



# Fair Funding of Schools

## Why and With What Results

### Inside this Issue:

- ✧ **Using ARRA stimulus funds**
- ✧ **Grand prize winning student essay**
- ✧ **Culturally-relevant teaching**
- ✧ **Welcoming families at the school's front door**



**by Albert Cortez, Ph.D.**

School finance reform has been pivotal to IDRA's work to improve educational opportunities for all students. It was initially our primary focus, and the organization has since expanded its reform efforts to include extensive work in the areas of professional development for teachers and administrators, supporting expanded parent involvement, and encouraging improved student engagement and graduation in schools. Promoting and sustaining school finance equity however has remained a constant area of focus in IDRA's 36-year history.

This article examines the following critical questions about school finance equity and offers lessons learned during the course of our long involvement in this area: Why is funding considered so crucial for providing excellent and equitable education for all children? Does money really make all that much of a difference in the educational opportunities provided to students, and does it convert to improved outcomes? If it does, then how does one best achieve equitable funding and how do states best pay for such reforms?

What options are available in states and communities that refuse to modify state funding plans that would ensure all students in all schools have equitable opportunities?

### **Recognizing the Need for an Educated Citizenry**

It seems a no-brainer to understand that providing excellent and equitable education requires some level of investment. It is a given that operating schools requires expenditures for school buildings, for textbooks and instructional materials, for teachers and administrators, and for the staff needed to provide a wide array of support as well as to keep records, provide counseling, and maintain school property.

While there is no disagreement about the need to provide funding to support public education in the United States, there has always been dissension about how much funding to provide, for what purposes, and out of what pockets. Concerns about the need to have an educated citizenry in a political system that allocated much of its power to the electorate led to an early agreement to support public education.

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The lack of consensus on the role that the federal government should play in that critical area was reflected in its exclusion from the U.S. Constitution. No doubt an article committing the federal government to support public education in all states would have resulted in a very different educational landscape than the patchwork of state-supported systems that exists today.

The exclusion of an education clause in the U.S. Constitution has resulted in the subsequent creation of state-based and state-controlled systems of public education and, with them, state-specific school funding plans. Research on these systems reveals that no two systems is the same (Augenblick, et al., 2001) with each reflecting the unique evolution of these plans within the contexts of each state's unique history.

## Attendance Requirements and Inequity

In many states, public education was not an option available to all students. As states began to adopt

## With fair funding, everyone benefits by having schools that are excellent and equitable.

compulsory attendance requirements, they also adopted processes for sorting students, such as designating separate school systems for White children and Black children in the South. In the Southwest, a variant created separate school environments for Latino students.

Finding ways to pay for schools that required student attendance, whether segregated or integrated, quickly led to a hodge-podge of state funding plans that varied extensively, ranging from schools funded by the state or primarily by local property taxes.

Texas is one example of that evolutionary process. Describing the early funding plans in the 1970s, legislative researchers note that Texas did not enter the modern era of school funding until 1949 (Texas House Research Organization, 1990; Walker and Kirby, 1986). Spurred by a strong

education governor, a commission recommended major revisions to the heretofore locally-controlled enterprise and recommended the establishment of a "minimum foundation program of state and local financial support" (Cárdenas, 1997).

Known as the *Gilmer-Aiken Act*, this basic funding plan served as the primary vehicle for the support of Texas public schools for a few years until legal challenges to inequalities in public school funding caused the state to review its funding system.

Like many of its counterparts, Texas was plagued by very large differences in educational spending per student. Many of the disparities were attributable to vast differences in the amount and value of taxable property within school systems, which ranged from a few hundred dollars to millions of dollars in taxable revenue

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Publication offices:  
5815 Callaghan Road, Suite 101  
San Antonio, Texas 78228  
210/444-1710; Fax 210/444-1714  
[www.idra.org](http://www.idra.org)    [contact@idra.org](mailto:contact@idra.org)

**María Robledo Montecel, Ph.D.**  
*IDRA President and CEO*  
*Newsletter Executive Editor*

**Christie L. Goodman, APR**  
*IDRA Communications Manager*  
*Newsletter Production Editor*

**Sarah H. Aleman**  
*Secretary*  
*Newsletter Layout*

# Fair Funding

## Dear reader,

School finance equity has been at the forefront of IDRA's work since our founding in 1973. It was clear more than three decades ago that if children were to have a reasonable shot at success in school—whether they were from East Los Angeles or Belvedere, the Bronx or Bronxville, West San Antonio or Highland Park—their schools needed to be funded fairly.

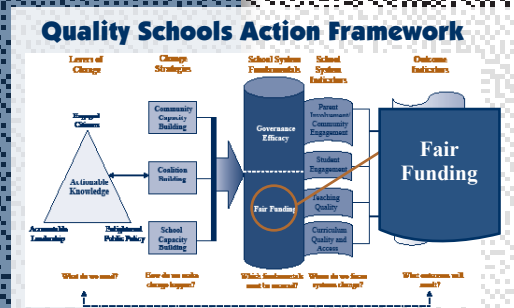
In Texas, poor school districts and advocacy groups struggled with the state for over two decades for equal educational opportunities. Up until these efforts saw real success in 1995, Texas' wealthiest and poorest school districts were separated by a spending gap as large \$7,000 per student per year. That gap added up: in one district, high school students hit the books in an astronomy lab; in another students found holes in the ceiling. Then and now, people resisted substantive change. Looking back at the history of the fight for fair funding in Texas, IDRA founder and director emeritus Dr. José A. Cardenas tells the story of the state educational leader who said, "I know that all kids are equal, but the system has to take into account that some kids are more equal than others."

