

Strengthening Schools’ “Immune Systems” to Fight Mediocrity and Failure

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

In the November-December 2005 issue of the *IDRA Newsletter*, Dr. María “Cuca” Robledo Montecel, IDRA executive director, presented a model for assessing school conditions and outcomes, identifying leverage points for improvement, and informing action (2005). This Quality Schools Action Framework is based on experience and empirical evidence that emerges from existing theories of change. The framework and related definitions are available on the IDRA web site (www.idra.org). This article examines ways to strengthen school capacity.

The human body is equipped with an immune system that protects it from outside biological influences. A school is like a human body. It has an “immune system” that equips it with the capacity to fend off internal and external influences that hinder its ability to successfully educate all children. For purposes of this article, *capacity* refers to a school’s *immune system* that, when activated, has an extraordinary ability to fight hurtful influences. Just like the biological immune system, schools have a first line of defense

to continuously ward off damaging influences and a capacity to strengthen this line of defense through external intervention and assistance.

Understanding and banking on this capacity for self-renewal is basic to finding effective remedies to many education problems. This article demonstrates how this immune system can ensure that all of a school’s interacting parts can be aligned to create a healthy school by: (1) describing what constitutes a healthy school, (2) briefly discussing two major woes that threaten a healthy school’s existence and functionality, and (3) outlining ways to build up a school’s immune system.

What is a Healthy School?

A healthy school may be described in two interdependent ways: (1) consistency and quality of outcomes as defined through success of all students regardless of ethnicity, race or socioeconomic status, and (2) access to strong and decisive governance and leadership, teaching quality, and a world class curriculum.

A healthy school has great accomplishments in student academic

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performance, a strong student holding power ability, no achievement gaps among student subgroups, high graduation rates, high college preparation rates as demonstrated through high college entrance examination scores, high college enrollment and graduation rates, and strong community and parent support for the school.

Also, a healthy school is filled with student excitement, engagement and inquiring minds that thirst for knowledge by questioning, hypothesizing and discovering. A healthy school draws strength from its leaders, teachers, community and parents. Its leaders are committed to excellence and equity for all students, its teachers are qualified and ensure that all students have access to knowledge, its community fully supports the school’s efforts, and its parents are the unquestionable and best partners in education. With today’s demands for excellence, healthy schools must be in a constant state of improvement.

Mediocrity and a dismal failure to teach students from diverse backgrounds and of low socioeconomic status are the two major illnesses that threaten the viability of our schools.

Threats to School Health

Unfortunately, a healthy school is a much-sought after luxury in many communities. *Mediocrity* and a dismal failure to teach students from diverse backgrounds and of low socioeconomic status are the two major illnesses that threaten the viability of our schools.

Mediocrity is defined as a paralysis of an educational institution that maintains the status quo regardless of its effectiveness, is content with its limited capacity to produce excellence, believes that improvement is out of its reach, and masquerades mediocrity as excellence. A school should look for signs of mediocrity and take immediate action. Some signs of mediocrity in schools are the following.

Misplaced and discouraged innovation. Mediocre schools make changes that fail to target critical areas of need. They fake change, are

overly cautious, and do not promote innovativeness. Their leaders fail to share and promote leadership among staff. No risks are taken.

Blame the students and community. It is not uncommon for a mediocre school to exonerate itself of all blame for ineffectiveness. Mediocre administrators and teachers firmly believe that student performance in their school can never reach the level of excellence that other schools reach supposedly because their students are not capable and because parents and community are uncooperative.

The “now” is the limit. Mediocre schools grow sour in their student performance because they feel that the limit has been met given the students they have and the community that those students come from. Because of that circumstance, their school cannot

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The STAR Center

10 Years of Making a Difference

by Josie Danini Cortez, M.A., and Albert Cortez, Ph.D.

Sankofa, a word from the Twi language of West Africa, is a symbol of the wisdom in learning from the past in the building of our future, of looking back as one moves forward. It is a symbol that resonates with the Intercultural Development Research Association's STAR Center as the federally-funded comprehensive regional assistance centers end after 10 years of operation. As with Sankofa, this is a good time to look back as we move forward. It is a good time to take the best from the past and the lessons from struggles and achievements to help inform and guide the future of professional development and technical assistance.

Since the inception in 1995 of the comprehensive centers, the centers have pioneered work in the delivery of many differentiated technical assistance and professional development services once provided by a loosely-connected collection of specialty centers that focused on limited focus areas. IDRA's STAR Center was one of 15 comprehensive centers originally authorized under Title XIII of the *Improving America's Schools Act* passed by the U.S. Congress in 1995.

Re-authorized by Congress under

the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB), the STAR Center supported the second U.S. Department of Education strategic goal of NCLB to improve student achievement. Toward this end, the STAR Center objectives targeted four areas of focus:

- Ensuring that all students read on grade level by the third grade;
- Improving teacher and principal quality;
- Improving the performance of all high school students; and
- Improving mathematics achievement of all students.

Under the leadership of IDRA's Dr. Abelardo Villarreal, who served as project director for the center, the STAR Center has been a collaboration among IDRA, the Charles A. Dana Center at the University of Texas at Austin, and RMC Research Corporation. This collaboration persisted over the 10-year span, and lessons were learned about coordinating many technical assistance and professional development efforts, and complementing and capitalizing on distinctive organizational strengths.

