



Focus: Fair Funding

<i>School Principal Discusses...Transformation</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>More Texas Students Are Taking College...Exams</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program National Institute</i>	<i>7</i>

Prospects for Texas School Finance Reforms in 2011

by Albert Cortez, Ph.D.

IDRA has been involved in school finance reform in Texas since the day it was founded. And while much progress had been made in the 1990s, recent actions by the Texas Supreme Court and the Texas Legislature have led to a significant slip-page in the extent of funding equity among school districts. And the current historic shortfall in state revenue may lead to further erosion during the 2011 Texas legislative session. This all may well set the stage for a new round of legal challenges that could be filed as early as this summer.

As the Texas legislature reconvenes this month, school finance is one of several major policy challenges it will need to address. Topping the list is how policymakers will come up with the estimated \$27 billion needed to balance the biennial budget, assuming no increases are provided to any programs.

Rainy Day Fund

While over \$9 billion sits in the state's "rainy day" fund, political leaders have already declared that the fund will not be the first avenue tapped to deal with the projected deficit. Though not yet taking a hard line regarding how much of the rainy day fund may be used to balance the 2012-13 state budget, many in Austin assume that it will not be fully used despite the projected shortfall. And some have indicated they would rather leave it untouched.

Even if the entire rainy day fund were tapped, additional revenue or cuts in programs would need to be made to balance the budget. With a majority of House and Senate conservatives committed to not raising additional taxes, the possibility of cuts in funding – including cuts in k-12 public school funding – are likely.

Across-the-Board Cuts

If cuts to public education are proposed, the battle will center on how the cuts are made and which school districts will be hurt the most. Some policymakers have suggested making across-the-board cuts in all schools using a flat percentage of state aid as the cutting tool. The problem with such an approach is that it would impact school districts in very different ways. School districts that are most dependent on state aid (low and moderate wealth school districts) would suffer the deepest cuts, while those that are least dependent on state funding (high wealth school districts) would experience lower cuts in funding.

For example, if a school district's state aid was \$7,000 per student and the state were to cut funding 10 percent across the board for all schools, that school district would lose \$700 per student. On the other hand, if a school district only received \$700 per student in state aid, it would lose only \$70 per student. In other words a poor school district could lose as much as 10 times the amount of revenue as a wealthy district. Such an approach
(cont. on Page 2)

“In one school district in Texas, a classroom of 25 students has 250,000 fewer dollars for the education of its children than does another district. We cannot wait any longer to demand fair funding and close equity gaps.”

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

(Prospects for Texas School Finance Reforms in 2011, continued from Page 1)

would have a devastating effect on the extent of funding equity in the Texas school system.

Recent calculations developed by the Equity Center found that funding disparities between the state's 100 poorest and 100 wealthiest school districts grew to \$2,674 per student in the 2009-10 school year. (Equity Center, 2010a&b)

State-Sanctioned Loopholes

Two features in the current Texas funding plan are the major causes for the growing inequity. One is the continued use of *target revenue* as the driver for determining state aid for most school districts. Target revenue in turn is largely based on what school districts were spending in the 2005-06 school year without any adjustments built in for inflation or new state requirements adopted since 2006.

The second confounder is the continued use of *hold harmless* funding, which provides school districts state funding for which they are no longer eligible under existing school finance formulae. Most hold harmless provisions date back to reforms adopted in 1993 when the legislature provided so-called "transition funding" to high wealth school districts that would have received less state and local revenue under the revised school finance plan adopted in response to equalization litigation.

These hold harmless provisions were first extended beyond the projected expiration dates and eventually were made permanent in subsequent legislation, providing hundreds of millions of dollars in state aid to school districts that would otherwise not qualify for such funding.

The state further squandered money by distribut-

ing funds "outside the system," meaning funding was distributed to school districts without running it through the official funding formulae that adjust state aid in direct proportion to a school district's local property wealth. While this outside-the-system funding did not increase inequity (since school districts got the same amount of funding per student), it wasted opportunities to provide funding to school districts that were most in need and least able to raise local revenue to cover increasing costs. (Cortez, 2009)

The recent adoption of increased student performance standards, incorporated into House Bill 3 adopted in 2009, has created even greater pressure on school districts to improve student performance but with no comparable increases in state funding.

