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## Focus: Teaching Quality

# Ensuring Teaching Quality in a Civil Rights Context

By Bradley Scott, Ph.D.

Directors of the nation’s 10 equity assistance centers recently had an opportunity to come together to discuss several issues that impact the civil rights of learners in public schools. It seems very apparent to us that there is still a potential for some students – particularly those who are minority, poor or linguistically different – to get lost in the midst of the continuing clamor for educational reform driven by the *American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA)* and other activities across the country. While I am not attempting to be a single voice for the equity assistance centers network (of which the IDRA South Central Collaborative for Equity is a part), I can report that we believe there are challenges attached to each of the ARRA principles that we must stay on top of to ensure that the civil rights of learners are protected and that they benefit from the reforms being sought.

ARRA has four principles that drive educational reform:

- Making progress toward rigorous college- and career-ready standards and high-quality assessments that are valid and reliable for all students, including English language learners and students with disabilities;
- Establishing pre-kindergarten to college and career data systems that track progress and foster continuous improvement;

- Making improvements in teacher effectiveness and in the equitable distribution of qualified teachers for all students, particularly students who are most in need; and
- Providing intensive support and effective interventions for the lowest-performing schools. (U.S. Department of Education, 2009)

Each one of these principles is worth intense discussion and examination. The purpose of this article is to focus on three of the civil rights challenges within the principle regarding teacher effectiveness and equitable distribution of qualified resources.

**Challenge 1: Securing and preparing qualified teachers so that, no matter where diverse students attend schools, they benefit from effective teaching**

Around the nation, the equity assistance centers continue to see many instances where under-qualified and poorly qualified teachers are assigned to schools in communities where there is a high concentration of poor, minority and linguistically different students. The increasing nature of *de facto* segregated communities and schools appears to facilitate this placement of the least qualified teachers with students who have the highest requirement for excellent teachers.

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*“Teaching quality is more than the teacher as a person. Specifically, it is characterized by strong content knowledge and effective pedagogy, quality decision-making in the classroom, self-efficacy, innovation, capacity to teach diverse students, and grounded in community and institutional support.”*

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



(Ensuring Teaching Quality, continued from Page 1)

The question to be answered is: *What structural regularities and deficiencies in teacher assignment practices of school districts continue to allow a lack of teacher competency to be matched inversely with students' requirement for excellent teachers and teaching?*

**Challenge 2: Overcoming deficit models of professional development that devalue, label and pigeon-hole learners based upon their difference**

Developing highly qualified teachers has been on the educational landscape for many years. In still too many instances, however, school districts embrace professional development models that are culturally and linguistically non-responsive to the learners to whom these models are applied. This practice means many teachers are ill equipped to provide powerful, responsive instruction that supports students to excellence. Villarreal (2010) suggests that we have learned enough to know that 21st Century professional development of teachers must embrace cultural relevance, competence and knowledge *vis a vis* all diverse students to enable them to achieve excellent academic outcomes.

The question to be answered is: *Why do models that reflect "one size fits all" continue to be the preferred approach to teacher professional development given the increasing range of diversity in the student population of public schools?*

**Challenge 3: Ensuring the protection of the rights of all learners to receive fair treatment and benefit from effective teachers who provide excellent, high-quality instruction no matter where learners attend public schools**

The equity assistance centers report increasing

segregation across race and national origin in schools and classrooms throughout the nation. Federal court rulings that require a narrowly tailored use of race to desegregate schools, a lack of compliance reviews being conducted by the Office for Civil Rights under Title VI of the *Civil Rights Act*, local communities and schools turning their focus away from the proactive protection of civil rights for all students have called into question whether students are receiving real access to quality teaching.

IDRA's Quality Schools Action Framework (Montecel, 2005) presents a systemic way in which communities and education stakeholders can work to guarantee graduation for all that leads to college access and success. Teaching quality is one of the critical indicators the framework examines. IDRA's Goals of Educational Equity and School Reform (Scott, 2000) provide these same stakeholders a set of more than 75 questions to determine how the system is operating to ensure quality, non-discriminatory access to an equitable educational experience for all students regardless of their race, gender or national origin.

Communities and stakeholders must embrace this end as a natural operational regularity and obligation to all students and families. They must not see this end as something they are being compelled to do, but as an obligation they must provide to be fair to all students.

The question to be answered is: *What technical assistance supports do we need in order to provide all students the benefit of a quality education as a natural regularity, even in the absence of external requirements, that leads to graduation and school success for college and for life?*

To paraphrase the U.S. Secretary of Education, education really is the civil rights issue of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. This time, however, the primary burden for change cannot be on the backs of diverse learners; it must be the educators who create, operate and sustain the education operations they establish for all diverse students.