Over the past 10 years, the STAR Center staff experienced firsthand how focused technical assistance contributed to the positive changes

in education in Texas. As the number of students has increased in Texas schools, including minority students and English language learners, so have achievement levels. Improvements in student achievement resulted in decreases in the number of schools rated unacceptable and increases in schools deemed "exemplary" by our state accountability system.

STAR Center contributions to improvements in Texas public education ranged from improving teacher capacity to teach English language learners in core content areas, to identifying critical characteristics of high-poverty, high-performing schools. Highlights of the STAR Center's impact include the following.

- The Texas Reading Success Network, a technical-assistance program that helped targeted schools make effective use of the state's professional development programs to help teachers in kindergarten through third grade implement the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) in reading and supported improvements in student reading achievement.
- The STAR Center's study, "*Hope for*

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Urban Education: A Study of Nine High-Performing, High-Poverty, Urban Elementary Schools,” of “turnaround” schools (nine urban elementary schools around the country that made dramatic gains in student achievement in a relatively short time). These high-poverty, high-minority schools showed impressive academic results; in fact, they attained higher levels of achievement than most schools in the nation. Further, they achieved results in reading and mathematics that surpassed the achievement of students in affluent suburban schools.

- The Migrant Program Integrated Planning and Decision Making Institute designed and facilitated by the STAR Center that offered teams of key stakeholders from local school districts and community the opportunity to:
 - ❖ Discuss migrant education program best practices,
 - ❖ Identify data collected on migrant students,
 - ❖ Determine additional data needs,
 - ❖ Review the seven areas of concern, and
 - ❖ Develop an action plan based on evidence of need.
- Professional development and technical assistance to low performing schools in the Education Service Center Region X, and to other service centers across Texas, to improve high school student performance in mathematics and reading, exceeding the expected Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) scores in reading and mathematics for participating schools.
- Assisting schools in aligning curriculum and instruction with the TAKS through regional institutes on research-based mathematics teaching strategies that stressed the

use of manipulatives, increasing mathematics scores for almost all of the participating schools.

Consistently, throughout all of our work, the STAR Center focused on what makes a difference for students. That meant working with everyone who matters in the education of students: teachers, parents and families, administrators, state agency staff, and federal staff. STAR Center staff brought years of experience, expertise and uncompromised dedication, capitalizing on the strength of our individual partners as well as the collaborative strength of our national network to every classroom, principal’s office and conference center that hosted these efforts.

Over the 10 years, there have been many important accomplishments in Texas education that have made a positive difference for schoolchildren. The STAR Center contributed to these accomplishments, sometimes teacher by teacher, other times campus by campus, sometimes at the state or national level, and always positively influencing and impacting the quality of education provided to Texas students. As rigorous evaluation and research of these efforts showed, the STAR Center took the most appropriate and valid research and applied it in a way that worked for students and their teachers. Over these 10 years, the STAR Center served over 100,000 clients, most of them teachers and administrators. Nine out of 10 clients surveyed in 2003 (94 percent) reported that STAR Center services had impacted their work.

Moving Forward

As we look forward, there is great clarity about what is needed to continue to make a difference in Texas classrooms. Our insights come from years of trial, error and great success. Despite the progress, there is still much that is left to do in Texas classrooms and classrooms across the country so that no child is left behind.

In Texas, we face challenges at the state and local levels of new accountability requirements, new Title III regulations, high in-grade retention rates and high dropout rates in our schools, a severe shortage of qualified teachers and limited access to few resources. Compounding these challenges is an era of declining state investment in public education and ongoing state policy changes that hamper continuity. Many of these challenges, like those that came before, can be met through effective technical assistance.

The STAR Center has made an extraordinary impact and has some lessons to share, lessons that build on the best of what was done. Following are some things to remember.

Everything begins and ends with relationships. The most effective technical assistance efforts are based on establishing a long-term relationship with clients. There are many consultants who offer technical assistance and professional development but few who work *together* with schools and state education agencies in an in-depth, close manner. Most STAR Center efforts worked, in large part, because of the trust established between the client and provider.

Credible staff are needed with a strong background of working in schools. Content expertise is important, but it is not sufficient. People are more apt to listen to those who also have been in the trenches and understand firsthand the struggles and challenges faced by first-line personnel, including teachers, administrators and support staff. Importantly, they have to be able to see beyond the struggles and help with solutions. Coaching, demonstrating and modeling were key components of our most successful efforts.

Data and research can be used to inform. Opportunities for success are enhanced by helping clients understand the benefits of using data to



Gulf Coast States Educators Meeting Educating Students Displaced by the Recent Hurricanes

by Josie Danini Cortez, M.A.

On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina ravaged the Gulf Coast states with unprecedented fury, making it the worst natural disaster this country has ever seen. A few weeks later, Hurricane Rita hit Texas. Tens of thousands of people were left homeless and evacuated to nearby states. Hospitals and schools were in shambles, some never to re-open. This tragedy mobilized individuals and institutions from around the country and the world, wanting to help.

A few months later, it still is not business as usual for the Gulf Coast states, but there is hope and much work underway to reclaim what was lost. Some of that work is focused on the most vulnerable – the children. Thousands have been displaced in new schools where nothing is familiar. How do schools best serve these students?

To begin to answer this question, the Intercultural Development Research Association brought together leadership from the hurricane-stricken Gulf Coast states of Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas in September 2005 to identify issues, create solutions and identify resource needs for schools with displaced children.

This summary highlights the unprecedented dialogue and is intended to inform decision-makers as they work

in the best interest of children.