The state has countered school district complaints about lack of funding by releasing a study of school "efficiencies and effectiveness." Conducted by the state comptroller using economics-based "value-added" models, the report was released on the eve of the 2011 session. It rated all Texas schools and school districts on a five-point rating scale. Only 36 (3.5 percent) school districts received 5-star ratings. An additional 77 got a rating of 4.5. The great majority of school districts were rated as 3 or lower. (Texas State Comptroller's Office, 2010)

The "efficiency and cost-effectiveness" ratings themselves are inconsistent with existing school accountability ratings and do little to provide the support needed to help schools provide needed services. Unfortunately, this report will likely be used to justify unfair cuts or minimal funding for all schools. Should this occur, we can justifiably expect schools to launch a new round of legal challenges to the Texas funding plan with plain-

tiffs including not only low and average wealth school districts, but also some above average wealth districts, where leaders have become frustrated with lack of state leadership on this issue.

Resources

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Courageous Connections...



School Principal Discusses the Dramatic Transformation of His School An Interview with Dr. Lucious Brown

Editor's Note: Here, we present a new feature in the IDRA Newsletter, "Courageous Connections." IDRA's Quality Schools Action Framework emphasizes connections among schools and communities to secure success for all students. In this interview, Dr. Lucious Brown, principal of John F. Kennedy Middle School in Atlanta, talks about how partnering in the community, engaging students and building teaching quality has led to dramatic school transformation.

When Dr. Brown, first arrived at the school, changes were just beginning to occur. The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* describes the school's history: "For nearly a decade, Atlanta's Kennedy Middle School exhibited all the signs of a failing school. Test scores were subpar, teacher morale was low and the principal's office seemingly had a revolving door. Students roamed chaotic hallways. Broken furniture littered the building." (Badertscher & Staples, 2010)

The following interview was conducted recently by Sulema Carreón-Sánchez, M.A., an IDRA senior education associate. This interview is also available through the IDRA Classnotes Podcast (via iTunes or <http://www.idra.org/Podcasts/>).

Ms. Carreón-Sánchez: J.F. Kennedy Middle School has received a lot of attention and awards lately for its transformation. What are those awards?

Dr. Brown: A few of them are Georgia's Superintendent Distinguished Achievement Award, Trailblazers Award, we made AYP for three consecutive years, Atlanta Families Award for our partnership with Coca-Cola and IDRA, Atlanta Families Award for Excellence in Education, and the Panasonic National Change Award.

Ms. Carreón-Sánchez: And you also were named the Principal the Year from the Parent Teacher Association last year. Now, let's look back a bit. What was the school like when you got here four years ago?

Dr. Brown: If you can image a dimly lit building. When you walked into the main office, there were a couple of broken pictures and some

broken furniture. Not inviting at all, so you know if wasn't inviting for parents. It definitely wouldn't be inviting for children. It was very chaotic, with no systems in place.

Ms. Carreón-Sánchez: What did you see were the key areas to focus on?

Dr. Brown: One was community capacity building because we didn't have the community's support. Another was to build school capacity among the teachers.

Ms. Carreón-Sánchez: I know you have set-up an innovative partnership with some nearby colleges that involve college tutors to your middle school students. How is that working? And how did it get started?

Dr. Brown: Initially, when I arrived, the school had one partnership. It was so sad that they didn't have a contact name listed, they just had a phone number. So I called and found out it was a funeral home. Then, I sought some help from local agencies. For example, we now have Spellman College, we have Clark Atlanta, and we have an outstanding partnership with Georgia Tech. They continue to provide outstanding service with their students. We have a partnership with Coca-Cola, and we are very proud with our relationship with Coca-Cola and IDRA for the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program, where our students go to another elementary school to provide services for their students as well.

Ms. Carreón-Sánchez: Now, Dr. Brown there is a lot of talk across the country implying that poor students can't learn or that schools can't teach students who are poor. What do you say to that?

Dr. Brown: First of all I'll say very simply that they are wrong. As you know, when I first arrived here, our children were not learning at the rate that they should. But I don't think that it was because of the children; it was because of poor leadership.

When we sat down initially with Dr. Bradley Scott [from IDRA], I didn't know much about the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program at that time.



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funded by the U.S. Department of Education to serve the state of Texas

(School Principal Discusses the Dramatic Transformation of His School, continued from Page 3)

However, I continued to read about it. And once I read about its true intention of actually making sure children remained in school and focusing on those students who are “high risk” – and all our children are high risk in this particular area – and once we sat down and talked about all the main structures, we decided this can work here. And it has shown that we have increased our levels academically, and we increased our participation in the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program.