The equity assistance centers will continue to examine education reform and provide technical assistance and training through a lens of equity. There are also many other civil rights challenges to which the equity assistance centers will continue to attend as education reforms move forward. It is the only way to assure the protection of the civil rights of students to benefit from a quality public educational experience that leads to graduation and success for college and for life.

**Resources**

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

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**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](mailto:contact@idra.org).

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# An Unspoken Culture Clash – The Deeper Culprit of Teacher Beliefs

By Veronica Betancourt, M.A., and Kristin Grayson, M.Ed.

Research shows that students develop a greater self-concept of themselves when they perceive their teachers as having high expectations for them, great leadership, and helping and understanding behaviors (Alsop, 2005). Equally influential, when teachers do not use an equity lens when implementing research-based teaching practices and beliefs that reflect opportunity for all students, low expectations may be internalized by students, resulting in their disengagement (Cavazos, 2009).

Alyssa Cavazos recounts her struggles as an English language learner as she “encountered teachers in middle and high school who conveyed their low expectations regarding [her] potential as a student” (2009).

She explains the deeper constructs that create a deficit educational context that results in differential expectations: “Unfortunately, many times, programs such as cooperative education and early college recruitment are jaded and biased based on what one faculty or staff member believes about certain students’ academic potential” (2009).

This demonstrates how well-meaning teachers can inadvertently discriminate against students who do not fit within the constructs of a westernized, White, middle-class setting. It is the majority of marginalized students who may perceive these actions from their teachers as a form of discrimination, lack of concern or being singled out, which ultimately pushes them into a direction of mistrust, anger and disassociation from schooling (Langhout & Mitchell, 2008; Cheung, 2009).

The call for the educational setting to transform into a more culturally responsive environment has been slow to surface. However, we can no longer ignore children from diverse backgrounds who are more likely to experience negative interactions in school because it jeopardizes their opportunities to develop social and academic efficacy (Reyes, 2006). It is time

for a paradigm shift to provide multiple lenses from which to empower diverse populations of students within the educational system.

Educators have a very special and critical place in our society. We are key shapers of the future of our community, of our society, and of our economic stability and advancement. Of all the multiple roles in education, teachers are the most influential in terms of student success (Dinham, 2007).

If you take a moment to think about your own educational past, from the very first memory of school, to your experiences and interactions with peers and adults that have resulted in who you are today, what comes to mind? If given the task, could you pinpoint your “best” and “worst” teachers? What characteristics did each of them have that classified them as “best” or “worst”? What would these teachers remember about you? Were you “one of the good students,” or were you “one of those students” who were often left out during instruction in some form or another?

If you were one of the “good” students, you were probably considered *smart, athletic, attentive, determined, GT* or *sweet*. This type of labeled disposition lends itself to becoming the teacher’s favorite student, who then receives preferential treatment and opportunities.

But, a significant population of our traditionally underrepresented youth enrolled in public schools is swept into the category of “those” children who *struggle, don’t understand the language, aren’t motivated, can’t sit still, are disruptive, or whose parents don’t care*. Additionally, marginalized children experience further exclusionary labeling when they are *pregnant, poor, minority, ESL*, thought to be in *a gang*, or are *skaters, freaks* or *thugs*.

These labels influence teacher perceptions, whether consciously or subconsciously (Reyes, *cont. on Page 4*)

*“Embracing diversity as a foundation for self-efficacy and leadership will drive changes that result in equity for all children... It requires that we become cognizant of our preconceived negative notions of students’ capacity and tap the potential of every child.”*

(*Unspoken Culture Clash*, continued from Page 3)

2006), thus influencing the responses and interactions of teachers with students. As a result, students further disengage. And these behaviors can be seen as early as the elementary years with even greater distancing occurring at the secondary level (Sullivan, Riccio & Reynolds, 2008).

Unfortunately, responses to student disengagement exacerbate a culture of blame directed at the individual student (Langhout & Mitchell, 2008; Robledo Montecel, 2000), rather than recognizing the deficit that privileges select groups and marginalizes or excludes others, especially those of racial and culturally diverse backgrounds (Weinstein, Curran & Tomlinson-Clarke, 2003). When teachers are compelled to enforce behavioral expectations from a culturally monochromatic lens, there is little or no consideration for students' experiences, cultural perspectives or identity of self.

The call to action begins with challenging every educator, regardless of leadership level, to take a reflective look at his or her own beliefs about particular individual students as well as structurally labeled groups and populations of students. Ask yourself whether or not you truly believe that equitable educational opportunities exist for every child. If not, what would it take to refine and reconnect with each student in positive, supportive and meaningful ways?

To be accepting of color and monetary blindness is not enough. Educators must:

- Take emotional risks that challenge beliefs about perceived student abilities;
- Establish two-way positive communication with students so they have voice and purpose in learning through lenses of diversity;
- Be conscientious of the various discourse styles and communication within represented cultures;
- Develop an awareness, appreciation and acceptance of different cultural behaviors outside your own;
- Embrace the multiplicities of students' ideals, values and experiences; and
- Engage families in the decision-making process of the classroom and the school.