“All of us have particular roles and responsibilities in the institutions and organizations that we are a part of, and sometimes those roles require of us some looking at very specific things like rules, regulations, and what will be of NCLB,” stated Dr. María Robledo Montecel, IDRA executive director. “I think the way to get through that and to find solutions that will work is to come back always to what is good for our kids in times like these.”

Participants and Issues

Educators came from Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas to work on this issue, some of them having lost their

own homes. Joining school principals, state education agency administrators, researchers, and community liaisons was Darla Marburger, deputy assistant secretary for policy at the U.S. Department of Education.

Issues in four primary areas were discussed by the participants:

- State testing, assessment and diagnosis;
- Instruction, curriculum and teaching quality;
- Record-keeping; and
- Parent and community involvement.

Following is what emerged. A list of resources is available on Page 15. Also, a CD-ROM is available from IDRA

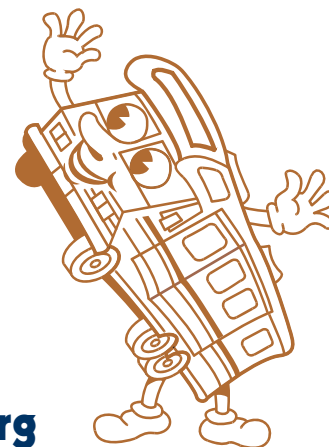
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with more information.

State Testing, Assessment and Diagnosis

“We need to make sure that these students count, that they are assessed, that they are instructed, that they get every single service and any other benefit that every student in those schools receives,” stated Ms. Marburger. “We have to make sure that education does not become another casualty of the storm.”

Issues Raised

- The lack of curriculum and testing alignment across states, particularly for high-stakes testing and standards. Graduation assessments – Are seniors going to be able to graduate in other states?
- The lack of available records, especially, for special education students. As an example, all students in Louisiana are assessed but some documentation is not available for placement decisions.
- There are not enough counselors to deal with trauma and missing parents.
- There is a shortage of personnel and monies to hire staff, purchase materials, etc.
- Students’ high mobility – students may have moved from New Orleans to Houston, began school in Houston and have been moved suddenly to another state.
- The uneven distribution of displaced students across school districts.

Solutions Offered

- The immediate solution to issues of assessment and diagnosis is for the receiving school to assess, diagnose and place students to begin intervention immediately.
- Schools should also listen to parents. If parents say their children are third grade students or were in a special

program, then that is where they should be placed.

- States can and should take advantage of flexibility. There is a letter from the U.S. Department of Education to the Council of Chief State School Officers that allows states to delay provisions in the law, e.g., that not meeting adequate yearly progress (AYP) can have consequences delayed for states receiving large infusions of displaced students.
- States can create a subgroup of “displaced” students for analyses. They would still count for determining AYP, in an effort to be accountable for all students. Schools will be able to show growth as well.
- States can also work toward greater alignment, uniform recording and assessment across state systems (similar to the migrant education system).
- Schools should access experts for support, including staff development with teachers and counselors (targeted support) and should access available resources and services such as the American Red Cross and mental health services, and teachers and counselors who are out of work.
- Social workers can help coordinate these services. Most importantly, schools must provide stability and predictability for children.
- Federal monies will be available to school districts (local education agencies in Texas; state education agencies in Louisiana and Mississippi) on quarterly basis.

Resource Needs Identified

- Someone is needed to facilitate access to student databases across states that are password-protected but available to state education agencies.
- Identifying, accessing and coordinating resource needs (e.g., skilled diagnosticians).

Instruction, Curriculum and Teaching Quality

Ms. Marburger stated: “I heard stories that were heart wrenching. For example, in the Dallas area there was a little girl who was leaving her classroom to go to a school assembly. She was a kindergarten student, and her class had filed into the hallway and she had followed them into the hallway. She ran back into the classroom to grab her backpack and lunch box. Her teacher said: ‘Oh, that’s okay, Hon. You can leave those there. They’ll be there when we get back.’ She looked at her teacher and said, ‘You just can’t count on that anymore.’”

Issues Raised

- Can the student-teacher ratio be waived in receiving schools?
- Will displaced students need to take the state-mandated tests, such as the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS)?
- Can a national normed test be used instead of the state assessment?
- How can certification of evacuee teachers be determined? Can emergency certification for teachers be extended?
- What do displaced students need to know and be able to do, as it relates to the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS)?
- How do parents and communities keep informed of what is happening in schools?
- A side-by-side comparison of graduation requirements by state is needed in order to see and address the different credit requirements. The greatest concern is with 11th and 12th grade students.
- How prepared are teachers to help students cope with trauma, poverty, diversity, perceptions and misperceptions?
- If students move from public school to private school or vice versa, it

may be difficult to access student records.

Solutions Offered

- Place students in their home-state curriculum.
- Establish reciprocity between states.
- Enter courses into a database for each state to review to make appropriate determination.
- Provide cross-cultural communication training that celebrates diversity and builds on uniqueness, strengths, high expectations, opportunity and achievement.
- Hire the many displaced teachers looking for work.

Record-Keeping

Ronald Love, special assistant for state schools and special projects at the Mississippi State Department of Education, stated: “We’re doing everything we can do to get schools operational. By the middle of October, even in those towns where you saw nothing but sticks, if there’s a school, we’re working real hard to try to get them back up. We’re doing everything in our power to get the feeling of normal, everyday, regular, communities healing... The state department of education has been going through a personality change. We’re working real hard to try to make that personality one of assistance, of encouraging, of resource building... We’re trying to be a positive force in that whole process.”

