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¡YA! Es Tiempo – The Courage to Connect

by María “Cuca” Robledo Montecel, Ph.D.

Editor’s Note: IDRA gathered more than 140 parents, community leaders, students, educators, public officials, and policymakers in July 2010 for a day of dialogue, action and network building to improve the quality of education for all of the 450,000 children who live in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas. The following is adapted from the opening remarks by IDRA President & CEO, Dr. María Robledo Montecel. Presented as a model for active communities across the country, highlights of the event were provided in the August 2010 issue of the IDRA Newsletter. Additional details and resources are online at http://www.idra.org/Ya_Es_Tiempo/.

We have called together this mid-summer meeting, because changing the state of education in the Texas Rio Grande Valley *cannot* wait. In a few short weeks, a new school year will begin, and change is long overdue. We know you are here because you share this conviction... *¡YA! Es Tiempo*. It is time to close the unacceptable gaps in equity and opportunity that hinder our children on their way to completing the great education they deserve.

In the Pharr-San Juan-Alamo school district, a classroom of 25 students has 250,000 fewer dollars for the education of its children than does the Highland Park school district. We cannot wait any longer to demand fair funding and to close equity gaps. *¡YA! Es Tiempo*.

Sixteen percent of teachers in the Valley are teaching out of their field, and 7 percent are not certified at all. Our children deserve competent, caring teachers who are well-paid and supported in their work. They also deserve courses and curricula that adequately prepare them for college and careers. We cannot wait any longer to close the opportunity gaps. *¡YA! Es Tiempo*.

Currently, four out of 10 – almost *half* of the students – who enter high school in the Valley do not graduate. Young people, families and the entire community feel the impact. And how could we not? Youth who drop out of high school earn an average of \$9,000 per year less than high school graduates. It is time to graduate all of our children. It is time to see them go to college. It is time to see them graduate from college. We cannot wait any longer. *¡YA! Es Tiempo*.

We know we must act and act now. But how can we be most effective?

Based on our research at IDRA, and through our experience and work with tens of thousands of educators, parents and communities over the last 37 years, we have found that lasting change requires working together around a clear framework for action. There are no magic bullets.

In the book we are releasing today, *Courage to Connect – The Quality Schools Action Framework*,
(cont. on Page 2)

“Coalition building and community capacity building are critical – though often neglected – change strategies in improving graduation rates.”

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

(¡YA! Es Tiempo, continued from Page 1)

we share our learnings (see box on Page 6). *Sí se puede.*

In the La Joya school district, for example, under the leadership of Superintendent Dr. Alda Benavides, we at IDRA have had the opportunity to help teachers create a professional learning community with mentoring and coaching in the classroom. Through that effort, students' reading scores on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAKS) rose, student attendance increased, no at-risk student dropped out, and there were many fewer disciplinary problems. *Sí se puede y ¡YA! Es Tiempo.*

Here at the Pharr-San Juan-Alamo school district, under Superintendent Dr. Daniel P. King's leadership, the district has reduced its dropout rate by 75 percent in two years with the development of the College, Career & Technology Academy in partnership with South Texas College. PSJA has become a regional leader in connecting high school students to college with more than 1,500 students participating in dual college credit courses during the past school year. We have had the opportunity to partner with Dr. King to strengthen curricula at PSJA High School, PSJA North High School and Memorial High School. With his leadership and the dedication of the principals and teachers here, our partnership has improved TAKS passing rates at all three campuses. *Sí se puede y ¡YA! Es Tiempo.*

Long-term and sustainable education change requires parents and communities to become engaged as equal partners in and with schools. Together, we can make this happen. Here in the Rio Grande Valley, a grassroots chapter of the PTA – a PTA Comunitario – has been founded by the women of ARISE with support from IDRA's Texas Parent Information and Resource Center (see story on