This idea, that some children are more equal or more deserving of decent schooling than others, must change. This is as true today as it was in 1973, as our nation addresses a new era of funding decisions brought on by the recession and as special interest groups retrench to roll back equity gains that Texans fought so long to achieve.

In "Fair Funding of Schools," Dr. Albert Cortez describes what exactly is at stake in school finance debates and how we must renew our commitment to this issue. The article is complemented by "Strategic Planning for the Effective Use of ARRA Funds," by Dr. Abelardo Villarreal, which examines how schools can use a careful planning process to ensure that this unprecedented federal investment in stimulus funding is spent appropriately, effectively and equitably. Just as our educational system cannot achieve excellence without equity, teaching cannot be considered high quality if some, but not all students, are served. In "Teaching Must be Culturally Relevant to be Quality," Dr. Bradley Scott emphasizes this point, making the case for why teaching quality must be culturally competent, relevant and responsive.

With financial hardship facing the nation, we have the chance as individuals, schools and communities to realign what we spend with what we value. If we value children, then clearly, we must make sure that equitable resources result in an excellent public education that serves each and every child, bar none.

*María Robledo Montecel*



# Student Voices

*IDRA's Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program is celebrating its 25th anniversary in the United States as well as its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary in Brazil. To celebrate these two milestones, IDRA sponsored an essay contest in the United States. Six students received prizes. The grand prize winner, whose essay is below, won an opportunity to represent all U.S. program sites at the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program Brazil's 10th Anniversary Celebration in Rio de Janeiro for herself, her mother, Jamie Starkey Guajardo, and the teacher coordinator, Mr. Lee Ramos, from South San Antonio High School. The celebration was held in April 2009.*

## Since I became a tutor...

*by Gabriella Marie Guajardo, 12th grade, South San Antonio High School*

Since I became a tutor, I've been overwhelmed with excitement. Meeting my students lets me know that my life has changed and will not ever be the same without them.

I mentor a classroom of seven; each of them has a learning disability. In my eyes, I do not see anything wrong with them. When the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program tutors first started visiting the classes and trying to figure out where my classmates and I would get placed, my teacher told me I was going to the class for children with learning disabilities (PPCD).



When I asked him why he placed me there, the instant he told me, I knew it was my place. Mr. Ramos simply said to me: "Those kids are the kids that don't get recognized. They're not paid attention to because they're different than most kids. You have that optimistic personality that would bring them out of their shells and show them acceptance that most people do not. I believe that when this year comes to an end, you will have made such an impact on those children, such a difference. When this year finishes, you will know deep down inside your heart that those kids will never forget you. Wouldn't that make you feel good? How does that make you feel?"

To hear him say that to me lets me know that I can do it. I can put my mind to it and further myself by knowing that I have the support behind me, pushing and giving me the assurance.

My children, my class, my tutees have taught me that it is acceptable to not be perfect, because nobody is. For just being in the age group of 3, 4 and 5, their knowledge for looking at the small things in life astounds me in ways that I never thought possible. I look back on a particular day when I was outside with them, and Casey\*, one of my three tutees, came up to me with a pink blossomed flower in hand and said, "This flower beautiful, Gabby." I looked at her and smiled "Like you," I said to her. "Like us," she smiled and then went to catch a multi-colored butterfly. I simply chuckled to myself as she went about, arms extended out; attempting to give the effect of that same butterfly she was following.

A simple object, like a butterfly or a flower to us is like my class' fantasy. The playground is a place for us to relax. To them it is an alternative world where they can be anything they want to be: A butterfly for Casey; A place where Mason\* can jump off the merry-go-round and scream "Super Man!" at the top of his lungs. They ask me to play along, and I imagine that I'm a kid again bundled up in my jacket, making snow angels in the dirt. I sit up from being on the ground with my class, and I think back. Wow. Pure Nirvana. I look at my watch and notice that it's time for me to go: I lift myself up and tell everyone good-bye. Casey walks over to me and whispers in my ear, "Tomorrow, we'll be angels." She gives me a big hug, and we go our separate ways. As I'm walking with my class I tell myself, since I became a tutor, life to me has endless possibilities, dreams and goals that I can accomplish when I just sit down, relax and look at the small things in life.

*\*name changed for privacy*



# Strategic Planning for the Effective Use of ARRA Funds

## Building a Blueprint for Success

by **Abelardo Villarreal, Ph.D.**

The recent infusion of federal funds into education through the *American Recovery and Reinvestment Act* (ARRA) represents an unprecedented opportunity to jumpstart a new vision to promote and strengthen educational equity. We can embrace a renewed perspective that discredits negative, stereotypical attitudes and beliefs about students and families and that values every child, with a fresh “out of the box” approach to elevate the overall quality of education in the United States.