Issues Raised

- It is difficult to track students (school-to-school and district-to-district), especially placement of special education and other students relying solely on parents for information.
- No private schools in Louisiana have common records. Every private school kept its own records, and *half of all Louisiana students* were enrolled in private schools.

- What are the requirements for recordkeeping and accountability as it relates to Texas?
- How do schools access the information needed for proper grade placement in order for students to benefit from best practices?
- Discrepancies between districts on student enrollment and grade-level data results in placing students according to age and self reports.
- Do seniors receive diplomas from the receiving school or the sending school?
- Who can have access to student data while ensuring confidentiality, and how do we make sure Texas knows how Louisiana schools operated?
- What are the responsibilities of the sending school and the receiving school?
- Have graduation plans for seniors matched diplomas (are they the same or different)? Do the programs across states match?
- How do schools manage the immediate needs of special education students; every special education student needs to have a review.
- Information can get bottlenecked. There need to be better ways to get information and ensure confidentiality.

Solutions Offered

- The first school (defined as the home school) that the student is enrolled in is responsible for the records.
- Make a request (governor to governor) to gain access to student data and establish a “SWAT” team who has experience transferring data from state to state.
- Establish a special department at the Texas Education Agency staffed by Louisiana staff to help Texas access student records.
- Examine past practices following disasters and see how student records were maintained and accessed.

Resource Needs

- Texas needs to create a record system that becomes a central repository for all displaced students (similar to the Texas PEIMS).
- There needs to be an articulation agreement between state departments to facilitate data access.
- Districts need an explanation of “homeless” to understand what that means for students and their families.
- The federal government needs to provide funds to school districts to support students who are homeless, in special education, in Carl Perkins, etc. Also needed are federal funds to support Louisiana staff who are housed at the Texas Education Agency to help with data retrieval and management.

Parent and Community Involvement

Maria Ferrier, executive director of external funding and grants for the Southwest Independent School District in San Antonio stated: “We’re here to listen to you, to work hand-in-hand with you, for what we can do for those children as individuals and what they’re going through. To get them to the place where they can concentrate on reading and where they can concentrate on math and science. So as we work together, we will be asking you for your advice about your children and what we can do to make them our children.”

Issues Raised

- Students coming from one community into another community where everything and everyone is different from what they have known.
- How to help students become engaged in the learning process in their new community.
- Finding district resources to work with the incoming population.
- Finding a way to embrace the new student population and integrate

Tools for

Teaching Quality is Central to School Capacity Building

The *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) requires that by the end of this school year, all teachers in core subject areas must be “highly qualified.” Highly qualified teachers must have earned at least a bachelor’s degree, be fully certified (or possess an alternative certification), and have passed a state competency exam in the subject in which they are teaching. In addition to teaching out-of-field, another area of need to be addressed particularly in complying with NCLB, is the number of teachers who hold emergency permits. Such permits do not satisfy the requirements of “highly qualified” teachers.

Secondary students in low-performing schools are “twice as likely as those in high-performing schools to be taught by teachers who are not certified in the subjects they are teaching.” Further, “Teachers in high-poverty, high-minority schools are less likely to have teaching experience than their colleagues in low-poverty, higher performing schools” (Humphrey et al., 2005).

To meet NCLB goals for the benefit of all children, states must address serious obstacles facing the teacher labor market. They must, for example, improve school finance equity; remove barriers to teacher mobility and the allocation of experienced, highly qualified teachers to the districts and schools confronting shortages; address the needs for appropriate preparation and mentoring of newer teachers; and strengthen recruitment and professional development programs, particularly in the core areas of math and science and in quality teaching for students with limited English proficiency and students with disabilities (Darling-Hammond and Sykes, 2003). The good news is that with greater capacity to improve teaching quality, school systems will not only be in a position to meet NCLB standards, but also to establish policies and practices that can have lasting, sustainable impact.

A Snapshot of What IDRA is Doing

Developing leaders – Through a series of MathSmart! Institutes, IDRA is delivering professional

development training to secondary teachers to strengthen their leadership and efficacy in closing achievement gaps and increasing student achievement in secondary mathematics. The institutes also model the integration of computers into mathematics curricula that makes content accessible to all students.

Conducting research – IDRA’s annual attrition study examines dropout trends among Texas high school students. This research, along with data on teaching quality and other key factors that contribute to student success, is forming the backbone of IDRA’s collaboration with communities and schools to analyze needs and identify ways to strengthen schools. A recent statewide summit on school holding power, *Graduation Guaranteed/ Graduación Garantizada*, convened by IDRA and the League of United Latin American Citizens, kicked off a local and statewide initiative in Texas that will build such partnerships, informed by quality data, for change.

Informing policy – IDRA has worked closely with the Texas Education Agency to assess statewide needs for improvement in teaching quality and retention and to develop solutions. To strengthen policy and practice, IDRA designed, implemented and evaluated the first teacher retention effort funded by TEA, enhancing the quality and retention of minority teachers and teachers in critical shortage areas. Also, IDRA’s transitions-to-teaching projects are increasing the number of fully-qualified and credentialed English as a second language teachers and bilingual teachers in high-need schools.