Page 5). And with the leadership of organizations like ARISE, the Brownsville Community Health Center, Casa de Proyecto Libertad, La Union del Pueblo Entero (LUPE), Proyecto Azteca, Proyecto Juan Diego, Texas Rio Grande Legal Aid, and the START Center, the Rio Grande Valley is showing how family and community leadership solves problems that seem almost intractable. *Sí se puede y ¡YA! Es Tiempo.*

This community has what it takes. At the intersection of two nations, the Rio Grande Valley is a young, vibrant and growing community of more than 1 million people. Growth is expected in a number of sectors over the next decade – from transportation to business and industrial and retail construction. And the health care industry here is expected to create tens of thousands of new jobs. Some of the best future jobs here and around the world will require more education. We need to be sure that our children have the chance to compete for these opportunities.

The Valley is also a place where rootedness, resourcefulness and generosity of spirit abound. Last year, when it looked like Census 2010 ran the risk of missing scores of *colonia* residents in the count, community and family leaders – many of whom are with us today – led the call for every person, every family to be counted. Responding with faith, family and fierceness, these are the hallmarks of how this community has taken on big challenges and how it can lead in transforming education.

As Bishop Daniel E. Flores, whose roots are on both sides of the border, said during the Feast of San Juan Diego, "This border culture was forged by the movement of history and directed by the efforts of families struggling to create a

Long-term and sustainable education change requires parents and communities to become engaged as equal partners in and with schools.

worthy life for their loved ones... [he went on to say] the encounter between distinct cultures does not necessarily imply a clash, we can show forth a pathway toward the future marked by cultural respect, the exchange of gifts and of authentic human solidarity." *¡YA! Es Tiempo y sí podemos.*

María "Cuca" Robledo Montecel, Ph.D., is IDRA President and CEO. Comments and questions may be directed to her via e-mail at comment@idra.org.

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Making Change

Casting Off “Yesterday’s Logic” to Transform Schooling

By Laurie Posner, M.P.A.

While it is no longer so much in fashion to agonize about the death of one or another cultural institution (grammar!, romance!, rock-and-roll!), this did not stop *Boston Globe* writer Derrick Jackson from asserting that we are now witnessing “the death of public education” (2010).

Noting how many U.S. cities are facing major school closings and massive budget cuts, Jackson goes on to describe how the country chronically under-invests in education and underpays teachers, while blaming poor outcomes on student poverty and diversity. “In monetary terms,” Jackson writes, “we have given up on millions of children” (2010).

Funding education at insufficient or inequitable levels – and blaming poverty or diversity for poor outcomes – evokes what management consultant Peter Drucker (1980) called “yesterday’s logic.” As Drucker said, “The greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence; it is to act with yesterday’s logic.”

Remaining trapped in yesterday’s logic comes at a perilous cost. Already each year, the United States loses an estimated 1.3 million high school youth to attrition. And while only recently the United States led the world in the number of young adults with college degrees, it has now slipped to 12th among 36 developed nations. Severe inequities persist, “Students from the highest income families are almost eight times as likely as those from the lowest income families to earn a bachelor’s degree by age 24” (Lewin, 2010).

What can be done to reject yesterday’s logic and transform teaching and learning? Research and practical experience point to the need to take up three inter-related strategies: (1) community capacity building; (2) coalition building; and (3) school capacity building. Each strategy is an integral part of IDRA’s action model for transforming public education, the Quality Schools Action Framework (Robledo Montecel, 2005).

Community Capacity Building

Community capacity building as a term and an approach is often associated with community development and the power of social networks (“social capital”). As a concept, social capital has been around since at least the early 1900s, when L.J. Hanifan promoted its value in supporting rural schools. Hanifan (1916) wrote: “If [an individual] may come into contact with his neighbor, and they with other neighbors, there will be an accumulation of social capital... which may bear a social potentiality sufficient to the substantial improvement of living conditions in the whole community” (see also Putnam, 2000).