Ms. Carreón-Sánchez: Dr. Brown can you talk about a little about the school system indicators in the Quality Schools Action Framework, because I have seen where you are now involving more of the community members and parents and I have seen how students are beginning to become more engaged in school, and your teachers are changing their instruction and how you are aligning the curriculum.

Dr. Brown: One of the indicators that we wanted to work on was parent involvement and community engagement. I don’t think the school can be successful without the involvement of parents. And that is part of the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program. Before, we didn’t have a community that actually came out. Now we continually invite community members in. You don’t need to make an appointment. We just want you to come in and see the school, because the school is really a microcosm of its community.

Another is the student engagement piece, which we bring about incentives to ensure that they have a bar to reach and make sure it’s ongoing, not just at the beginning of the year or the middle of year, but also at the end.

Teaching quality comes to play with our true framework of understanding. I tell teachers all the time, it is not what you know, it’s about what the students don’t know. I know you have gone to college. I want to know what the students don’t know. So you shouldn’t be the one doing all the talking. So we focus on that part of the framework.

The curriculum quality and access indicator means making sure high quality curriculum is available to them. It can’t be available to them if we are not giving it to them and providing a quality education for all the students.

Ms. Carreón-Sánchez: IDRA has been working with Kennedy Middle School to imple-

ment the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program. Regarding the program here at Kennedy, what has struck you about this program and what it has done for your students?

Dr. Brown: Of course, one of the outcomes is to keep children in school. And we’ve seen what the program does as it relates to focusing on students coming to school, coming to school consistently, maintaining good attendance, and maintaining grade point averages throughout –not just because they want to be a part of the program, but because it’s the right thing to do. The Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program continues to focus on this issue, and it provides student success in preparing them for college. It’s one of my dreams to have the Coca-Cola Valued Youth in all of our high schools to actually follow-up with those children. Most of all we want to focus on student success. One way to measure that success is to have them graduate on time and to enter college.

Ms. Carreón-Sánchez: Dr. Brown I know you had a visitor from the Department of Georgia to come and visit your campus. Can you tell us a little bit about what she said and observed as she walked the halls at Kennedy Middle School?

Dr. Brown: We were very proud to have a Georgia State Superintendent, Ms. Kathy Cox, coming to our building. When she walked around, she saw how it was very conducive and enlightening and the framework that was being implemented. She also just got an understanding of how children are learning at such a higher rate. She was very pleased with that.

Ms. Carreón-Sánchez: Dr. Brown is there anything else you would like to share with us regarding Kennedy Middle School and the transformation that has happened during your four-year tenure here at Kennedy Middle School?

Dr. Brown: I would just say that it was truly a mammoth task, but it wasn’t just me. It was about surrounding yourself with outstanding people and making sure you have the right people on the bus and getting the wrong people off the bus. And I want to say thank you to IDRA Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program for saying we will stay here with you and stick with you, rather than giving up on the program here when the process wasn’t working initially. Because I think if we had given up on the program, we would be giving up on the children. So thank you.

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- Classnotes Podcast: Interview with Dr. Lucious Brown
- Resources on education policy for fair funding

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For more information, contact IDRA or visit http://www.idra.org/Coca-Cola_Valued_Youth_Program.html. Also see the story on Page 7.

Resources

Badertscher, N., & G.B. Staples. “Some schools rise from mess to model – Stability in principal’s office a factor in Atlanta, Gainesville,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (February 6, 2010).



More Texas Students Are Taking College Entrance and Readiness Exams But Insufficient Investment Results in Continued Performance Gaps

by Albert Cortez, Ph.D.

Advanced Placement Results

The Texas Education Agency (TEA) recently reported on the number of Texas students who took one or more Advanced Placement (AP) tests in 2010 and their performance on this measure of college readiness (21010a). On the whole, the news was encouraging. The number of students taking one or more AP exams rose to 179,320, which was a 12.8 percent increase from the previous year. Even more encouraging were the data showing that the number of minority students taking the exams had grown by 17.3 percent for African American students and by 18.1 percent for Hispanic students. (See graph on next page.)

Also encouraging was the revelation that the number of students who scored a 3 or higher on AP exams had gone up to 153,539, a net increase of 11 percent. This is important because many colleges require a score of at least 3 to consider granting college-level credit for those courses, giving those students a jumpstart on college credit hours and saving families thousands of dollars in tuition costs.

