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## **Engaging Schools, Parents, Students and Communities IDRA's FLEChAS Project**

**by Rosana G. Rodríguez,  
Ph.D., and Frances M.  
Guzmán, M.A.**

Research has documented parent involvement as a critical component of ensuring students' school success. And it is generally understood that parents are powerful first teachers of children through informal learning that takes place in the home and community. For more than 30 years, IDRA has promoted a community engagement model that values parents and encourages their important role as partners in education.

Yet many attempts to strengthen home-school connections often represent a one-size-fits-all approach. They do not recognize, value and build upon children's unique assets represented by culture, home language and familial contextual roots. Schools and well-intentioned educators may seek to encourage parent engagement, but they often limit parents' involvement to a peripheral role rather than a meaningful one. They shortchange a process for shared decision-making to promote positive learning outcomes and preparation for college access and

success. This is especially true for educators in under-resourced schools that serve minority children or English language learners, where parents want to engage with schools but may be intimidated, misinformed or lack skills and information about how to do so.

IDRA's model challenges schools to become more parent-friendly and inviting to community members to be full partners in decision-making. In serving a multicultural student body, schools need to honor multi-generational leaders and the wisdom they bring to teaching and learning.

They must create a culture of engagement in order to improve effectiveness of school systems. This requires a paradigm shift that values the diversity and wisdom that families and communities bring to the shared goal of educating children.

Quality multicultural materials are needed to build capacity for educators to partner effectively with parents. New tools are needed to help schools assess their progress toward building more effective engagement with parents and communities as *together* they build more responsive and supportive relationships to improve

teaching and learning for all children.

Schools can create partnerships with key community-based organizations that serve youth and families to create a web of support for every student from preschool through higher education. Cross-cultural collaboration is fostered by schools that create a climate for effective parent engagement, ultimately building a better future for communities and for the greater good of the country.

### Engaging Families

In San Antonio, IDRA is implementing effective tools and creating a web of support through its Family Leaders Engaged in Children’s Academic Success (FLEChAS) project, funded in part through a grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. This southwest region of the city has been demographically what others in the nation are becoming. It is precisely within these communities where much can be learned. They are valuable resources for cross-generational and multicultural approaches as keys to

## From students’ voices and through their eyes, we can learn much more about barriers that impede minority youth from access to quality schooling and completion of a college degree.

bridging races, languages, cultures and traditions to support student success, address the disparate dropout rates of minority students and encourage college enrollment.

Components of the FLEChAS project include: (1) IDRA’s model for parent engagement and its “parents as leaders” curriculum for leadership development; (2) capacity-building tools and training for school personnel in engaging meaningfully with parents and assessing their involvement with parents as partners; and (3) institutes to build leadership skills for students and community-based organizations.

### Student Voices

Listening to students is a critical part of engagement that helps develop a growing base of support for emerging leaders, provide skills for positive interaction, and create new networks of

intergenerational leaders who can work together in supportive ways across races and cultures. Too often, strategies for community engagement overlook the element of “student voice.”

As adults, we all share in the responsibility of supporting young people’s success in school. Therefore, it is essential for us to understand what constitutes effective engagement from a student perspective. From students’ voices and through their eyes, we can learn much more about barriers that impede access for minority youth to quality schooling and completion of a college degree. We can then take collective action to support their success more fully.

In addition to FLEChAS, IDRA is incorporating student voices as a critical component for engagement in several initiatives. As part of a

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*The Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA)* is a non-profit organization with a 501(c)(3) tax exempt status. The purpose of the organization is to disseminate information concerning equality of educational opportunity.

The *IDRA Newsletter* (ISSN 1069-5672, © 2007) serves as a vehicle for communication with educators, school board members, decision-makers, parents, and the general public concerning the educational needs of all children in Texas and across the United States.

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Portions of the contents of this newsletter were developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. However, those contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and endorsement by the federal government should not be assumed.

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# Telling the Truth

## Framing It as We See It or Being Framed

by Aurelio M. Montemayor,  
M.Ed.