As Hanifan implies, social capital and community capacity grow where there is a sense of neighborhood. In strengthening education, the best efforts build on these connections and expand knowledge and leadership to take up shared concerns. As a recent national study finds, well organized communities can serve not only to influence education policy and practice but also to “disrupt the priorities, assumptions and practices that have sanctioned poor school performance for so long” (Mediratta, et al., 2009).

Community capacity building also can overcome barriers to family engagement, creating new forums for partnership and problem-solving. The United Way’s family-school-community partnership in Texas began just such an approach in 2006. Focusing on student outcomes at 10 inner city schools, this initiative “shaped by and for parents” has created parent rooms at each campus, built parent-led networks and achieved gains in student attendance and tutoring rates, and decreased early dismissals (United Way of San Antonio and Bexar County, 2010).

In this way, the strategy both banks on decades of research linking family engagement with better student and school outcomes (Henderson, et al., 2004) and promotes partnerships that respect family contributions and leadership.

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If public education is not just to survive but to be transformed and thrive, turbulent times must not have us retrench and revert to the failed logic of the past. We need a new logic, built on knowledge and experience, bold commitment and respect.

IDRA South Central Collaborative for Equity

For more information about the IDRA South Central Collaborative for Equity or to request technical assistance, contact us at 210-444-1710 or contact@idra.org.

Additional resources are available online at http://www.idra.org/South_Central_Collaborative_for_Equity/

funded by the U.S. Department of Education

(Making Change, continued from Page 3)

Coalition Building

Traced to the French and Latin terms for “fellowship” and “the growing together of parts” (as in coalesce), coalition building describes the process of developing a partnership of organizations to advance a common purpose. Needed as they are, coalitions designed to improve education have not always lived up to their potential. Too often, they have failed to include grassroots organizations and parents of children in public schools (Mediratta, et al., 2009).

Against this backdrop, a case-study review of the development of the Educational Justice Collaborative provides important insights. The EJC is a coalition of more than two dozen organizations in California whose goal is to attain high quality education for all children. Formed around the class action suit, *Williams vs. State of California*, the EJC has brought together community organizers, educators, researchers, and policy and legal advocates to coordinate research and policy and build community capacity to promote systems change.

One of EJC’s first actions, based on a review of statewide school outcome data, was to craft an Educational Bill of Rights. The bill highlights every student’s right to an education under the California constitution and, within this framework, to high quality teachers, and to safe and supportive learning environments. Importantly, the bill also calls for reliable public information on school outcomes, and regular community forums with public officials, to build in accountability for resources and results. Since the *Williams* settlement, coalition members have turned their attention to realizing these rights through work on school funding equity, college readiness and the state’s data system (Oakes & Rogers, 2006).

School Capacity Building

School capacity building, the most familiar of the three change strategies, involves the process of assuring that schools have the vision, leadership, faculty, curricula and resources to engage all students in learning. It begins with the recognition that substantial changes require interacting strategies, ensuring: that teachers are valued, prepared and well-equipped; that curriculum is rigorous, challenging and exciting; that students’ strengths are recognized and can flourish; and that families and community members are engaged as partners (Robledo Montecel, 2005). Rather than working

apart from or at odds with the first two strategies, school capacity building depends on each for continuous self-renewal (Villarreal, 2006).

This holistic approach can be seen in work underway at Pharr-San Juan-Alamo ISD in South Texas. Unlike traditional dropout recovery strategies, PSJA’s College, Career & Technology Academy, carried out in partnership with South Texas College, is re-engaging students who have dropped out of school in new learning opportunities and a curriculum that prepares them for college. The results include increased graduation and college readiness rates. Further, to strengthen mathematics and science teaching and learning, PSJA is partnering with IDRA on professional development and strategies to strengthen community-school-family partnership.

If public education is not just to survive but to be transformed and thrive, turbulent times must not have us retrench and revert to the failed logic of the past. We need a new logic, built on knowledge and experience, bold commitment and respect.