Engaging communities – IDRA’s Preparing Qualified Teachers of English Language Learners: A Tri-State Symposium of English Language Learners held in Little Rock brought together more than 100 educators, administrators and community representatives from “hyper-growth states” for a forum on serving growing numbers of students who are English language learners.

Tools for Action continued on next page

Action

Participants learned about teacher certification options and accelerated teacher preparation programs, actions for institutions of higher learning to improve access and quality of teacher preparation, and ways to tap minority community resources for teacher candidates and paraprofessionals.

What You Can Do

Get informed about NCLB and how it affects students, parents and teachers at <http://www.ed.gov/nclb/landing.jhtml> and through publications prepared by the Public Education Network at http://www.publiceducation.org/pubs_nclb.asp. To learn more about effective community-school partnerships to strengthen schools, you might look at:

- Bilby, S. *Community-driven School Reform: Parents Making a Difference in Education* (Mott Mosaic, 2002).
- Desjean-Perotta, B. "The Middle School Achievement Project: A Grassroots Effort Improves Middle Level Education," *Middle School Journal* (2003).
- Cunningham, C. "Engaging the Community to Support Student Success," *ERIC Digest 157* (April 2002). Clearinghouse on Educational Policy Management, College of Education, University of Oregon.
- Kroll, J., Sexton, R.R., Raimondo, B.N., Corbett, H.D., & Winston, B. *Setting the Stage for Success: Bringing Parents into Education Reform as Advocates for Higher Student Achievement* (Lexington, Ky.: Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, 2001).

Get results. Based on the teaching quality needs in your own neighborhood public schools, you can initiate and/or expand partnerships among educators, school administrators, parents and local community members that can jointly work toward better teaching quality. Communities and schools can monitor the plan for meeting NCLB teaching quality requirements this year; press for greater school finance equity; and build wider support for teaching and curricula that serve diverse learners, such as bilingual education and ESL programs. Through www.GiveKidsGoodSchools.com, a national campaign led

by the Public Education Network, you can e-mail your governor calling for good teachers be a top priority in your state. Through the Public Education Network and locally sponsored hearings on NCLB, you can express your view on how NCLB is affecting your community and school, <http://www.publiceducation.org/index.asp>.

For more information on the use of emergency permits in Texas, see: "Access to Quality Teaching – Number and Distribution of Emergency Permit Assignments in Texas Public Schools," by Albert Cortez (*IDRA Newsletter*, May 2005) available online at: <http://www.idra.org/newsltr/2005/may/albert.htm#Art1>.

Additional Resources

- Canales, P, and J. Harris. "Migrant Service Coordination: Effective Field-based Practices." In Salinas, C., and M.E. Franquiz, *Scholars in the Field: The Challenges of Migrant Education* (Charleston, W.Va.: AEL, 2004).
- Darling-Hammond, L. and G. Sykes. "Wanted: A National Teacher Supply Policy for Education: The Right Way to Meet the 'Highly Qualified Teacher' Challenge," *Education Policy Analysis Archives* (2003, September 17). <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v11n33/>.
- Villarreal, A. "Quality Teaching: A School Reform Dilemma," *IDRA Newsletter* (San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development Research Association, April 2003).
- National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education – A coalition of major education, community, public service, and advocacy organizations working to create strong family and school partnerships in all schools: <http://www.ncpie.org>.
- Parent Information Resource Centers – This site provides information regarding federal legislation and equips families with the proper skills to support their child's learning (funded by the U.S. Department of Education): <http://www.pirc-info.net>. Visit the IDRA Texas PIRC at <http://www.idra.org/pirc/pirc.htm>.

expect and should not expect more than what it is accomplishing.

Systemic deception is the rule rather than the exception. Mediocre administrators and teachers circumvent policies and best practices because they have little hope and low expectations of their students and have no faith in the community served by the school. Pretexts abound for unfinished or unacceptable teaching. Dishonesty and keeping quiet about fraudulent behavior are common systemic regularities.

Unqualified staff. In mediocre schools, teachers are non-degreed, and many are teaching out of field. Administrators lack the leadership and management skills to guide a school through tough times. Teachers lack the desire and commitment to grow professionally and make a difference in the lives of students. For many, teaching is just a job, and these teachers have few accomplishments to show for their time. They lack self-efficacy and hold low expectations for themselves. They institutionalize low expectations across the school, having a negative impact on students, parents and community as a whole.

Under-funded schools and classrooms. Appropriate funding to provide the necessary opportunities to learn in a safe environment usually is missing in mediocre schools. Administrators and teachers use this lack of funding as grounds for their lack of accomplishment or their inefficiency in teaching students from diverse backgrounds.

Biased governance and leadership. The absence of leadership in the school board and the mismanagement of a school are also symptoms that contribute to mediocrity. A school board where infighting is common and micromanagement runs rampant is fertile soil to breed discontent, promote mediocrity and endorse inefficiency.

Lack of partnership with communities and parents. Schools where teachers and administrators feel foreign and have little in common with the community in which they teach become vulnerable to heartless, insensible, indifferent and mediocre teaching.

The second problem that beleaguers a school is its inability to increase the academic performance of all of its students. Many factors contribute to this. These factors are: (1) prevalent mediocrity; (2) inability to teach students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds; (3) uncaring and mediocre staff; (4) no access to a world class curriculum; (5) low academic expectations, particularly for low-income and minority students; and (6) a community that fails to require educational excellence from its schools. These factors also have a demoralizing and weakening effect on the school's immune system to protect its viability as a great equalizer.