In workshop sessions on family leadership in education, an IDRA trainer has sometimes asked parents and caretakers to take part in a typical graphic arts exercise. They often will draw and say: “I want my child to be bilingual and finish college and have a good job,” and “My drawing shows my children as doctors and lawyers, but really, I want them to be whatever they want.” The drawings and explanations communicate high expectations and positive dreams for their children.

In contrast, some educators at those schools refer to the same children as *at-risk*, *poor English-speakers*, and *not college material*.

Are these families on the good ship lollipop and the educators firmly planted on terra firma? Are we looking for politically correct euphemisms that cover a harsh truth?

### “Graduation Guaranteed” vs. “Preventing Dropouts”

Through our Texas IDRA Parent Information and Resource Center (PIRC), we are having a conversation with parents about college readiness and graduation. While IDRA speaks of *school holding power* to focus on the responsibility of adults in schools to

**The parent-friendly spirit is diminished every time we use terminology that frames the conversation in limited expectations and hopelessness.**

hold on to their students, many schools are having conversations about *dropout prevention*, *remediation*, *motivation exercises* and *intensive test practice rooms* for drilling on state-mandated test.

All are under the same mandate of the *No Child Left Behind Act*. But the spirit and letter of the law we each speak and act from is framed very differently.

Where some see *assets*, others see *deficits*. The premises that underlie our descriptions are actual filters and selectors of ideas and concepts represented by labels. If the premise is *richness*, then the terms will be rich, bountiful, promising and hopeful. But if it be *deficit*, clearly the words will describe what is lacking and distressful: drowning in despair.

Here is a case in point. At our recent Annual IDRA *La Semana del Niño* Early Childhood Educators Institute, I was conducting a session on six levers parents have in the Title I regulations of NCLB. To illustrate a key point about true parent engagement, I focused on the school-family-student

compact. I was presenting the compact as a dialogue, an opportunity for families and students to agree upon what their responsibilities are in the educational process and to list their expectations for the institution.

Some teachers in the audience responded that the compact was well and good, but “How are we to hold the parents responsible for keeping the agreement?” An opportunity for family dialogue was perceived as not useful in forcing a family to be responsible in the eyes of the institution.

One frame is accepting and encouraging; the other is punitive and guilt producing.

### We Must Frame It, or They’ll Get Framed, Again!

The spirit of NCLB’s Title I has evolved during the last 40 years to embrace a meaningful and dignified engagement of economically disadvantaged parents. Every iteration of the law has continued to stress the academic achievement of the students and the oversight that parents should have on schooling.

But the parent-friendly spirit is diminished every time we use terminology that frames the conversation in limited expectations and hopelessness. Many children will be left behind if we continue to frame

*Telling the Truth – continued on Page 5*

# Re-Framing the Conversation for Adult Literacy

## Information for Literacy...

IDRA's *Adult Literacy Outreach Innovations* project in the mid-1990s was a special project funded by the Texas Education Agency that focused on adult education and literacy in Texas. The goal was to create awareness about the need for literacy and to generate community support for literacy initiatives. Following is a discussion of the project's frame.

## ... Choosing Messages of Value

Outreach messages for literacy must be determined carefully. When they convey information and images that people feel connected to and when they encourage action, the effects can be both powerful and positive.

In working through the four steps (see full article), decisions must be made. In the hurry of deadlines and juggling various responsibilities, the easy answers can look attractive. While developing its campaign prototype for literacy, IDRA faced this. Some people we talked to suggested that the only way to get someone's attention is to focus on how bad illiteracy is for everyone else and to categorize people who cannot read as "lost" and needing "rescue."

In our analysis of a sampling of past literacy outreach campaigns and their messages, 19 percent contained "deficit" model messages, and only 13 percent contained clearly "valuing" messages.

The deficit model assumes that there is something wrong with a person who cannot read well and that literacy projects exist to fix the problem (Robledo Montecel, et al., 1993). The deficit way of thinking will codify a person as, in this case, an "illiterate." It uses the word "illiterate" as a noun instead of an adjective as if being illiterate is the sum total of that person's identity. Deficit-based outreach messages will attempt to appeal to people's guilt to generate action, or they will use economics to describe "illiterates" as a "drain" on society.