From the application it is clear that the use of ARRA funds will not be business as usual. Applying for funds will require a thoughtful, reflective process and a commitment that is focused, transparent, sustainable, data-driven, needs-driven and accountable. The requirements also underscore the importance of building capacity and increasing teaching quality to sustain the momentum of success beyond the life of these funds.

The application refers to this process as *strategic planning* and allows the use of funding to ensure that this process is at the core of all reform efforts. The purpose of this article is to share with school and community stakeholders 10 key strategic planning tenets that are the foundation of IDRA’s technical assistance program designed

to help schools and districts develop their strategic plans for the efficient use of ARRA funds in addressing key educational issues.

School effectiveness literature converges on one finding: a successful school is strategic, commits to equity, and engages all stakeholders, including the community and parents, in its endeavors. Being strategic means having a vision and a clear path to success for an organization. In education, the shared vision should be that *all children* will have achieved a high level of academic success. It also means that schools seize every opportunity available to reach this vision, by engaging stakeholders in designing change and by taking risks to explore new and proven approaches to achieve equity.

For schools, being strategic means identifying the most pressing issues and taking bold steps to close achievement gaps. This includes addressing high student dropout rates, low academic achievement, and disproportionately low numbers of minority and low-income students who are enrolling in and graduating from college. Being strategic also means making wise investments of resources that have high rates of return as measured through increased human capital.

The ARRA application for funds strategically earmarks resources to address these educational areas. It also offers a level of flexibility that affords

school districts and campuses leeway to be selective in the manner that they feel best addresses their specific areas of need.

Although much flexibility is afforded in the use of ARRA funds, there are stipulations that must be observed unless a waiver has been granted. These stipulations include:

- Meet and comply with regular Title I rules and regulations;
- Comply with the requirement of supplementing and not supplanting local and state funds;
- Meet the maintenance of effort (MOE) requirement; and
- At a minimum, spend 85 percent of these funds by September 30, 2010.

These stipulations are subject to some exceptions that are discussed in the federal document, *ARRA Title I Guidance*, available online at <http://www.ed.gov/policy/gen/leg/recovery/guidance/title-i.doc>.

IDRA’s highly qualified researchers and practitioners, in collaboration with school personnel, have developed a program of technical assistance for schools engaging in a strategic planning process. The 10 strategic planning tenets embodied in IDRA’s technical assistance program that echo the spirit of the ARRA legislation include the following.

### 1. Use an equity lens when

*Strategic Planning – continued on Page 6*

**revising or developing a vision and an approach** to create a system that values and capitalizes on the assets that *all* children bring to school and that builds an educational environment second to none. The future of this country depends on the strength of its diversity and its inclusion of different viewpoints.

Dr. Bradley Scott, director of the IDRA South Central Collaborative for Equity (the equity assistance center that serves Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, New Mexico and Texas) describes this lens, “Public schools can do what they choose to educate their students within certain limits and parameters, but they are accountable for educating *all* learners to high academic standards and outcomes regardless of differing characteristics of those learners” (2009).

**2. Build on current research about successful schools with diverse student populations**, with particular emphasis on minority, low-income, special education, and English language learner students. Learn from their lessons. Robledo Montecel, et al., describe a process for assessing a quality educational program in IDRA’s guide, *Good Schools and Classrooms for Children Learning English* (2002) (See box on Page 7).

**3. Build on a theory of change and envision success through the use of a logic model.** Schools must undergo a thoughtful process that defines change and the way change must be engineered in order to have the most impact on the lives of the children under their care. Having a clear and common image of how change will occur and how success will be measured creates the right environment to foster creativity and commitment. See the W.K. Kellogg Foundation’s *Logic Model Development Guide* for a detailed description of how to build a theory of change or develop a logic model (<http://www.wkkf.org/Pubs/>

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[Tools/Evaluation/Pub3669.pdf](#)).

**4. Be transparent in the definition of problems and issues, barriers and solutions** so that improvement efforts promote buy-in and reflect the convergence of different viewpoints from internal and external stakeholders. Transparency is usually accomplished by: (a) involving school personnel, parents and community in sharing ideas; (b) ensuring broader participation in the design of strategies and initiatives; (c) creating benchmarks and metrics to measure success; and (d) regularly and predictably sharing results with parents, the public, school personnel, state education agencies and the U.S. Department of Education.

**5. Institutionalize data-driven decision making** where decisions are informed and strategic, based on a rationale and a foundation. Relevant data must be used. Student outcome data are the results of school inputs. The data about quality teaching, access to a rigorous curriculum, student engagement, and parent involvement must be examined throughout the school year. Data are the foundation for effective school reform decision making.

In Texas, the AEIS and PEIMS are crucial databases that must be consistently reviewed and analyzed before and during the implementation

of school reform efforts. IDRA has created an online portal where high school communities in the state can access critical student data to use in developing a strategic plan. The School Holding Power Portal is available at <http://www.idra.org/portal>.

