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Focus: Governance Efficacy

Expanding School Governance through Participatory Community Engagement

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

Schools belong to their communities. Governance is the mechanism through which a community claims ownership of schools. In our democracy, governance – as the governing body made up of elected officials – exists at the will of the community, becoming the voice through which a community speaks with educators. Most existing governance models are described in terms of relationships between a school board and a superintendent. Governance roles are primarily concentrated on policymaking, public relations and fiscal guardianship. Yet, unlike in other types of organizations, the owners here often are seen as intruders or are excluded from participating in most internal decision-making.

We propose that students and communities are better served through a governance model where existing roles remain with the school board, but the community becomes involved in four additional roles that are particularly important for greater public support and accountability for student achievement. As a community-engaging endeavor, governance begins at the grassroots level and cannot be limited to the school board. It manifests itself as an ongoing and living process throughout a school district's hierarchical structures with intentional and participatory community engagement designed to empower the voice of parents and community.

A principal once said, "If you want to be successful in a school with culturally and linguistically diverse students, co-create a school culture of

high expectations with students, teachers, parents and community, and the rest will fall into place." One can ponder about the interpretation of this statement, particularly the second part. What did the principal mean by "co-create a school culture of high expectations" and "the rest will fall into place"? These profound thoughts with multi-layered ramifications encapsulate what we know about successful schools for minority and low-income students.

This article provides a scenario where students, parents and community expand the role of governance beyond that of policymaking to a more inclusive community governance model where parents and students play four major roles: (1) as co-designers; (2) as partners and critical friends in the educational process; (3) as pro-active feedback providers; and (4) as gatekeepers and guardians of success. This community governance model, embodied in IDRA's Quality Schools Action Framework (Robledo Montecel & Goodman, 2010), correctly marks three levers of change – accountable leadership, enlightened public policy and engaged citizens – as a powerful triad upon which rests the foundation of strong schools.

Parents and Community as Co-Designers

A school culture is defined by a set of expectations based on equity and excellence, stakeholders' (cont. on Page 2)

"Maintaining urgency and clarity in sustainable education reform depends in large measure on community will and informed engagement at the local community level. Schools after all, belong to the community, and change is too important to be left to schools alone."

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



relationships and roles, community aspirations, quality of instruction, and holding itself accountable for high student academic achievement. In the best of worlds, this culture is co-created by stakeholders, including students, parents, community leaders and educators. Co-creation means co-ownership. And as co-owners, each stakeholder has a responsibility to play his or her role in a manner that does not allow the school to fail nor, for that matter, is the stakeholder allowed to fail.

Co-creating a school culture requires parent and community involvement in visioning, assuming specific roles to partner for success, engagement in shared goal-setting and decision-making with teachers and students, and shared accountability for support and commitment. Once stakeholders share the passion and commitment to succeed and claim ownership of the school, shared expectations can be realized.

Parents and Community as Partners and Critical Friends in the Educational Process

Having parents and community as partners and critical friends with educators requires recognition of the value and contributions of each stakeholder in making the education enterprise a success. Partnership entails acknowledgement, respect and honoring of each others' contributions in making education work for each student. It also means tapping into diverse assets and strengths of a culturally diverse community to strengthen the teaching and learning process at every level.

Parents and teachers, in collaboration with students when appropriate, set goals and monitor their accomplishments. With the support of parents and community, teachers and administrators are now empowered to make a positive difference in

the lives of students.

Parents and Community as Pro-Active Feedback Providers

Research has confirmed the benefits of a well-planned system that engages parents as providers of feedback as an integral part of continuous improvement. Parents and community often make themselves available to work with the school, but their support becomes more evident when schools are facing difficulties. Our children's success requires no less than our full commitment to make sure that parents and community are fully informed and have mechanisms for providing input with regularity throughout the year and at key decision points.