Building a School's Immune System

How does one build up a school's immune system to deal with the two major woes that afflict schools? The first step is to assess the effectiveness of the school's critical interacting components and determine the health of each component. The box on Pages 11 and 12 provides a description of those interacting components of a healthy school.

The second step is to base the priority to act on each component in relationship to academic success and intensity of need as demonstrated through the assessment phase. Address each component starting with the ones that most directly affect student outcomes. Research has yet to establish the degree of interrelationship of the components and student outcomes.

The third step is to recognize that renewal is internal and solutions

and remedies to mediocrity and school failure must emerge from the school's immune system with strong support from external resources. Autoimmune forces (internal forces such as sabotage, disruption and incapacitation) must not stall the school's immune system. It must create an environment of support and determination to guarantee the success of its remedies.

Excellence is prized; mediocrity and student failure must be out of favor. Schools must recognize that they have an immune system that must be activated and exploited. Solutions to education problems must emerge from within and have support from external agencies to be successful.

All students need to have access to a high-quality education that prepares them not only to go on to college but also lays the groundwork for a life that includes the potential for economic success, full participation as a citizen of a vibrant democracy, and the ability to enrich themselves with ongoing learning experiences.

Resources

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Immune Systems – continued on Page 12

School's Interactive Components and Description

Components	Description
<p>Fair Funding is the availability of funds in a school district to support a quality educational program for <i>all</i> students.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides enough to fund a quality school program. • Provides enough additional funds for a quality school program for students with special needs. • Provides enough to fund educational programs to help students who are not having success in school. • Is fairly distributed among the various schools in the school district. • Is fairly distributed among the schools in the state.
<p>Governance is the policy making and pro-active support of a school board to support a quality educational program for <i>all</i> students in a school district.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School board actively supports a quality educational program for all students. • School board sets policies that support programs for students who are successful academically. • School board sets policies that do not affect negatively the quality of education that some students receive. • School board provides for funding and other resources to implement policies that support programs for students who are not successful academically. • School board supports efforts by school administration to ensure high achievement and no achievement gaps among different student groups. • School board tracks and acts on inequalities within the various schools' academic achievement performance. • School board tracks and acts on inequalities within the various schools' access to resources and quality curriculum.
<p>Leadership is the ability and inclination of administrative and supervisory personnel to deliver quality educational services to <i>all</i> students and prides itself for its ability to hold on to students in a school setting.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School leaders know the needs and educational programs for the various student populations. • School leaders know the needs of a diverse student population. • School leaders actively promote and ensure that the needs of a diverse student population are met. • School leaders represent the ethnicity of the student population in the school. • School leaders involve parents in the decisions affecting the quality of education that their children receive.
<p>School culture is an educational environment that promotes safety and high expectations for <i>all</i> students, reflects high energy and commitment across the board to do what is needed to ensure that students stay in school, and guarantees academic success for all students.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School personnel at all levels reflect attitudes and beliefs that all students can and will learn in that school. • School personnel at all levels respect and value all students regardless of ethnicity, religion and lifestyle. • All students feel safe and are able to express themselves without fear of ridicule or embarrassment. • Students from various ethnic groups respect each other and learn in a cooperative setting.
<p>Community involvement is the creation of a partnership based on respect and the shared goals of academic success and integration of the community into the decision-making processes of the school.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The community has an interest in becoming an integral part of the education community of the school. • The community takes a pro-active role in ensuring that all students receive a quality education. • The school actively promotes the involvement of the community in school activities and decisions. • The school perceives community involvement as an essential partner in its campaign to teach all students.
<p>Teaching quality is the preparation of teachers, the placement of teachers in their fields of study, and the opportunities provided teachers to grow professionally.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers have the highest preparation available to teach students from different cultures and languages. • Qualified teachers (bilingual or English as a second language teachers for English language learners) are placed in appropriate classrooms. • Teachers teach in their discipline. • Teachers have ample opportunities for professional growth.

School's Interactive Components and Description (cont'd)

Components	Description
<p>Assessment and accountability are the school practices related to fair and unbiased assessment of students and the degree to which schools take responsibility for the academic success of <i>all</i> students.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School uses fair and unbiased tests that are reliable for students from diverse cultures and languages. • School uses assessment data in planning and delivering instruction. • School communicates assessment data in a comprehensible way to parents and the community. • School feels responsible for serving a diverse student population.
<p>Curriculum is the educational programs of study, materials and other learning resources, such as technology, and their accessibility to all students.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic goals for the school are congruent with district and state goals. • Curriculum meets federal, state and local requirements. • School offers quality bilingual or ESL programs of study for English language learners. • School offers quality educational programs for students with disabilities. • School capitalizes on the power of technology to enhance the delivery of instruction. • School offers the most challenging state graduation plans available. • School has agreements with colleges and universities to offer courses that carry college credit. • Students, regardless of ethnicity or home language, have access to the most challenging graduation plans and courses.
<p>Instruction is the practices that teachers use in the classroom to deliver comprehensible instruction that prepares all students to meet academic goals and ensures that no child drops out of school.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers use appropriate teaching techniques that are aligned with student characteristics and learning styles. • Teachers feel responsible for teaching all students. • Teachers capitalize on cultural resources in the community to enhance their teaching. • Teachers articulate high expectations through their actions and beliefs. • Teachers communicate with other school personnel to coordinate the best instruction for all students.
<p>Student engagement is the school activities designed to incorporate students into the learning process and other social activities within the school that ensure academic achievement.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers know and practice the value of connecting students socially and academically. • All students believe that school personnel want them engaged in the academic and socialization processes of the school. • There is evidence that all students have access to and are supported in the academic and socialization processes of the school. • All students feel valued and respected and engage themselves in the academic and socialization challenges provided by the school.
<p>Support systems are programs and activities designed to support students academically, psychologically and socially to ensure that students reach the goals set by the school.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counseling programs are sensitive to cultural and linguistic characteristics of the student population. • Counselors are trained and committed to work with students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. • Counselors and teachers encourage and prepare all students to enroll in college. • School provides academic programs to address students who have fallen through the cracks. • School has been successful in addressing students who are falling through the cracks.