**6. Create goals and objectives that are aligned with the school district and campus vision** and that emerge from a meaningful review of existing data on: (1) student achievement; (2) teaching quality; (3) principled leadership; and (4) problems and barriers that impede academic success in the district or campus. This involves a review of student achievement data disaggregated by student group and socioeconomic status and the identification of goals and objectives for closing the academic achievement gap. This will increase the ability of the school district and campuses to hold on to students through graduation, ensuring that a critical mass of students from each student group is college-ready and enrolls in and graduates from college.

**7. Ensure that teaching quality and leadership excellence are major goals** and objectives that are factored in to any school reform effort. As a first step, build on strengths and assets that presently exist in the school district or campus by conducting a contextual analysis of the qualities that must exist in order for the school reform effort to prosper and succeed. This analysis should be followed by an assessment of strengths and areas in need of improvement in the organization.

ARRA funds can then be used to strengthen school personnel, teaching quality and leadership skills by enhancing existing capacity through professional development activities or adding the necessary expertise to support implementation of the strategic plan. IDRA can assist schools with its Contextual Analysis Toolkit that helps schools efficiently zero in on

# IDRA Can Help You

## Contextual Analysis Toolkit

IDRA is committed to finding solutions to change the current status of English language learner education. Similarly, IDRA is committed to assisting school districts and campuses to identify areas that need improvement or significant change.

IDRA's Contextual Analysis Toolkit helps school districts and elementary and secondary campuses assess the extent to which they are meeting the needs of all of their students, particularly their English language learners.

We bring to bear 36 years of research and professional development, including IDRA's national study of effective bilingual education programs commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education in which IDRA identified critical elements of exemplary bilingual education programs. This research resulted in a rubric, *Good Schools and Classrooms for Children Learning English*, that has been used by thousands of practitioners across the country to assess their own bilingual or ESL programs. In addition, IDRA provided training to the U.S. Department of Education staff on the rubric, which has been endorsed by the department's Office of English Language Acquisition (Title III). It is this body of work and the resulting rubric that IDRA used as a theoretical framework and research base.

IDRA's research-based "Good Schools" rubric assesses five dimensions necessary for student success, especially English language learners.

- School Indicators
- Student Outcomes
- Leadership
- Support
- Programmatic and Instructional Practices

IDRA's Contextual Analysis Toolkit is a comprehensive schoolwide assessment that pinpoints areas of strength and those needing improvement. Key on-site data collection activities include:

- Classroom observations
- Focus group interviews with teachers, students and parents
- Individual interviews with administrators and staff
- Good schools survey (administrators and teachers)
- Student self-efficacy survey

IDRA's Contextual Analysis Toolkit has resulted in schools' efficient use of funds as they zero in on what will yield the greatest impact for students.

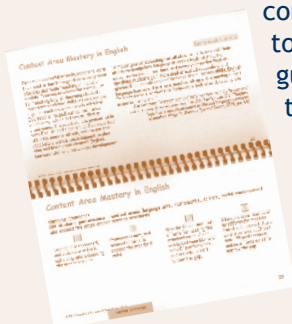
**Contact IDRA for details (210-444-1710; [contact@idra.org](mailto:contact@idra.org))**

## Good Schools and Classrooms for Children Learning English

### ❖ A Guide ❖

Thirty years of research have proven that, when implemented well, bilingual education is the best way to learn English. Research by IDRA has identified the 25 common characteristics of successful schools that contribute to high academic performance of students learning English. This guide is a rubric, designed for people in schools and communities to evaluate five dimensions that are necessary for success:

- ❖ school indicators
- ❖ student outcomes
- ❖ leadership
- ❖ support
- ❖ programmatic and instructional practices



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# Ways IDRA Can Help Your School District...

**Build capacity, turn around low performing campuses, improve teacher effectiveness and increase student achievement with American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) funds**

Below are samples of IDRA products and models based on what works for all students, especially English language learners. Details of IDRA technical assistance are available on the IDRA web site by topic area.

## Coaching and Mentoring

**Smart Coaches** – Teacher coaching for success in the content areas.

## Contextual Analysis Toolkit for Setting Baseline and Getting High Impact Results

- Good Schools for Children Learning English – Rubric
- Teacher and Student Efficacy Surveys
- Classroom Observation Analysis
- State-mandated Tests and Benchmarking Analysis
- Teacher Quality Assessment
- Student Engagement Survey
- Key Stakeholder Focus Group Interviews



## Dropout Prevention

- **Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program**, which keeps 98 percent of at-risk students in school.
- **School Holding Power Portal**, an online database of individual school conditions for school and community action.



**Instructional Leadership** – Intensive language-across-the-curriculum program created through sustained and intensive campus-based professional development.

**Family Leadership** – Meaningful school-home engagement for student success (Spanish and English).



**Professional Learning Community and Mentoring** – Peer support for individual student success.

**Math Smart!** – Teacher training for dynamic diverse student learning in mathematics in elementary and secondary grades.



**Science Smart!** – Teacher training to strengthen science curriculum and pedagogy to engage diverse learners.



**Engagement-Based Sheltered Instruction** – Effective engagement strategies for English language learners across the content areas.



**Integrating Technology in the Classroom** – Program that translates students' technology expertise and teachers' knowledge of what works into effective practice that infuses technology into content areas, leading to solid and sustainable student achievement.