Parents and Community as Gatekeepers and Guardians of Success

For this article, *parents and community as gatekeepers* serve different purposes, primarily to ensure that: (1) failure is not an option; (2) equity and excellence becomes a school's mantra and practice; (3) every student is engaged, none are unattended; (4) everyone graduates ready for college and career; and (5) the sanctity of the school as a center of learning that fuels progress in the community is maintained. As guardians of success, parents and community keep tabs on progress achieved by all stakeholders and become co-catalysts for change. Accountability is shared; all stakeholders collectively assess success, reflect on the actions taken or needed, and redirect efforts to increase a school's effectiveness.

Nothing is impossible for a principal with the complete and unabashed support of parents and community. A community governance structure assumes that the responsibility for education rests

in shared accountability to ensure equity and excellence where all children – regardless of economic status or ethnicity – graduate ready for college and the workforce. This means reclaiming ownership of our schools, taking time to share our leadership and getting involved.

As diverse stakeholders in this process, we must begin a new, enlightened relationship with educators based on mutual respect and recognition that parents are leaders and advocates for quality education who are willing to partner with educators in making equity and excellence a reality. Parents possess unique gifts that, when coupled with those of educators, become a powerful force. The reality in our schools is such that we must purposefully create mechanisms to engage in new relationships with one another, planning and co-designing the future for our children.

Resources

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

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Courageous Connections...

Connecting Every Student to a Meaningful Future

An interview Dr. Daniel P. King, Superintendent of the Pharr-San Juan-Alamo School District

Editor's Note: In this "Courageous Connections" feature, IDRA senior education associate, Aurelio Montemayor, M.Ed., interviews Dr. Daniel P. King, superintendent of the Pharr-San Juan-Alamo (PSJA) school district in south Texas. Dr. King highlights how he used actionable knowledge to keep students in school, graduating college ready. Below is an excerpt of their conversation, edited for space. The full interview is available through the IDRA Classnotes Podcast (via iTunes or <http://www.idra.org/Podcasts/>) and in video at IDRA's Courageous Connections website (http://www.idra.org/Courageous_Connections/).

Dr. King on Actionable Knowledge: When I first arrived in PSJA in 2007, one of the things that really stood out was the dropout rate, which was double the state average. The district was losing close to 500 students a year. Losing one drop out is unacceptable; 500 was overwhelming. I wanted to know everything we had about them in our system: What was their age and grade level? Were they migrant students or English language learners? I wanted to see if there were any patterns in the data.

One thing that I expected to see and did was a number of students who never made it past the ninth grade. But those were less than half of the problem. What really caught me off guard, and maybe it shouldn't because I had seen this in statewide data, was that almost 40 percent of dropouts in PSJA were actually seniors. The number of seniors not meeting graduation requirements was increasing, and the district did not have an effective way of handling it. In the class of 2007, a little over 230 seniors had not graduated, mostly failing the science and math exit exams, being a couple of credits short, or both.

Dr. King on Taking Action on the Data: I could have written this off as the previous superintendent's problem. But it had to be addressed immediately – if we didn't do something, 230 students who had not graduated in May were going to be lost. What do we do with those students?

My first thought was to do what we were already doing, but do it better and harder. In Hidalgo when

I was a high school principal at a small school, I just went out and got these kids and convinced them and their parents to come back. But those were small numbers, and as the principal I could make sure to follow-through and make sure it was taken care of.

In this large district, all three of the comprehensive high schools were struggling in AYP [adequate yearly progress] and were going down those stages with many other issues of discipline, attendance and academic performance. I thought, "If I can put something together and go out and convince these 230 students to come back and I put them into an environment that's not ready for them, it's not going to work."

Dr. King on the Challenges: There are a lot of challenges with this particular type of student. I wanted to design something that would meet this student's needs. I'd been a high school principal, and I knew the challenges. For example, a student may think: "Since, I only need the TAKS test, why do I need to come to school every day? I don't need a credit or a class. I only need to study." But I knew that if a student is weak in math or science, a couple of tutoring sessions and a packet to study on their own was not going to be effective.

Or another student might think: "If I only need one credit, then I only have come one class period." Their context has changed. Socially, these students have moved on with their lives. They have gotten a job and have parents expecting them to be working. Some are getting married.

From a practical school point of view, there is no per pupil (ADA) funding for one class period, and students must come at least two hours to generate a half-day of funding.