Source: Villarreal, A. Intercultural Development Research Association, 2006.

Immune Systems – continued from Page 10

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make decisions. Clients often need help using data wisely and ensuring that data are always used to serve the best interest of the student. It also is important to use varied data sources, including qualitative, teacher reflective data, and quantitative student data to guide the effort and ultimately positively impact the outcome.

Change takes time, hard work, flexibility and persistence. Every change process has its ups and downs, and the wise technical assistance provider is persistent. The successful technical assistance provider

Administrators and teachers involved in most STAR Center efforts were already caring individuals. The center provided a systematic way of channeling that, along with shared accountability, into strategies that would work for students.

recognizes that school staff at times may feel that change is an affront to their personal identities. So the effective technical assistance provider uses humor, generates buy-in from all groups, works closely with leadership, and stays attuned to the perceptions and interpretations of issues, resolving them as quickly as possible. Changes within schools themselves – changing leadership, staff and focus – can and should be anticipated and adjustments should be made as needed.

Nurturing, caring and creating a sense of urgency are keys to success in turning around low-performing schools. Creating and nurturing a culture of caring (for children and for each other), creating a sense of urgency and accountability through the use of data and research, and helping leaders establish strong consistent strategies for success are vital to the local change process. Administrators and teachers involved in most STAR Center efforts were already caring individuals. The center provided a systematic way of channeling that, along with shared

accountability, into strategies that would work for students.

Collaboration requires high degrees of trust and responsiveness to each other. Each partner in the collaboration must deliver on its promises and must do so in a way that is responsive to each partner's needs. That way, trust is built and maintained over time.

Co-create clear expectations at the beginning of any collaborative effort. When expectations are clearly understood, they are more likely to be met and relationships stay on a positive course. Collaboration is not the same as

coordination. Excellent collaboration starts with agreement about values and philosophy. It continues with agreement about division of labor.

Coordination requires understanding a division of labor and connecting points. While valuable, coordination in itself does not produce the same kind of culture for work as collaboration.

Collaboration, while sometimes not efficient, typically is more effective than doing things alone. Collaboration takes an enormous amount of time and effort, and it takes trust. However, in the best instances, collaboration produces enduring relationships, synergy and leveraging of efforts and resources, leading to greater sustainability for the project.

Clear and consistent communication is important for effective collaboration. It is important to understand the meanings of various words to the collaborative partners. At the beginning of a collaborative relationship, partners often think they understand each other only to find out

later that they defined things differently or imbued different meanings to concepts. The best results come from common understandings and internally consistent communication early in the collaboration.

Schools Can Improve on their Own, But Effective Technical Assistance Supports and Accelerates Needed Change

There is an important role for technical assistance that must be filled: helping people understand and apply best practices for serving children and youth, particularly those who come from economically disadvantaged areas, who are English language learners and who are members of families that are migratory. Their needs are to some extent unique. History has taught us that if there are no assistance centers devoted to help schools in serving their needs, some students are likely to be ill-served, underserved and in a few circumstances un-served. Schools want to be successful with all students, but sometimes external support is needed.

The STAR Center played an important role in moving forward together with schools. The center accomplished much, given our limited funding and perpetually uncertain future. In Texas, as in the rest of the country, the efforts of the STAR Center and the comprehensive centers network have greatly contributed to increasing schools' capacity to effectively serve all children. The result is that more children are achieving, as reflected in some of the national studies tracking school reforms. Yet, the center has recognized that more improvement is needed.

Although the data indicate that education in Texas is still far from where it needs to be, there is movement in the right direction. All technical assistance

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providers need to stop, look back and make sure no one is left behind before moving forward. In contrast to many previously disconnected federal technical assistance efforts, new initiatives also must build on and extend what we have already learned in successful efforts that have been proven to work. The many schools STAR Center activities improved, and the many children whose futures are still being created day-by-day, week-by-week and month-by-month, deserve nothing less.

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Save this Date!

April 25-27, 2006

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Early Childhood Educators Institute™
San Antonio, Texas

See upcoming issues of the *IDRA Newsletter* and the IDRA web site for more information about this popular event.

www.idra.org

Highlights of Recent IDRA Activities

In October, IDRA worked with **4,447** teachers, administrators, parents, and higher education personnel through **47** training and technical assistance activities and **134** program sites in **11** states plus Brazil. Topics included:

- ◆ Literature-Based Classroom Strategies
- ◆ Dual Language Programs
- ◆ High School Retention Programs
- ◆ Integrating Teachers, Parents and Students in Improving Participation in School
- ◆ Principals Building Leadership Skills

Participating agencies and school districts included:

- ◆ Bernalillo Public Schools, New Mexico
- ◆ Detroit Public Schools, Michigan
- ◆ University of Texas at San Antonio

Activity Snapshot

The IDRA Texas Parent Information and Resource Center (PIRC) is a comprehensive, multicultural and multi-lingual parent leadership support program for strengthening partnerships between parents and schools for student success. The project 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 promotes an emerging cadre of parents committed to positive support throughout 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

For information on IDRA services for your school district or other group, contact IDRA at 210-444-1710.