**WOW Workshop on Workshops** – Train the trainer program to transform school capacity to leverage and sustain campus leadership and professional development by providing practical, research-based tools for campus mentors, coaches and support staff that results in a self-renewing process for adult learning.



Contact IDRA to explore individualized contracted technical assistance in these or other areas.

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# Teaching Must be Culturally Relevant to be Quality

by Bradley Scott, Ph.D.

IDRA has taken a stand on the importance of building quality schools to support student success and increase graduation. Our Quality Schools Action Framework presents a way of looking at systems change to produce student success and increased graduation (Robledo Montecel, 2005).

This article makes the case that one of the important areas of focus for change – teaching quality – must embrace cultural relevance as a necessary and absolute component. In fact, teaching in public schools cannot and should not be considered high quality if it is not culturally relevant. Why is that so?

I have previously described the Six Goals of Educational Equity and School Reform (Scott, 2000) that are a guide for ensuring that public schools work for all students regardless of their diversity. Systemic equity is defined as “the transformed ways in which systems and individuals habitually operate to ensure that every learner – in whatever learning environment that learner is found – has the greatest opportunity to learn, enhanced by the resources and support necessary to achieve academic competence, excellence, independence, responsibility and self-sufficiency for school and for life” (Scott, 2000).

At the onset and throughout every

**The encounter of teaching in the classroom is not just intellectual; it is also cultural. It needs, therefore, an approach that is culturally competent requiring powerfully dynamic and responsive pedagogy.**

aspect of creating quality schools is the regular work to ensure success and graduation for all diverse learners. The Quality Schools Action Framework would have, as an added dimension at its entrance point, the Goals of Educational Equity and School Reform.

This is important because when education stakeholders want to create success for all learners, then those who provide high quality education do so with the learner in mind. If one accepts that learners are diverse, they do not necessarily learn in the same way, and all can achieve and excel, then one also must accept something else. While good teaching can be effective for all learners, it may not be if it is approached in a rigid, fixed, non-responsive way for students who are diverse in language, culture, socialization and many other dimensions.

Diverse students do learn in many ways. The way they learn, the way they bring skills to bear in the learning process, their manner of engaging the

learning process, and how they interact with teachers and other students are all cultural in nature.

Teachers need to understand this about their students, and students must come to know this about their teachers. The encounter of teaching in the classroom is not just intellectual; it is also cultural. It needs, therefore, an approach that is culturally competent requiring powerfully dynamic and responsive pedagogy.

Many scholars have made similar assertions in some form (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Wortham and Contreras, 2002; Howard, 2003; Trumbull and Pacheco, 2005; Hill and Flynn, 2006). It appears that many teachers, however, are still not prepared to provide educational experiences that effectively serve diverse students in ways that move them to high achievement and other positive outcomes.

Dr. Laura Goe, Dr. Courtney Bell, and Ms. Olivia Little note in *Approaches to Evaluating Teacher Effectiveness*, “Given that teachers’ roles involve much more than simply providing subject-matter instruction, it is appropriate to consider a broader and more comprehensive definition of effective teachers consisting of five points and formulated by evaluating discussions of teacher effectiveness in the research literature as well as in policy documents, standards and

*Teaching Quality – continued on Page 10*

# Status of Hispanics in America

## Panel discussion available from C-SPAN

In March, IDRA president, Dr. María “Cuca” Robledo Montecel, participated in a panel discussion during the fourth annual national conference of the American Association of Hispanics in Higher Education. Among the topics addressed were the significance of the growth of the Latino population, demographics, what President Obama can do, and the current economic downturn. The other panelists were:

Dr. Henry Cisneros, Chairman and CEO, American City Vista (Panel Chair and Moderator)

Ms. Aida Alvarez, former head of the U.S. Small Business Administration

Ms. Lorraine Cortez-Vasquez, Secretary of State of New York

Dr. Arturo Madrid, Murchison Distinguished Professor of Humanities, Trinity University

Mr. Antonio R. “Tony” Sanchez, Chairman of the Board & CEO, Sanchez Oil and Gas Corporation

Dr. Richard Tapia, Mathematician & Professor, Department of Computational and Applied Mathematics, Rice University

Mr. Solomon “Sol” Trujillo, Chief Executive Officer, Telstra, Sydney, Australia

Mr. Ralph de la Vega, President & CEO, AT&T Mobility



**View the discussion free online at <http://www.c-spanarchives.org>**

*Teaching Quality – continued from Page 9*

reports” (2008).

They provide a five-point definition of effective teaching based upon the current research. One should note that within the five points, three speak specifically to culturally relevant pedagogy.

- Effective teachers have high expectations for all students and help students learn, as measured by value-added or other test-based growth measures or by alternative measures.
- Effective teachers contribute to positive academic, attitudinal and social outcomes for students, such as regular attendance, on-time promotion to the next grade, on-time graduation, self-efficacy and cooperative behavior.
- Effective teachers use diverse resources to plan and structure engaging learning opportunities; monitor student progress formatively, adapting instruction as needed; and evaluate learning using multiple sources of evidence.
- Effective teachers contribute to the development of classrooms and schools that value diversity and

civic-mindedness.