Resources

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Get More Online at IDRA’s Newsletter Plus

- Classnotes Podcast about school change strategies
- IDRA’s new OurSchool data portal
- Highlights and resources from ¡YA! Es Tiempo
- Articles and resources on family-school-community partnerships
- Links to research
- *Courage to Connect – A Quality Schools Action Framework* information

Visit www.idra.org for more information.

United Way of San Antonio and Bexar County. *Family-School-Community Partnership* (San Antonio, Texas: United Way of San Antonio and Bexar County, July 21, 2010).

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The ARISE South Tower PTA Comunitario

An Example of Community-Based School Engagement

by Aurelio M. Montemayor, M.Ed.

"Schools that work for all children" – IDRA has a big vision and addresses a huge challenge, following multiple paths. As advocates for children in neighborhood public schools, we connect with those who are the most available natural ally: the adults who most care about the child, the parent, relative or caretaker who is most connected and overwhelmingly desires the best for that child.

Family Leadership Partnerships

IDRA has developed a model for family leadership in education. In working with schools and communities, we have developed partnerships with community organizations that have education as a priority. In 1998, one such relationship was formed with ARISE (A Resource In Serving Equality) because of its interest in developing family leadership in support of an excellent education for all children, especially those who come from families that are poor, recent immigrant and whose home language is Spanish.

For more than a decade, IDRA conducted training and technical assistance to the ARISE centers located in some of the poorest communities in South Texas. The Texas IDRA Parent Information and Resource Center (PIRC) has carried out and met the priorities of the program: to serve Title I (low-income) school families, especially those whose children are attending schools that are not meeting academic standards. The ARISE *promotora* model for family outreach and connection is ideal. Home visits are conducted weekly, with each staff member and volunteer in direct communication and in a meaningful relationship with each family.

With assistance from the IDRA PIRC and support from Texas PTA, ARISE formed the country's first PTA Comunitario. I outlined the process they followed in the April 2010 issue of the *IDRA Newsletter*. Their leadership is proving to be a model of community-based school engagement.

After completing its first year of existence, the group elected new officers, reviewed its successes of the first year, and laid out ambitious plans for the second year. One challenge they have decided to take on is the establishment of a new PTA at each of their children's schools.

Key points of pride recorded for the first year were:

- Conducting monthly meetings with an average of 30 parents present (and almost as many children) with child care provided by ARISE staff who are also parents of school-age children.
- Visitors from schools and organizations attended almost every meeting.
- Doubling of the initial membership.
- Visits to the nine public schools attended by children of this PTA's founding families. (Only one of the schools had a parent organization.)
- Training conducted by the PIRC on specific Title I parent benefits, rules and requirements. The sessions were conducted bilingually, and the materials were in English and Spanish.
- Focused discussions and inquiry about teaching quality at neighborhood schools.
- Public participation in community events, such as the *Día del Niño* parade held annually by ARISE in the *colonias* where they have an organizational presence.
- Presentations to sister community organizations about the new PTA.

Initial Lessons Learned

IDRA has supported parent leadership in education in a variety of settings and in multiple relationships. Much has been learned about what works and what doesn't seem to be sustainable over a significant period. Past efforts that were city-wide or regional were lacking a strong local base. Indications are that a viable organization is one that has strong local roots. The ARISE South Tower PTA Comunitario effort reinforces IDRA's experiences in public education advocacy.

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Though "parent participation" still describes the core activity, we use the term "family meaningful engagement" to signal that there is a new and improved description of the process.

IDRA Texas PIRC

For more information about the Texas IDRA Parent Information and Resource Center or to request technical assistance, contact us at 210-444-1710 or contact@idra.org.