Resources for States Affected by the Recent Hurricanes

Below is a listing of resources to help you work toward creating schools and classrooms where children feel they belong and will achieve.

Helping Children Cope with Hurricane Katrina

Please consider each of these general thoughts with an understanding that the levels of devastation for children will vary greatly, from one to the next, depending on what occurred for each of them during the hurricane. Also, some children may have had their greatest exposure through television and living fairly close to, but not in, the actual path of the storm. Some who live far away will have had family members in the midst of the storm. These are general guidelines and thoughts – amend as you see fit.

Developed by the Crisis Management Institute, www.cmionline.org.
http://www.cmionline.org/shop/images/cmi_cope_hurricane.pdf

Tips for Parents

This two-page guide gives suggestions for how best to support a child as he or she enters new schools at this challenging time.

Developed by the Crisis Management Institute, www.cmionline.org.
http://www.cmionline.org/shop/images/cmihk_tips_for_parents.pdf

Tips for Administrators

This two-page guide gives suggestions for how best to support your administrators as we help displaced students enter schools in our communities.

Developed by the Crisis Management Institute, www.cmionline.org.
http://www.cmionline.org/shop/images/cmi_tips_for_administrators.pdf

Tips for Counselors

This two-page guide gives suggestions for how best to support your staff as we help displaced students enter schools in our communities.

Developed by the Crisis Management Institute, www.cmionline.org.
http://www.cmionline.org/shop/images/cmi_hk_tips_for_Counsel.pdf

Tips for Teachers

This two-page guide gives suggestions for how best to support your teachers as we help displaced students enter schools in our communities.

Developed by the Crisis Management Institute, www.cmionline.org.
http://www.cmionline.org/shop/images/cmihk_tips_for_teachers.pdf

Texas Homeless Education Office

THEO provides services to students who are in homeless and highly mobile situations. The U.S. Department of Education and the Texas Commissioner of Education have indicated that students who have been displaced by the hurricanes in the Gulf Coast region are to be considered homeless. THEO is operated by the Charles A. Dana Center at the University of Texas at Austin.

<http://www.utdanacenter.org/theo/index.html>

Giving Back the Gift of Hope: A Guide for Educators Helping the Child Survivors of Hurricane Katrina

http://www.unitedwayla.org/pdffiles/2005/Educators_Guide_for_Child_Evacuees.pdf

Caring for Kids after Trauma and Death: A Guide for Parents and Professionals

http://www.aboutourkids.org/aboutour/articles/crisis_guide02.pdf

Hurricane Help for Schools, U.S. Department of Education

Web page connects schools and organizations willing to help.
<http://hurricanehelpforschools.gov/index.html>

Letter to Chief State School Officers on whether the U.S. Department of Education will waive NCLB accountability provisions regarding assessments and adequate yearly progress for areas impacted by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita (Sep 29).

<http://www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/guid/secletter/050929.html>

Request Student Records

Make requests to the Texas Education Agency at LSRhelp@sea.state.tx.us or from links at <http://tea.state.tx.us/caa/acct091605.html>.

Louisiana Policies

The Louisiana Department of Education has published all the memorandums of understandings, rulings, policies, etc., regarding displaced students and families online. <http://www.louisianaschools.net>

Louisiana Unemployment

Louisiana teachers can file for unemployment online with the Department of Labor. <http://www.laworks.net>

Louisiana TOPS Scholarships

<http://www.osfa.state.la.us>

Louisiana Children's Health Insurance Program

<http://www.lachip.org>

Louisiana Medicaid

<http://www.Medicaid.dhh.louisiana.gov>

Other Sources for Helping Children and Adolescents After a Disaster

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry
www.aacap.org

Child Study Center, New York University

<http://www.aboutourkids.org/>

National Association of School Psychologists

www.nasponline.org/

Connect for Kids

www.connectforkids.org

National Center for PTSD

www.ncptsd.va.gov

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students into the school.

- Assessing the immediate impact in receiving the new students.
- Concerns of low expectations for incoming students.
- Stereotyping of ethnic groups, cross-cultural clashes and breakouts of violence because of intolerance.
- Student mobility and the unpredictability students and families face moving from one city and school to another.

Solutions Offered

- Provide quick orientation for staff.
- Orient new families and students.
- Maintain high expectations for all students.
- Secure funding at the campus level

and distribute resources and funds appropriately.

- Tap community resources, such as the American Red Cross.
- Provide competent bilingual staff.
- Teach tolerance in all settings.

IDRA's commitment to making schools work for all children continues through the Seven-State ArtReach Symposium being held in February 2006 in Little Rock. The IDRA South Central Collaborative for Equity (the equity assistance center that serves Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas) is working with the Arkansas' Governor's Office and the Arkansas State Department of Education to use the lessons learned from the Gulf Coast states educators meeting in San Antonio

and help the thousands of displaced school children from Hurricanes Katrina, Rita and Wilma.

Invited state representatives from the governors' offices of Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas and will join with representatives from the Chief State School Officers, departments of education, state homeless education coordinators, and others to address critical issues, find solutions and identify resources.

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