Dr. King on Student Needs Driving the Response: I needed to meet this age group's needs tied either to a partnership with employers or a partnership with area colleges. If this student only needs to pass one test, why can't he or she start
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(Connecting Every Student to a Meaningful Future – An Interview with Dr. Daniel P. King, continued from Page 3)

college classes right now with test preparation part of the day and college courses the rest?

We put together a dual enrollment model with South Texas College, an initiative that began originally aiming for the top 10 percent of students.

When we started with this dropout recovery initiative, many said: “We’ve tried before, and it hasn’t worked.” But we were intense, intensive and intentional. We did newspaper ads, radio and door-to-door – a whole-scale community awareness campaign – and door-to-door invitations to parents and students encouraging students to come back. I personally met with students and parents. There was a lot of excitement.

Dr. King on PSJA’s Solution: Our new campus is called the College Career and Technology Academy. Notice that we gave it a college focus, with future focused words. We enrolled 223 of the 237. That first year, we had 49 complete in December and about 72 in May. More than 120 completed high school in nine months. They had left school, and we recovered them successfully.

We’ve expanded our vision and looked back at the other students we had lost. Fortunately, in 2007 the legislature passed a provision providing full funding to schools for students through the age of 26. We embarked on that very aggressively and succeeded. Schools all over the Valley and Texas have now opened similar schools.

In just under four years, we have graduated well over 700 young people ages 18 to 26 who otherwise would not have a high school diploma. Over 120 were above the age of 21, young adults who were lost for years. We’ve gotten them back, and they earned their high school diplomas.

Our students graduate with an average of six college credits. It gets their feet in the door. All graduate with the college readiness course. We’re strengthening the model, and about half of the students we graduate from this high school continue in college, which is pretty close to the ratio of area high schools.

One example is a 26-year-old young man who took two semesters to complete his high school diploma. He went to STC and soon became the student of the week. He’ll be graduating this spring with his associate degree in criminal justice.

Dr. King on Governance Efficacy: I was able to

convince my staff about this for two reasons: *renewed vision* and *proven success*. Most people come into the education profession with high ideals of wanting to help young people. Over the years, frustration sets in because of barriers and dead ends. I’ve approached everyone with the message: “We’ve got all the talent here, in our teachers, our administrative team and our students. We can do these things. Our students can achieve their dreams. Our students can do as well as students anywhere else.”

We took on our biggest challenge – dropouts – and turned it completely around. We convinced by boldly going forward, and the success has been amazing. In two years, we went from having double the state dropout rate to half the state rate and from being a drag on the state and the region to leading by bringing up the state dropout average. In three years, we cut the dropout number almost 85 percent from almost 500 to less than 100. Our number of high school graduates has almost doubled from 966 in 2006-07 to 1,800 this last school year. There’s a saying that holds true for teachers, administrators and students: “Nothing motivates like success.”

We applied what we learned to the regular high schools and have dual credit on all campuses now, and we have more than tripled dual enrollment on some campuses. Our goal is for every student to have dual credit by the time they graduate. This spring, we have more than 1,600 students taking dual enrollment out of 7,800 students. We expect 2,000 by next year.

Dr. King on College for Everyone: Our goal is to connect every single student to a meaningful future, college and career ready, and on a college track before they leave us. We pay for transition counselors housed at the local colleges to make sure the student’s first year is successful. Transition from high school to college will be the same as from elementary to middle school and from middle school to high school: the automatic, standard expectation for all of our students. We won’t be satisfied until every one of our students is going to college. By the way, 99 percent of our families are Latino and 86 percent are low-income. Our students are just as good as any others across the state.

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What a Principal Can Do to Create a College-Going Culture

by Nilka Avilés, Ed.D.

Usually, the more educated its people are, the more advanced a nation can be financially, culturally and scientifically. When compared to ranked global nations, the level of education in the United States is not competitive, revealing a need to systemically change how we educate an increasingly diverse student population and shift to a more inclusive paradigm that helps us move forward.