Additional resources are available online at www.idra.org/Texas_IDRA_PIRC.htm

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

(The ARISE South Tower PTA Comunitario, continued from Page 5)

First, it is vital to establish a relationship with a bona-fide grassroots community organization that has education as a priority. IDRA is a long-term child advocacy organization that focuses on creating neighborhood public schools that work for all children. As an intermediary it can bring skills and resources that are useful to the local group.

Second, build trust, communication and carefully identify the overlapping goals and objectives. Most community organizations have multiple goals, and it was very important to highlight the educational goals held in common by IDRA and the partner organization. ARISE is a mature and grounded community organization that is very clear on its goals, values the resources brought by IDRA and is a willing partner in carrying out mutually beneficial activities.

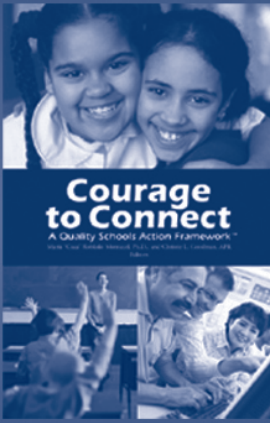
Third, take advantage of opportunities to transform traditional organizations as effective vehicles for parents (previously excluded or underserved). This opportunity was to transform the traditional PTA model of volunteerism and fundraising to one of a mutual school-home partnership in support of children's academic and social success.

Fourth, give training, technical assistance and support in achieving mutual goals. Any initial effort to have a formal parent educational organization is like a glowing ember that needs to be protected and nurtured to burst into a sustainable fire. The Texas IDRA PIRC offers direct, on-site support that is consistent with the project goals and also with the assets and requisites of the local organization.

Meaningful Engagement

A community PTA is a viable alternative to the traditional organization. Many families will join a PTA that follows this model. The ARISE *promotora*/home visitor is the ideal outreach worker and a model for PTA outreach as well as Title I school campus outreach.

Though "parent participation" still describes the core activity, we use the term "family meaningful engagement" to signal that there is a new and improved description of the process. IDRA's experience, the research on parent involvement and current Title I parent involvement requirements converge in one major premise: Families, meaningfully engaged, contribute significantly to student achievement and success. Families that are



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

Available now for purchase from IDRA (\$15 plus s&h)

To learn more about the book, visit www.idra.org/couragetconnect to view the framework, see the detailed table of contents, read an excerpt and listen to related podcasts.

well informed about their children's progress and their children's schools and that are active in their children's education can transform schools.

Resources

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

Texas NCLB Parent Involvement Conference

Plan now to attend this event in Corpus Christi on November 4, 2010, to learn strategies for empowering all stakeholders to increase student achievement and meet the requirements of NCLB.

Details are online at
<http://www.escri6.net/dept/isserv/titleswi/>

IDRA Launches “OurSchool” Website to Help Schools and Communities in Texas Improve their School

Community, family and school leaders need high quality, accessible data to assess how schools are doing and develop a plan to improve them. The just-launched latest generation of IDRA's data website provides key data for all Texas school districts and high schools. Data include: outcomes on ACT/SAT tests, college-sending rates, teacher certification rates, and district-level attrition rates. Designed around IDRA's Quality Schools Action Framework, the portal provides key questions to promote community conversations and a framework that local, cross-sector partners can use to develop and assess action plans. With 2.0 interactivity, the portal enables visitors to keep a “my schools” portfolio, conduct surveys and share results with local partners and policymakers.

This website (<http://www.idra.org/OurSchool>) is helping community and school partners examine their school data and plan joint action to improve school holding power. With Texas schools losing one-third of their students, schools and communities in Texas and around the country are looking to new ways to understand the obstacles to school success and to work together to address them. Gathering quality information is a first step.

To meet this need, IDRA developed a prototype school holding power portal in 2007 that placed accurate, high quality information in the hands of people at the leading edge of systems change. Through the portal, educators and community members found out how well their high school campuses were preparing and graduating students, what factors might be weakening school holding power, and what they could do to address them.