Equitable access for all children will continue to be a distant dream when marginalization is fueled by the silent constructs, such as the normative foundation of a White, middle-class culture, of learning within the educational system. Teachers' negative perceptions, exacerbated by these silent constructs, influence the identities and values that children develop from their educational experiences. As long as the educational setting continues to mirror these current embedded values, educators will continue to compare and categorize children into "the good" or one of "those" students.

Embracing diversity as a foundation for self-efficacy and leadership will drive changes that result in equity for all children. It will push educators to re-examine the deficit connotations that linger in the educational context, thus striving for a shift in capitalizing on the strengths of teacher practice and sharing in the teaching and learning processes. It requires that we become cognizant of our preconceived negative notions of students' capacity and tap the potential of every child.

Now is the time to examine the current belief system that is exclusionary of the majority population of diversified learners (NCES, 2009) and take immediate action to rectify it. When the teacher consciously begins this transformative process, mountains can be moved and new pathways can be created for all students.

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- IDRA School Holding Power portal (for Texas high schools)
- Six Goals of Educational Equity
- IDRA policy update on disciplinary alternative education programs in Texas (free publication online)
- Video on high expectations of students

Visit [www.idra.org](http://www.idra.org) for more information.

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## Texas Accountability – A Fast Track for Some; A Dead End for Others

by Josie Danini Cortez, M.A.

“I can tell you right now who’s going to drop out of school.” It’s been 10 years, but I still remember that second grade teacher’s words. There was absolutely no doubt in her mind that she could accurately predict who wouldn’t make it. Not surprisingly, she was referring to children who were minority, who came from low-income families, and whose first language wasn’t English. She believed all children can learn – except for those over there.

There is an impressive array of research that tells us that teacher expectations matter for their students’ success. Three decades ago, researchers were studying the effects of teachers’ expectations as self-fulfilling prophecies for their students. In the 1980s, Beady and Hansell’s research showed that African American teachers in a predominantly African American elementary school were more likely to expect their African American students to enroll in and graduate from college than were White teachers in the same school (1981). In 2004, Dee’s research found that same-race teacher-student assignment significantly increased the math and reading achievement both of African American students and of White students. That same year, García and Ortiz published their study on the misplacement and overrepresentation of English language learners (ELLs) in special education programs, often a result of teachers’ low expectations for ELL students, “Teachers sometimes judge students’ competence on the basis of race, sex, socio-economic, linguistic and cultural differences, rather than on actual abilities” (2004).

Many teachers are dedicated to ensuring that all students succeed in school and in life. But there are also those teachers and administrators who believe that some children and youth will never succeed and who go into triage mode and spend their time, energy and school resources with those children they believe “will make it,” while ignoring others.

Reinforcing these low expectations are accountability standards that say your school is *acceptable* if only 50 percent of students pass, for example, the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS). Would you get on an airplane that is rated *acceptable* with those kinds of accountability standards, knowing you have a 50-50 chance of getting to your destination?

And now this belief system is bolstered by our own Texas State Legislature. In “Texas Policy-makers Live Up to Their Own Low Expectations – A Post Legislative Session Assessment of Changes Proposed and Reforms Adopted in 2009,” Dr. Albert Cortez points to a series of regressive legislative changes that include differentiated curriculum track, including – a “college bound” track and a “career-technical track” (2009). If a school has retained a student at least once before the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, then he or she is placed into the career-technical track (remember the old voc-ed track). The student’s parents will be required to approve the change, but we know all too well that many parents will be asked questions like: “Do you want your child to take all these required college courses or do you want him to graduate?” Once on this track, students will be given fewer mathematics and science courses and less rigorous ones at that – precisely those gatekeeper courses they will need if they are going to succeed in two- or four-year colleges.

We can safely predict that the train on the “career-technical” track will be filled with mostly minority, low-income, and ELL students. Meanwhile, schools will provide the more rigorous curriculum of four years each of English, mathematics, science, and social studies for those students they believe are college bound.

This point is underscored by IDRA’s President & CEO: “Today, our public schools are losing tens of thousands of students every year. (cont. on Page 6)

*“Many teachers are dedicated to ensuring that all students succeed in school and in life. But there are also those teachers and administrators who believe that some children and youth will never succeed.”*

(Texas Accountability, continued from Page 5)

And we only have a 5 percent higher education participation rate. That rate is a mere 3.7 percent for Hispanic students... But rather than embracing the challenge, some state leaders seem intent on lowering expectations. Unfortunately the new 'accountability' plans... do not result in... the creation of schools that educate all students to a true level of college readiness. In fact, these measures will have a devastating effect on our state." (2009)

So how does one change the trajectory? You begin by examining your own beliefs – do you fundamentally believe that not all students can succeed? Whatever the answer, carefully and honestly examine what you are doing to make that belief a reality. Because, what you think about students and what you do for them every-day matters. You, as a teacher or a principal or a policymaker, were once a second-grader and someone believed in you. There were some who didn't, perhaps because you were an English language learner or low-income or minority, but someone along the way gave you a chance. And now it is your turn to be that person and to believe in someone's success – even if they or others don't see it yet.