Consequently, as a nation, we should act to ensure that our educational system emphasizes equity and excellence to increase the overall academic achievement of all students as well as to eliminate achievement gaps and prepare students for both the workplace and a rigorous university curriculum.

We need every school to operate with a college-going culture where the expectation is that all students will be prepared to enroll in and successfully complete college courses while in high school, to enter a post-secondary institution and to fulfill the requirements of their chosen career.

Where do we begin? First, we must convey to the community and to students a genuine and shared belief among all school staff that every student can achieve and will be provided a college preparatory curriculum. In other words, a school operating in a college-going culture mode provides opportunities and hope for all students regardless of students' socioeconomic or ethnic background, the language they speak, or the community in which they reside.

A college-going culture cultivates valuing attitudes about students and provides an environment where students and their families are encouraged to seek college information, access resources, cultivate high aspirations and ultimately obtain a college degree. Through this process, discovery of the tools needed to enhance access and success can be achieved.

School personnel and community leaders must actively engage in the process to ensure this preparation becomes a reality for all students

(Robledo Montecel, 2010). The main goal is for students to believe in themselves by building the confidence that is necessary as they plan for a great future. Students must prepare academically, socially and emotionally for the options that can lead to a creative and better life after high school.

Lyndon B. Johnson stated: "We must open the doors of opportunity. But we must also equip our people to walk through those doors." Early college plans are most vital in determining whether students will be trained and prepared to learn the in's and out's of college and be successful in navigating its systems.

A college-going culture transforms the school climate and transcends negative stereotypes to provide all students the option and realization that they can and will succeed in college if they are prepared. The school leadership team must be committed to building and fostering this culture to develop a stronger community that will excel and improve economically.

There are certain key elements and non-negotiable steps that must be in place to build a college-going culture in a school, particularly at the secondary level, to assist students and parents (Avilés & Garza, 2010). As a former school principal and as a recent director of the Early College High School initiative at a university, I saw that these key elements were in place at the schools where I have worked. One of the productive outcomes was that 93 percent to 97 percent of students pursued enrollment in a two- or four-year institution (Avilés, 2007). Here are some essential elements.

- Foster an environment that reinforces to students the importance of achieving a post-secondary career and how this will be accomplished. The school, the community and the home should share with students the same message of support in meeting the high expectations placed before them for a brighter
(cont. on Page 6)

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(What a Principal Can Do to Create a College-Going Culture, continued from Page 5)

future.

- Build capacity among students, parents and community members with pro-active empowerment and a genuine guidance program that increases students' understanding and competencies needed to succeed in college.
- Teach students early that they are capable of succeeding in college as they start building their confidence and developing college aspirations.
- Help students trust their educators by eliminating preconceived notions of which students will succeed or not succeed. Students trust educators who have high academic expectations and standards for all and who provide individualized support services as well as boost opportunities and access through optimum guidance on how to successfully navigate the unfamiliar world of college.
- Build caring and positive relationships with all students and demand that they meet the high expectations and rigor of a curriculum that will prepare them for college. Provide a genuine support system focused on success through persistence, willpower and commitment. This is one of the most important aspects that can make a profound difference in students' lives. These positive relationships must be extended to students' families as they will provide additional support to them and to the school.
- Support everyone in the school to invest in becoming knowledgeable and making time to share information on a wide variety of college-related topics. From the custodian and cafeteria worker to the superintendent, everyone should be collectively committed to increasing and enhancing students' college goals.
- Ensure that everyone in the school reinforces the following formula: Determination + Self-Discipline + Academic Focus = Success. In addition, place all kinds of posters and slogans on the walls of classrooms and hallways, and use college lingo as part of the everyday vocabulary connected to the curriculum content being taught.
- Have discussions with students and parents to help them understand that life brings many obstacles and challenges, and that how we face them is what leads to successful outcomes. Seeking help when needed is critical to getting the right support to overcome obstacles. Students and parents should be counseled: "For every barrier there is a solution. Do not allow

anything to derail your dream of attending and graduating from college." (Avilés, Rodríguez & Villarreal, in press)

- Set up a comprehensive school counseling program that emulates the understanding of students' funds of knowledge and that of their families as they convey assets and interconnect with the conditions that influence classroom instruction and administrative practices.
- Establish partnerships with nearby colleges that can provide a shared wealth of information, resources and facilities to support secondary students and their families to become familiar with and begin to navigate the college system. A positive partnership should include a comprehensive plan in preparation for college assessments and a well-aligned high school and college curriculum. This will ensure students have the necessary reading, writing and math skills as they learn to work collaboratively, apply critical thinking and problem solving skills to the relevant courses of studies.