However, not all of the data were encouraging. A critical observation is that, while more students are enrolling in and taking AP classes in Texas schools, the majority are not earning the coveted 3 or higher score. Texas students took 325,571 exams, but the group scored a 3 or higher on only 153,539 of those assessments. This figure means that less than half (47.2 percent) scored at levels reflecting a high degree of mastery of the AP course content.

The varying rates for different groups spark even greater concern. The serious gap observed in graduation and college enrolments between Texas' White students, Hispanic students and African American students is mirrored in AP stats. While three out of five White students earned AP scores of 3 or higher, only two out of five Hispanic students and just one out of four African American students earned comparable scores.

SAT and ACT Results

The need for expanding efforts to better prepare Texas students for college also is reflected in recent reports of Texas students' SAT and ACT performance. The encouraging news reported by TEA is that in 2010 more Texas students took the SAT or ACT college entrance exams, as was the case with AP classes.

On the SAT, the number of test takers increased from about 107,000 to 117,000 (8.8 percent). Also encouraging was the fact that the increase in test taking was highest among minority students, where 10 percent increases in numbers of test takers were twice those among White students.

Similar increases in the overall numbers of test takers were reported on the ACT exam in 2010. According to TEA, "92,615 students in the class of 2010 took the ACT compared to 82,640 members of the class of 2009, a net gain of 12.1 percent over the prior year" (2010b&c). The state also reported that in 2010 a total of 188,209 high school underclassmen took the ACT exam, which was an 18 percent increase over the number of students taking the exam in 2009.

On the negative side, the comparison of mean SAT scores for the state's major student subgroups indicates the persistence of notable gaps in the scores. In 2010, the average SAT reading scores for White test takers was 522 compared to 452 for Mexican Americans (a 70-point gap) and 433 for "Other Hispanic" students (an 89-point gap). The performance gap was even higher for African American test takers, whose average reading score was 424, reflecting a gap of 98 points.

The performance gap also was evident in SAT math scores, where the mean score for White students was 543, compared to 476 for Mexican American students (a 76-point gap) and 457 for "Other Hispanics" (an 86-point gap), and 437 for African American students (a 106-point gap).

(cont. on Page 6)

Data on student performance indicate that simply getting more students into AP classes or taking the college entrance exams is not enough.

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(More Texas Students Are Taking College Entrance and Readiness Exams, continued from Page 5)

On the ACT exam, TEA reported that in 2010 the average composite score for White students was 23.1, while the average score for Hispanic students was 18.3 and for African American students was 17.3.

Implications

On the positive side, it appears that state and local school efforts to expand minority student participation in AP classes and to encourage them to sign up for and take the ACT and SAT exams does seem to be having a positive impact.

Data on student performance, however, indicate that simply getting more students into AP classes or taking the college entrance exams is not enough. While some small gains have been made in both areas, the achievement gaps among minority students and White students meeting criterion standards on the college entrance exams indicate that more targeted improvement is needed. Otherwise, the state will continue to struggle to meet its college enrollment and graduation goals outlined in the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board's ambitious Closing the Gap (CTG) targets (2000).

According to the coordinating board's latest progress report: "In the first nine years of CTG, state-wide participation increased by 401,476 students. That leaves the state with six years to close 36 percent (or 229,007) of the 630,000-student gap in enrollment by 2015... Hispanics had the largest numeric and percentage increases in enrollment from 2000 to 2009 among the three major ethnic groups. But with a participation rate of just 4.4 percent of Texas' total Hispanic population in 2009, their enrollment lags the most in meeting the CTG participation target" (THECB, 2010).

Given that Hispanic students also constitute the largest and fastest growing proportion of Texas school population, this lag in meeting targets portends serious under-education issues for the state over the long term. The state's failure to meet its higher education goals will have serious social and economic implications that will impact not only the state's minority communities but all persons residing in the state over the next few decades.

Among the issues worthy of examination is the quality of AP offerings being provided to different student groups within and across school districts, including credentials and experience of teach-

ers delivering those AP classes. On the college entrance exam issue, it may be necessary to reassess the quantity and quality of any supplementary support being provided to ACT and SAT test takers in Texas high schools. While there are costs associated with most efforts to improve test taking and performance, failure to address these critical issues in the near future has even greater long-term (and negative) consequences for everyone in this state.

Other changes needed may include the creation of state and local goals on the numbers of students taking AP and college entrance exams and related goals for the percentages of students scoring at 3 or higher on AP exams as well as targets for the number of students scoring at or above criterion levels on college level exams.