- Effective teachers collaborate with other teachers, administrators, parents and education professionals to ensure student success, particularly the success of students with special needs and those at high risk of failure.

Quality teaching that works just for some cannot be the goal or outcome of schools. Quality teaching has to be effective in supporting *all* students in realizing academic, civic, social and life success. Quality teaching is absolutely

necessary to move all diverse students to high outcomes. And teaching must be culturally relevant for the learners who encounter it to be high quality.

## Resources

Goe, L., and C. Bell, O. Little. *Approaches to Evaluating Teacher Effectiveness: Research Synthesis* (Chicago, Ill.: National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality, 2008).

Hill, J.D., and K.M. Flynn. *Classroom Instruction that Works with English Language Learners* (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2006).

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Ladson-Billings, G. “But That’s Just Good Teaching! The Case for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy,” *Theory Into Practice* (Summer 1995). pp. 159-165.

Robledo Montecel, M. “A Quality Schools Action Framework – Framing Systems Change for Student Success,” *IDRA Newsletter* (Intercultural Development Research Association, November-December 2005).

Scott, B. “We Should Not Kid Ourselves: Excellence Requires Equity,” *IDRA Newsletter* (Intercultural Development Research Association, February 2000).

Trumbull, E., and M. Pacheco. *Leading with Diversity: Cultural Competencies for*

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# Customer Service for School Improvement



How many times will you walk up to a counter only to be ignored or be given frowns and third-degree questions about why you are there? Everyone's breaking point is different. But eventually, you understand that you are not welcome.

That is not the kind of reception families and people in the neighborhood should receive at the front office of their school. Teachers and principals may be trying elaborate and innovative ways to engage families and community members. But if people are made to feel unwelcome at the door, those great plans will fail.

Current improvement efforts in schools frequently look to business models of successful change and leadership. Customer service is one aspect of the business model that gets talked about more regularly and is actually delivered to varying degrees in schools around the country.

What does it mean to provide good customer service? How do we ensure service to our community on par with our expectations of service in other sectors of our lives? What can be gained through a focus on customers? Who are the customers?

There are two distinct forms of customer service in a school:

- Internal customer service – how we engage students and staff in the education process, both at building and district levels; and
- External customer service – how our schools and central office personnel engage the community.

Internal customer service can go a long way toward helping us understand the unmet needs of our students and staff and improve the quality of our work as a result. External customer service can garner community support in ways that empower our work and strengthen partnerships that are beneficial for students.

The Texas IDRA Parent Information and Resource

Center (PIRC) recently conducted a full-day professional development session for the secretaries, clerks and support personnel of a school district that is strategically aiming to improve its services to and engagement with families. Below were the objectives of the session entitled, "Creating Family Friendlier Schools through A+ Customer Service."

- Arrive at a rationale for having A+ customer service in all the school district;
- Compare and contrast the value and contribution of each staff position represented in the group;
- Analyze the five C's of customer service and list at least two barriers to providing or having each C;

**"The school leaders who embrace, design and implement customer-driven systems will be the ones who thrive in the future."**

– Eilan Toothman, 2004

- Describe situations that are stressful or challenging to delivering good customer service and suggesting positive and creative ways of dealing with them; and
- Sketch out personal and campus team steps to be taken to improve customer service.

The highly participatory workshop enabled school staff to validate their roles, their contributions and the importance of their work in presenting the face of the school district to customers (families) and the broader community. A committee representative of the different positions and roles drafted information to eventually become a customer service publication for the district.

This kind of intervention is critical in giving new energy and direction to the overall parent-family involvement work of the school district and will positively affect the Title I parent involvement responsibilities of each campus.

**Visit the Parent Information and Resource Center online:  
[http://www.idra.org/Texas\\_IDRA\\_PIRC](http://www.idra.org/Texas_IDRA_PIRC)**

per pupil.

The state's failure to recognize – let alone to equalize – these funding disparities would eventually be challenged in federal court. The historic case of *Rodríguez vs. San Antonio ISD* resulted in a 5-4 ruling that despite the observation that the Texas system was “chaotic and unjust,” it did not violate federal equal protection requirements.

The state's successful defense was short lived: in 1987 a state court found that the unequal school finance plan did in fact violate the Texas constitution. In the historic *Edgewood vs. Kirby* case (which came to be known as *Edgewood I*), the state's supreme court required Texas to modify its school funding plan in a way that provided every school district equal return for equal tax effort, instituting a process for equalizing school funding throughout the state (Cárdenas, 1997).

## Other Considerations for Funding

Forcing states to recognize differences in local school districts' ability to support education, however, proved to be but one piece of a complicated puzzle. Advocates of equal opportunity for children had noted since the 1970s that students with differing needs would not be well served by providing the same amount of funding for educating them as students with no special needs.

In response to these issues, states developed funding mechanisms that recognized varying program costs. They used different strategies ranging from simple add-on funding to tying special program costs to funding for regular programs via weighting systems (where programs such as compensatory education were provided an allocation based on percentage of regular program costs) (Augenblick, 2001; Versteegen, 1988). Though an improvement, a

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major flaw in many of those state adjustments was the failure to collect and use actual add-on cost data to guide funding levels.