Building a college-going culture in schools is especially important where students are traditionally underserved and underrepresented in higher learning. College prep high schools have common characteristics: (1) a belief in the potential of every student to succeed in college; (2) a determination to succeed as a school with a college-going culture; (3) much self-discipline to address numerous barriers that may appear during the planning and implementation phase; and (4) academic focus, hard work and commitment that are shared by all school personnel to ensure that all students are treated with respect and are provided the support necessary to become successful.

Resources

Avilés-Reyes, N. Examining the Components of the Early College High School Model and the Impact on the Participants in the Program, doctoral dissertation (San Antonio, Texas: University of Texas at San Antonio, 2007).

Avilés-Reyes, N., & E. Garza. "Early College High School: A Model of Success for High School Redesign," *International Journal of Urban Educational Leadership* (2010) 4(2), 1-13.

Avilés, N., & R. Rodríguez, A. Villarreal. *Achieve College - Hacia Adelante! - A Guide for College Access* (San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development Research Association, in press).

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http://www.idra.org/Texas_IDRA_PIRC.htm

Nilka Avilés, Ed.D., is an IDRA senior education associate. Comments and questions may be directed to her via e-mail at comment@idra.org

News from IDRA's Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program

Tutor Receives Wingate Presidential Scholarship

Kayla Rugg of Cumberland County Schools, North Carolina, has been accepted to Wingate University with a Presidential Scholarship of \$50,000. Kayla was a tutor in IDRA's Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program last year. She received third prize in our high school tutor essay contest. "I have discovered that when my tutees see that I am doing well in school, they also strive to do well," wrote Kayla Rugg. "This has been an extremely good motivator for me. I never dreamed that I could possibly make a 3.8 grade point average. Thanks to those young children, I am a much better person than ever. It makes me feel as though anything is possible." Her full essay is online at: http://www.idra.org/Coca-Cola_Valued_Youth_Program.



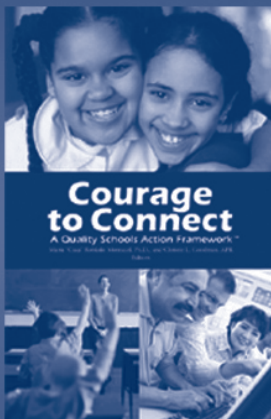
Tutor Goes on YouTube to Share His Experience as a Tutor

Kwame' Weatherall, of the Houston Independent School District, is featured in a YouTube video talking about how the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program made a difference in his life. He received first place in IDRA's high school tutor essay contest last year. In his essay, Kwame' wrote: "Ever since I joined this program, my attitude has changed toward helping people who are in need or struggling... When I see a smile from my tutees, it gives me the sign that I am a great person as a role model and as a growing man." The video is available online at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GFYbdCClkCA>.



More Stories Being Added to the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program Fellows Networking Website

IDRA is compiling more success stories like these through our Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program Fellows website. If you know former Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program tutors, please have them contact IDRA. The Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program has been in existence for 26 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.



Courage to Connect A Quality Schools Action Framework™

Edited by Maria "Cuca" Robledo Montecel, Ph.D.,
and Christie L. Goodman, APR

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

"I believe it is time to dream together – to dream about education not for a lucky few but for all. And it is time to make the dream of education for all become fact."

– Dr. Maria Robledo Montecel, IDRA President & CEO

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Focus: Governance Efficacy

“Schools are not poor because the children in them are poor or black or brown. Schools are poor because we have poor policies, poor practices and inadequate investments.”

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

Intercultural Development Research Association

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