Finally, while goal setting may provide visible targets and measures of progress toward students' college readiness, it is important to recognize that all facets of school operation are inter-related (see Robledo Montecel & Goodman, 2010) and require coordinated efforts that include governance and school leadership, teacher preparation and support, equitable funding, and parent engagement to meet those stated goals. Especially in an economy as constricted as it seems to be in Texas, investment in today's future workforce will pay great dividends over the long term, just as neglecting the promise of increasing college enrollment will create long-term costs and lost revenues.

Resources

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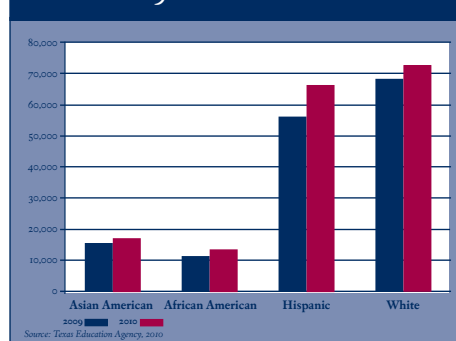
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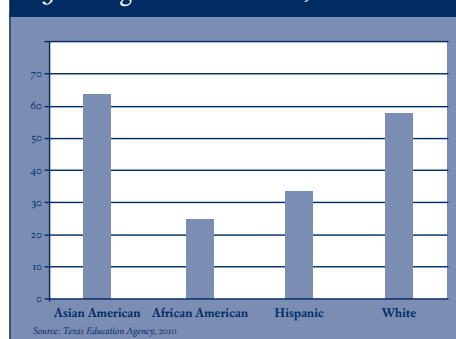
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Number of Texas Students Taking the AP Test 2009 and 2010



Percent of Texas Students Who Earned a 3 or Higher on AP Tests, 2010



Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. *Closing the Gaps Progress Report 2010* (Austin, Texas: Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, June 2010).

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

Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program National Institute Held in Atlanta

This year, the IDRA's annual Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program National Institute was held in Atlanta in October. The program highlighted Kennedy Middle School, which has implemented the program for several years (see feature on Page 3).

The institute included a day for school district representatives, community members and state agency staff to see the program in action as students from Kennedy Middle School tutored their elementary "tutees." Participants also learned how to implement a program in their districts. The event also brought together current program implementers from across the country to

plan together and share successes, highlights and approaches they are using to make the program successful.

The IDRA Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program is a research-based, internationally-recognized dropout prevention program that has kept 98 percent of its tutors in school. "The Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program exemplifies IDRA's asset-based approach. The program is based on the creed that all students are valuable, none is expendable," stated Dr. María "Cuca" Robledo Montecel, IDRA president and CEO. "It has maintained a less than 2 percent dropout rate, which is an incredible legacy."

At a reception during the institute, Ms. Ingrid Saunders Jones, chairperson of the Coca-Cola Foundation, and Kirk Glaze, the community affairs manager for North America, attended the event. Many parents and students from Kennedy Middle School attended, as did teachers and administrators from participating sites. Dr. Robledo Montecel presented Ingrid Saunders Jones with a gift that represented 27 years of partnership with the Coca-Cola Foundation and the Coca-Cola Company.

For more information, contact IDRA or visit http://www.idra.org/Coca_Cola_Valued_Youth_Program.html/.



María Robledo Montecel, IDRA President; Ingrid Saunders Jones, The Coca-Cola Foundation Chair; and Kirk Glaze, The Coca-Cola Foundation Community Affairs Manager for North America at the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program National Institute in Atlanta.



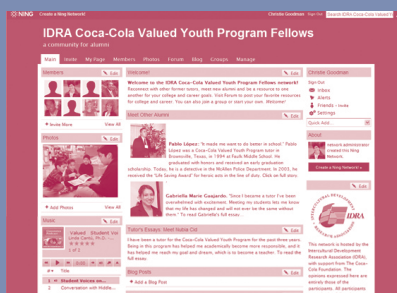
Tutors in Atlanta work with their tutors.



Representatives of the program in Ector County, Texas, participate in the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program National Institute.

We are looking for former Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program tutors!

The Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program has been in existence for 27 years, and we have created a free web site for former tutors to network with each other and to support each other in areas such as getting to college and employment. If you know former tutors, have them contact us at 210-444-1710 or Coca-ColaVYP@idra.org





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Focus: Fair Funding

“We must ensure that any new or revised funding plan provides equitable access to excellent education (to high quality curricula, good teaching, support services, and facilities) for all students in all school districts.”

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

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