That fundamental shift in belief can be one of the most powerful predictors of success, but it has to be matched by action. So believe that all children can and will succeed, and believe in your own capacity to transform your school so that it works for all children. If you need support, ask for it. And remember that you are not alone. Connect with your community, parents, teachers, administrators – anyone who will take a stand with you to ensure that children have everything they need to succeed in school. Use IDRA's Quality School Action Framework and other IDRA resources to help with that transformation (Robledo Montecel, 2005).

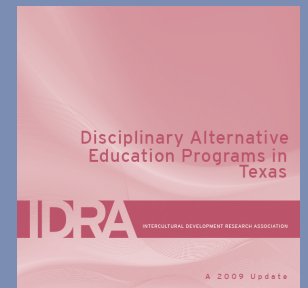
When the 81<sup>st</sup> Texas State Legislature or the legislature of any state tells its schools that all children can learn, except for those over there, don't believe it. Instead, take up the challenge to prove them wrong. Show them that all children have inherent value and promise, and it is up to schools to acknowledge, nurture and ensure their success. "Those over there" are now the majority of students in Texas schools; more than half are low-income, and one in six is ELL. We had better prove them wrong,

## Disciplinary Alternative Education Programs in Texas – An Update

by Albert Cortez, Ph.D., & Josie D. Cortez, M.A.

Almost 10 years ago, IDRA gave voice to the thousands of Texas public school students who were being criminalized, ostracized and stigmatized for "offenses" that were formerly managed by a simple timeout or even a visit to the principal's office with its seminal assessment of Texas DAEPs. IDRA's latest policy update released March 2009, shows that in the last decade, more than three quarters of a million students have been sent to DAEPs. Four out of five students of them are not there because of serious offenses. Put simply, DAEPs are a mess. They don't work for kids, they don't work for schools, and they don't work for Texas.

Available from IDRA for \$7.00 plus shipping, or free online at [www.idra.org](http://www.idra.org).



because our future and our children's future depends on it.

### Resources

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# How One Group of Families Explored Clues about their Children's Math Education

by Aurelio M. Montemayor, M.Ed.

When parents in one school district received a letter from the school announcing that their children's high school was not meeting the federal requirements for adequate yearly progress, IDRA staff representing the Texas Parent Information and Resource Center reviewed with families the school's data on the School Holding Power Portal. IDRA developed the School Holding Power Portal as a tool for parents and communities to assess the quality of their children's high schools in Texas. The families in this district quickly noted that their children's algebra test scores were the reason for the school being rated poorly.

A committee of parents decided to investigate the causes more fully, assuming that one reason for the problem was the prevalence of unqualified or mis-assigned math teachers at the school. But, they discovered that not only did the teachers have the appropriate credentials to teach high school math, they also were experienced teachers.

This particular school has a student population that is 90 percent Hispanic. It is also a Title I school due to its high proportion of economically disadvantaged students.

As the group of parents continued to explore reasons for the school's poor math education, a parent shared that, in a recent conversation with the school's math department chair, she learned that the teachers as a whole assumed that only 10 percent of the students at that high school were capable of handling the challenges of algebra.

Though it is important to ensure that teachers are appropriately certified and teaching in their area of expertise, there are other key factors, such as attitudes and low expectations toward students and families that dramatically affect teaching quality.

The parents worked over time with their school and later formed the first PTA *Comunitario* (a community-based PTA).

## IDRA School Holding Power Portal

Key data to help you assess your high school.

Features to help your school-community-parent group work together.

IDRA's School Holding Power Portal is available free online at <http://www.idra.org/portal> to assist school-community-parent groups. Organized around IDRA's Quality Schools Action Framework, the portal is a web-based tool that 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.

IDRA's president and CEO has stated: "Community oversight is a critical missing ingredient in effective and accountable dropout prevention efforts at the local level. 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."

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Additional resources are available online at [http://www.idra.org/Texas\\_IDRA\\_PIRC.htm](http://www.idra.org/Texas_IDRA_PIRC.htm)

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## Focus: Teaching Quality

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*“Teaching quality is about the men and women who dedicate their lives to educating our children. It is also about providing the training, mentoring, coaching and professional development that nurtures teachers’ development and success.”*

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

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- “Continuities with Lessons in Dropout Prevention,” featuring María “Cuca” Robledo Montecel, Ph.D.

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