In addition to issues related to student counts and special needs, funding plans grew increasingly complex by incorporating adjustments for such issues as school district size, which impacted both operating expenses and efficiency.

Another funding issue that has confronted state leaders is how to deal with costs of constructing and renovating school facilities. Some states play little or no role in supporting local school construction, while others cover substantial portions of building costs. Some states incorporate equalization features that consider local district wealth factors, while others fund facilities outside an equalized system (ESC, 2009).

## Impact on Student Achievement

The impact of school funding on student achievement has long accompanied debates about the amount and the type of funding provided to local schools. Research by Eric Hanushek (1997; 1996) has argued that funding variations have no impact on student

achievement, while Ronald Ferguson (1991) and Thomas Nechbya (2004) found that the amount of funding notably impacts the quality of schooling available to students in different school districts.

An interesting observation in Texas is that some of the state's wealthy districts had originally proposed that money did not make much difference but later complained that limited funding did not enable them to provide an adequate level of education for their students, especially their special needs students.

An outgrowth of decades-long debates on equitable funding of public schools is an effort to ensure that schools provide “adequate levels of funding” for all students in a state (Augenblick, et al., 1997). The emergence of adequacy studies led to the filing of a new round of court challenges based on the level of funding adequacy produced by a state funding plan. These were particularly effective in increasing funding in states (mostly in the South) that had previously provided minimal state funding for their public schools (Rebell, 2008).

Recent federal attention fueled by requirements in the *No Child Left Behind Act* have led to increasing federal funding for the nation's public schools. What began as supplemental support targeted for students with special needs has grown to increasing federal allocations that help cover costs of facilities, energy, technology and other issues of interest to federal officials.

While making a notably larger investment in public education, the federal percentage of total school allocations still accounts for less than 10 percent of most state public school budgets, though that amount may vary from state to state.

Funding for public education also has been challenged with the emergence of vouchers, which provide



direct allocation of monies to private institutions. A radical departure from the goals of public education, these approaches have been vigorously opposed by public school advocates and the majority of the general public. Public school advocates affirm that the way to fix public schools is to focus attention on fixing public schools, rather than diverting resources to private enterprises.

Emerging research indicates that despite big promises, voucher programs have not resulted in dramatic improvements in achievement (Rouk, 2000), and at best, after years of implementation, have proven to be inconclusive (Gill, et al., 2001). At a symposium convened by the Institute for Education Sciences in Washington in 2005, a panel of experts continued to show that the evidence of voucher effectiveness at improving achievement was inconclusive.

## Conclusion

As long as states, communities and federal agencies provide funding for public schools, we can expect continuing debates on what to fund, how much to fund and who will be responsible for covering those costs. As long as funding remains a state responsibility, IDRA believes that equity and excellence also is primarily a state responsibility.

On the other hand, while we understand the evolution of state education funding plans, we believe it is perhaps an appropriate time to consider adoption of a new federal constitutional amendment stating that equal educational opportunity is a birthright of every child living in the United States.

In an age when a student educated in one locale may grow up, work and raise a family anywhere in the country, it is not unreasonable to assure that an excellent and equitable education is

accessible to all.

IDRA's president, Dr. María "Cuca" Robledo Montecel, has proposed imagining "a future in which the color of a child's skin, the language a child speaks and the side of town a child comes from are no longer considered barriers to a great education and a great life" (2009).

In the closing paragraphs of *Savage Inequalities*, Jonathon Kozol exposes the effect of unequal public school funding systems, noting: "From the top of the hill... the horizon is so wide and open... one wonders what might happen to the spirits of these children if they had a chance to breathe this air and stretch their arms and see so far... Standing there by the [river]... one is struck by the sheer beauty of this country, of its goodness and unrealized goodness, of the limitless potential that it holds to render life rewarding and the spirit clean. Surely there is enough for everyone within this country. It is a tragedy that these good things are not more widely shared" (1992).

When we establish a system of fair funding for schools, it will send the message that indeed every child is capable and is worthy of receiving the best quality education possible. Excellent schools will no longer be just for the families with the greatest financial advantages. With fair funding, everyone benefits by having schools that are excellent and equitable.

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Albert Cortez, Ph.D., is the director of IDRA Policy. Comments and questions may be directed to him via e-mail at [comment@idra.org](mailto:comment@idra.org).

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Bradley Scott, Ph.D., is the director of the IDRA South Central Collaborative for Equity. Comments and questions may be directed to him via e-mail at [comment@idra.org](mailto:comment@idra.org).