This new upgraded web-based tool helps schools and communities get key data to: (1) assess dropout rates; (2) find out how well schools are holding on to students and preparing them for college; and (3) partner and take action to strengthen schools. Specifically, the portal provides:

- Key data to help you determine whether high dropout rates and weak school holding power are a problem for your school.
- Actionable knowledge and key questions to spark conversations and action planning around:

teaching quality, curriculum quality, attrition, college readiness, college access and college sending.

- Real-time data collection features via surveys (e.g., to measure parent engagement).
- Social networking features you can use to share data with others and attach charts or graphs, keep track of your own notes, or call a community-school meeting to work on a specific issue.
- Bilingual (Spanish/English) content.

Community oversight is a critical missing ingredient in effective and accountable dropout prevention efforts at the local level,” said Dr. María “Cuca” Robledo Montecel, IDRA President & CEO. “We also know that schools and communities working together have the capacity to craft and carry out effective solutions that will make a difference for students.”

Change begins with school, community and legislative action,” she added. “Working in partnership, parents, educators, students, policymakers, business people can create schools that hold onto all students until graduation and prepare them to succeed.”

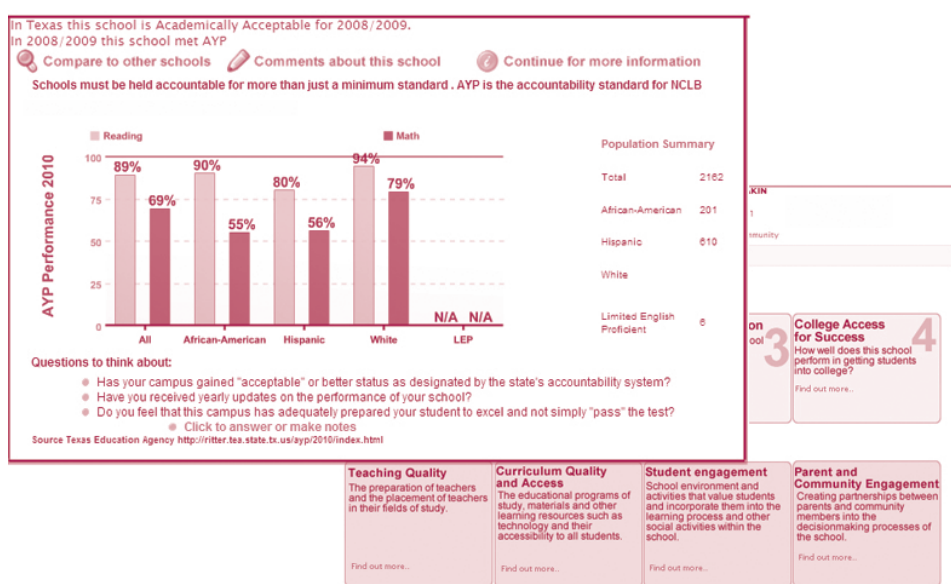


From Left to right: Community members, parents and students look up data about their schools in IDRA's data portal. Left to right, standing: Carolina Herrera, Proyecto Juan Diego; Lourdes Flores, ARISE; Sandra Carrillo, ARISE South Tower; Jennifer Servin, student; Javier Parra, La Unión del Pueblo Entero. Left to right, seated: José Elizondo, student; Assanet Vela, student.

OurSchool Website

Visit the website in English and Spanish.
www.IDRA.org/OurSchool

Also see a bilingual handout on how to use the portal: www.idra.org/images/stories/Handout_To_the_Portal_bilingual.pdf



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Focus: Change Strategies

“It is clear that in transforming schools, we must connect the dots from actionable knowledge to families, the broader community and schools through strategic actions that give new life, mobilize and give all involved the evidence that change and transformation for the better is possible.”

– *Courage to Connect: A Quality Schools Action Framework*, IDRA (2010)

Intercultural Development Research Association

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