Paul Ilesley and Norman Stahl have studied literacy outreach efforts and have outlined four common deficit metaphors and their effects: "Unfortunately illiteracy is often discussed in relation to such striking notions as war, disease, prison and chronic unemployment both in print media and electronic media campaigns" (1993). Designed to invoke strong connotations in the public's collective mind, these metaphors portray illiteracy as a function of school language, as a disease, as a national enemy in the military sense, and as a lack of capital in a cultural banking system.

Some people argue that such metaphors are used because they are effective. But, the fact is, while messages that focus on the negative costs of illiteracy to the community, to business and to taxpayers are easy messages to communicate, any positive reactions that result from such messages have been shown to be short-lived. IDRA's goal is to create community support for literacy efforts – real support, lasting support.

Others argue that such metaphors are the only choices out there. They have become so accustomed to deficit model messages – whether associated with literacy, lawbreakers or lipstick – that they cannot see any alternatives.

Even when the intentions are good, the means do not justify the ends. The concerns raised by Ilesley and Stahl are similar to concerns raised by IDRA in its work in education. IDRA has known there are alternatives because it has demonstrated them from its inception. Its vision is to work with people to "make schools work for all children" not "make children work for all schools."

In IDRA's Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program, the stated and underlying philosophy is that *all children are valuable, none is expendable*. The program works with students that schools were about to give up on. It helps the schools and families see the youths from another perspective – as tutors, as capable of contributing, as valuable.

In a climate that says parents who do not attend school meetings obviously do not care about their children's education, IDRA chooses an alternative. IDRA works with parents and schools to see each other differently and to work with each other differently in ways that value both.

Adapted from: "Adult Literacy Outreach Innovations: *Porque Significa Tanto*," by Christie L. Goodman, APR, *IDRA Newsletter* (San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development Research Association, September 1996).

the pedagogical conversation on what they lack, what is broken and what is perceived as inadequate. Such framing is dishonest.

## No At-Risk Student Left Out Of Remediation

Many thought the term *culturally disadvantaged* had gone out with the last century, but it still raises its ugly snout. When research points to the verbal inadequacy of poor and minority families, it does not acknowledge the words and ideas that are present. There is a gap between the verbal and literacy context of poor families with middle-class English speaking families. But teachers can help children make sound-print connections from the many words and ideas they bring from whatever their context is.

More than 50 years ago, Sylvia Ashton Warner told us clearly and artfully that the Maori children brought tremendous resources to the British children in New Zealand (1986).

Paolo Freire uncovered the rich culture and habits of the tribes in the Brazilian jungles as his students were helping them learn Portuguese (1998).

Teachers working with poor White children in rural Appalachia helped their students document the rich culture of the very same families that Al Capp derided in *Li'l Abner*.

The journal, *Foxfire* that was sold in mainstream bookstores was replete with the wisdom, lore and crafts of these Appalachian families (1975).

Luis Moll and others facilitated Latino students in Arizona to document the “funds of knowledge” found in their families (2005).

In each of these cases, the frame of the conversation was that there are cultural, linguistic and experiential riches in all families. None is deficient in culture, language or ideas. It takes some work to document and align

## Re-framing is Not a Cover-up

Euphemisms (using a more palatable word for some painful or harsh reality) are not the re-framing referred to.

Re-framing means:

- Shifting the center of the conversation from the student to the institution.
- Drawing on the rich experiences all human beings bring to whatever the content is to be taught rather than cataloguing what they do not know.

Here's a sample frame (underlying assumptions; paradigm; organizing principle)

Assets	vs.	Deficits and needs
Graduation guaranteed	vs.	Dropout prevention
Valued youth	vs.	At-risk of dropping out
Fair funding of public schools	vs.	Robin Hood plan
Diversity	vs.	Culturally disadvantaged
English language learner	vs.	Limited English proficient
Public schools	vs.	Government schools

Source: *Intercultural Development Research Association, 2007.*

with current curricular standards, but not because the group is inherently deficient, it is just different.

