. Even with bucket loads of groundwork, *stuff happens*! In our case, one center director retired during the second-inning of the project implementation. Another center started building renovations sooner than expected, with the computer center scheduled for the first round of renovations. Adaptability was the theme of the week in these situations.

Communication

Structure communication. Continually communicate progress, challenges and future actions and events with all stakeholders. Schedule regular

meetings with project staff, center directors and other key stakeholders. Follow-up with reports to make certain actions items are happening as planned. Regular communication and collaboration with the technology centers, schools, colleges and other college access groups is enabling TECNO to recruit more students to the centers and provide the students with the most current information and resources from various sectors.

The TECNO staff were trained to maintain regular communication with the center directors and staff. This training enhanced the rapport and working relationship between TECNO and the center staff. Staff hired for the centers are composed of upper level college undergraduates or recent college grads with extensive experience with college planning. The staff live or grew up in or near the Edgewood community. Knowing the community provides the staff with highly skilled communication nuances for understanding the language, culture and expectations.

Building and Sustaining Community Relationships

Listen, talk and act – in that order. IDRA's Dr. Rosana Rodríguez and Dr. Abelardo Villarreal have written about this point clearly: "Creating a partnership relationship requires a paradigm shift. The at-promise way of thinking pursues values and unconditionally integrates the "soul" of the community into the educational process. Recognizing communities as *at-promise* rather than *at-risk* means capitalizing on the community's assets, pointing to possibilities rather than stressing dysfunctionality, and turning away from limiting labels and diagnostic approaches. This fundamental shift implies greater engagement of communities at all points of the educational pipeline."

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- Resources on planning for college
- Articles on student access to technology

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(2000)

Especially listen to the students. Our initial research indicated a majority of the students and families in this area did not have Internet access. However, the conversations with groups of students revealed the opposite – a majority of students were digitally connected at home. These findings were similar to a recent report on new media connectivity that found that 85 percent of college-bound African American high school seniors compared to 86 percent of Whites and 77 percent of Hispanic college-bound students had access to a broadband connection (Noel-Levitz, 2006). Also, as reported above, although Hispanic students had home Internet access, lack of general student and parent knowledge about the college process were compelling concerns. With this information at hand, the project re-emphasized parent involvement by ensuring each student phone call or meeting includes input from at least one parent.

In addition to resources for students, the new TECNO web site has a section for parents in English and Spanish. As a result of the downturn in the economy, there have been more and more adults visiting the centers seeking a GED, new job training and college-going information. With this

new group warmly welcomed to the centers, the center staff adapted their college advising talents to serve this new population.

With these best practices and lessons learned fresh in our minds, IDRA will continue to plan, communicate, adapt and most importantly listen to the students and community to improve their college-going opportunities. However, our most important work will be keeping up and changing with *their* needs and the latest technology to help them go from college-bound to college graduate.

Resources

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Leticia Rodríguez Ed.M., is an IDRA education associate. Comments and questions may be directed to her via e-mail at comment@idra.org.

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IDRA will providing assistance to help you access and leverage American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) stimulus funds for increased student achievement.

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A Community Action Guide –
## Seven Actions to Fulfill the Promise
of Brown and Mendez

By Rosana G. Rodríguez, Ph.D., Bradley Scott, Ph.D., and Abelardo Villarreal, Ph.D.

This booklet details seven critical actions community members can take to help fulfill the promise of *Brown vs. Board of Education* and *Mendez vs. Westminster* in the education of African American and Latino students.

This booklet also includes a step-by-step tool for developing a blueprint for action in a local community. It presents an action planning process that navigates local participants through vision building, focused planning, local environmental scanning and constructing the actual blueprint for local action.

It also provides a community assessment instrument that, when used as a foundation for discussion and action, generates a clear direction local stakeholders can embrace to bring about real action to fulfill the promise of *Brown and Mendez*.
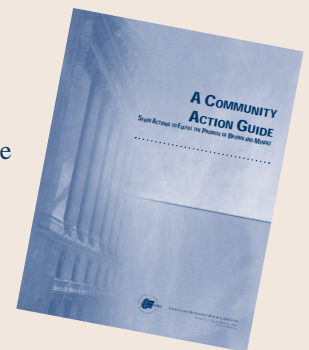
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expendable, so is our view of families that each must be respected and treated as the crucial defender and protector of their children.

2. Families of different races, ethnicities, languages and classes are equally valuable. Each group has assets, traditions and a language that is worthy of respect. Our most effective and impactful work with families and their schools happens when this

all children when collective efforts create solutions for the common good. The power that families have in a neighborhood public school is in their numbers. Assertive individuals are good sparks and energizers, but the staying power resides in the network of families. When families connect around the education of their children and move to the group consciousness, they are drawing on the combined intelligence, energy and power to transform a school

schools lasts if it is only led from within. Families attempting to reform schools, when only acting as an external force, no matter how strong, rarely last beyond a few years. When families partner with school people and the broader community participates, there is a greater possibility for a sustained and positive reform of a school.