## Highlights of Recent IDRA Activities

In March, IDRA worked with **7,093** teachers, administrators, parents and higher education personnel through **52** training and technical assistance activities and **155** program sites in **13** states plus Brazil. Topics included:

- ◆ Pathways to College, parent presentation
- ◆ Math Smart! site needs assessment
- ◆ Effective Community Outreach
- ◆ Strategies for Building Academic Language
- ◆ Coaching and Mentoring

Participating agencies and school districts included:

- ◆ Monroe City Schools, Louisiana
- ◆ Pharr-San Juan-Alamo Independent School District (ISD), Texas
- ◆ Kansas Missouri School District
- ◆ Houston ISD, Texas

### Activity Snapshot

The IDRA Texas Parent Information and Resource Center (PIRC) is a comprehensive, multicultural and multilingual parent leadership support program for strengthening partnerships between parents and schools for student success. The project is funded by the U.S. Department of Education and targets critical areas of need in parent involvement throughout the state of Texas. Families with children in schools designated as low-performing and Title I are supported through the activities of this project. The IDRA model of valuing parents as leaders supports an emerging cadre of parents committed to strengthening the educational pipeline from pre-kindergarten through higher education.

Regularly, IDRA staff provides services to:

- ◆ public school teachers
- ◆ parents
- ◆ administrators
- ◆ other decision makers in public education

Services include:

- ◆ training and technical assistance
- ◆ evaluation
- ◆ serving as expert witnesses in policy settings and court cases
- ◆ publishing research and professional papers, books, videos and curricula

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target areas needing intervention. (See Page 7.)

**8. Integrate a plan to ensure sustainability beyond the life of ARRA funds.** Sustainability is ensured when support for the change (a) is based on reform strategies and initiatives that are proven and research based, (b) has buy-in by community, parents and school personnel, (c) is articulated and assigned high priority status by the school board, and (d) is integrated into the regular school or campus budget and improvement plan.

**9. Start with the end in mind.** Failure is not an option in the ARRA legislation. It is clear that a district or campus strategic plan must integrate an evaluation plan that is guided by your vision, goals and objectives. A formative and summative evaluation plan is fundamental to informed decision making and continuous improvement. Creating performance measures and benchmarks are expected and will be used to measure progress and share results with key stakeholders.

**10. Be accountable for the**

**success of the strategic plan.** For years, federal spending has been likened to a runaway train with no consequences for failure and no clear end in mind. ARRA is an example of legislation where intent and accountability have never been as clearly articulated or more vigorously accentuated. Informing community, parents and other stakeholders periodically of the progress being attained is required to ensure transparency, full equitable implementation and a positive outcome from the use of these funds.

Strategic planning is not only a necessity to ensure success, but also an ARRA expectation. Furthermore, strategic planning serves to: (a) define purpose, provide clearer focus and promote unity; (b) ensure transparency, sustainability, data-driven decision making and accountability; (c) build consensus and create a sense of ownership among stakeholders; (d) ensure that the use of resources is carefully planned and cost effective; (e) make certain that decision making is informed by a conscientious and well planned and managed evaluation

system; (f) provide the glue that keeps the mission focused; and, most importantly, (g) increase productivity for greater results, ultimately, success for every student.

For a more detailed description of IDRA's technical assistance program to strategically implement ARRA funds, contact IDRA.

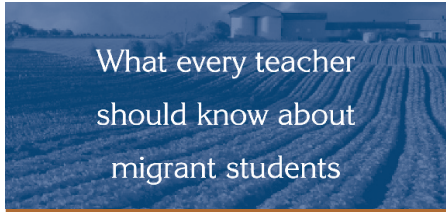
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Abelardo Villarreal, Ph.D., is director of IDRA Field Services. Comments and questions may be directed to him via e-mail at [comment@idra.org](mailto:comment@idra.org).



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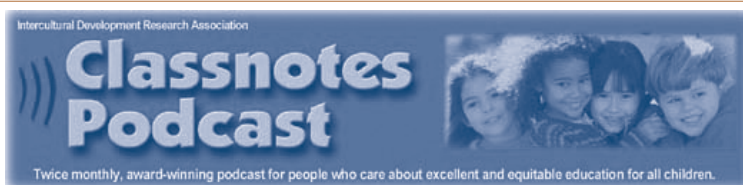
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**Episode 53: “School Change Strategies”** IDRA Classnotes Podcast – In the third of a set of podcast episodes on this topic, IDRA president and CEO, Maria “Cuca” Robledo Montecel, Ph.D., describes how IDRA’s Quality Schools Action Framework identifies three strategies for changing schools: capacity of the community to influence schools, building coalitions, and building the capacity of the schools themselves.



**Episode 52: “Fundamentals for School Change”** IDRA Classnotes Podcast – In the second of a set of podcast episodes on this topic, IDRA president and CEO, Maria “Cuca” Robledo Montecel, Ph.D., describes the two school change fundamentals of governance efficacy and funding equity in the Quality Schools Action Framework that are required for school success.



**Episode 51: “Student Engagement and the Language of the Mathematics Class”** IDRA Classnotes Podcast – Jack Dieckmann, M.A., a former senior math education specialist at IDRA and current doctoral student at Stanford, describes the importance of using the language of the student and allowing for messy talk to help their students make meaning of math concepts.



**Episode 50: “Busting Myths About Children of Poverty”** IDRA Classnotes Podcast – In this 50th episode, Bradley Scott, Ph.D., director of the IDRA South Central Collaborative for Equity, and Aurelio Montemayor, M.Ed., director of the IDRA Texas Parent Information and Resource Center, discuss myths about children of poverty, how they fail to recognize the strengths that students bring and how they lead to inequitable and unsuccessful education.

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