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The reason for bringing parents together in a meeting, session, workshop or any other gathering is to have them analyze, synthesize and evaluate critical pieces of information.

principle is evident in the outreach and work done with families. Families engage with their children's schools and the children blossom.

3. Families care about their children's education and are to be treated with respect, dignity and value. Latinos and other groups consider education of their children a priority. This almost universal concern is the critical connection between families and schools and is a most useful basis for beginning a dialogue and a project that engages families more fully in the education of their children and that underlies effective outreach efforts.

4. Within families, many individuals play a role in children's education. There are many key caretakers of children who are not genetic parents. The combination of all who live within a home are important influences on children and can be a collective force for creating excellent schools. For educators, this means rather than developing activities that assume a biological parent be present, design activities for whomever arrives and rejoice in the presence of whomever the family members are.

5. Family leadership is most powerful at improving education for

and to catalyze administrators to raise their hopes, standards and expectations for all children. When families operate out of optimism, draw on individual and neighborhood assets, and move a school to achieve new heights, all children benefit.

6. Families, schools and communities, when drawn together, become a strong, sustainable voice to protect the rights of all children. Transformation and improvement of

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IDRA's Family Leadership Principles handout

Sample chart of valuing and deficit assumptions

Articles on parent and community engagement

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Are We Facing Reality?

A criticism could be made that these principles are romanticizing who families are and what they can accomplish. It's almost the mirror image of the negative deficit model critiqued above.

These premises don't assume all families are perfect or models of virtue or childrearers of the highest order. What these points of view bring are a different set of rules for effective work with parents. They discard "banking" notions of education for parents, that is, that the parents who happen to be poor and/or minority have empty little heads into which we will deposit coins of knowledge.

Under these assumptions, the reason for reaching out to families is to find out what they think, what they expect for their children and from the school, and what critical questions they have.

The reason for bringing parents together in a meeting, session, workshop or any other gathering is to have them analyze, synthesize and evaluate critical pieces of information. The idea is not to make them little lawyers and have them memorize large amounts of data, but to know that key data means and to seek more if it is important and relevant.

An asset-based model of operating doesn't validate what precious knowledge and skills are present in the community because we

want to improve their self-image and concept, but because those assets are the strength and power that will transform a school and a neighborhood.

Consultation, for Real, if You Follow Our Drift

For all the criticisms of the *No Child Left Behind Act*, some pieces have been very useful in carrying out our valuing model. Every requirement for a consultation on a Title I campus has been an opportunity to engage families in meaningful conversation and to enlighten teachers and administrators about the validity of our vision and principles.

So whatever changes or is reformed in the new federal education policy, we expect, we wish for, we are prepared to move on to school data presented in meaningful and disaggregated forms; families made partners and co-discussants of the standards; curriculum and instruction happening on a campus; and outreach and connection with the families being real, being personal and being a means to inquire what families think, invite and welcome to the table.

We Knew it Would Happen

It's been heartwarming to see families and their children engaged in seeking and discussing online information, as well as families participating in dynamic dialogues about curriculum and instruction. Yes, it's been positive and motivating, but given our point of view, not surprising.

Aurelio M. Montemayor, M.Ed, is an IDRA senior education associate and director of the Texas IDRA Parent Information and Resource Center. He also serves on the national board of PTA. Comments and questions may be directed to him via e-mail at comment@idra.org.

Highlights of Recent IDRA Activities

In February, IDRA worked with **7,313** teachers, administrators, parents and higher education personnel through **56** training and technical assistance activities and **155** program sites in **13** states plus Brazil. Topics included:

✦ Customer Service for Families and the Community
✦ School District Bilingual/ESL Audit
✦ Math and Science Strategies for English Language Learners
✦ Oklahoma Multicultural Education Conference
✦ Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program

Participating agencies and school districts included:

✧ National Association for Bilingual Education
✧ Wichita Falls Independent School District (ISD), Texas
✧ National Network of Equity Assistance Centers

Activity Snapshot

In a major urban school district in southeast Texas plagued by racial tension, hostility and violence, IDRA's South Central Collaborative for Equity quickly assessed the situation and context; interviewed and surveyed key forces in the district including administrators, teachers, parents and students; and articulated a clear and appropriate response to the problem. Part of that response included bringing together the different key stakeholders and helping them to realize the effects that their tension, hostility and violence were having on children. Through our collective work in dialogues, effective decision making and problem solving, they transformed their own school environment.

Regularly, IDRA staff provides services to:

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✦ parents
✦ administrators
✦ other decision makers in public education

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