Typically in research and educational writings, when the paucity of vocabulary in children is documented, there is no parallel documentation of the richness of experience that is expressed in other ways and for which there are many words. Even though those alternative experiences and words might not be useful in preparing for the rigors of the vocabulary norms of the elementary public school, they are nevertheless a rich resource for the teacher.

It is all in the framing. Does the child bring riches or trash? If the assumption is dross, then teachers feel they must sweep it out and replace it. And because the replacing is viewed as catching-up to middle-class linguistic and cognitive standards, it is also rigid, linear and rote-like.

Listen to the patronizing of children and families: “Poor child and family, it’s not their fault they are poor

and minority, so we need to give the child an extra dose of catch-up before he or she can participate fully in the wonderful world of learning that the middle-class child is experiencing”!?

Must we return to dreary canned curriculum with adults teaching mechanically by the number like robots drilling the sounds of the alphabet because the test will reveal that the children in fact learned the sounds and the letters? These dastardly frames for failure, paradigms of paralysis, are not the classrooms that have large picture windows facing wide vistas of learning.

## Believing Two Points Can Be Bridged

My colleagues at IDRA, Kathryn Brown and Jack Dieckmann, have brought forth another conversation that needs reframing. It involves switching the paradigm from believing that few have the ability to master higher math to understanding that math is for

# Immigrant Students' Rights to Attend Public Schools

The National Coalition of Advocates for Students (NCAS) launched its annual School Opening Alert campaign to reaffirm the legal rights of all children who reside in the United States to attend public schools, regardless of immigration status. These fliers provide information for immigrant parents about the rights of their children to attend local public schools this fall. Though NCAS has closed, IDRA continues to make this alert available. The copy of the alert below and on the following page may be reproduced and distributed as well.

## School Opening Alert

In 1982, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Plyler vs. Doe* [457 U.S. 202 (1982)] that children of undocumented workers have the same right to attend public primary and secondary schools as do U.S. citizens and permanent residents. Like other students, children of undocumented workers are required under state laws to attend school until they reach a legally mandated age.

As a result of the *Plyler* ruling, public schools may not:

- deny admission to a student during initial enrollment or at any other time on the basis of undocumented status;
- treat a student differently to determine residency;
- engage in any practices to “chill” the right of access to school;
- require students or parents to disclose or document their immigration status;
- make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; or
- require social security numbers from all students, as this may expose undocumented status.

Students without social security numbers should be assigned a number generated by the school. Adults

without social security numbers who are applying for a free lunch and/or breakfast program for a student need only state on the application that they do not have a social security number.

Recent changes in the F-1 (student) Visa Program do not change the *Plyler* rights of undocumented children. These changes apply only to students who apply for a student visa from outside the United States and are currently in the United States on an F-1 visa.

Also, the *Family Education Rights and Privacy Act* prohibits schools from providing any outside agency—including the Immigration and Naturalization Service—with any information from a child’s school file that would expose the student’s undocumented status without first getting permission from the student’s parents. The only exception is if an agency gets a court order (subpoena) that parents can then challenge. Schools should note that even requesting such permission from parents might act to “chill” a student’s *Plyler* rights.

Finally, school personnel—especially building principals and those involved with student intake activities—should be aware that they have no legal obligation to enforce U.S. immigration laws.

For more information or to report incidents of school exclusion or delay, call:

META	Nationwide	(617) 628-2226 (English/Spanish)
NY Immigration Hotline	Nationwide	(212) 419-3737 (English/Spanish)
MALDEF – Los Angeles	Southwest/ Southeast	(213) 629-2512 (English/Spanish)
MALDEF – Chicago	Illinois	(312) 427-0701 (English/Spanish)
MALDEF – San Antonio	Southwest	(210) 224-5476 (English/Spanish)
MALDEF – Washington D.C.	Nationwide	(202) 293-2828 (English/Spanish)

**Please copy and distribute this flier.**

## Llamada Urgente al Comienzo del Curso Escolar

En 1982, El Tribunal Supremo de los Estados Unidos dictaminó en el caso *Plyler vs. Doe* [457 U.S. 202] que los niños de padres indocumentados tienen el mismo derecho de asistir a las escuelas públicas primarias y secundarias que tienen sus contrapartes de nacionalidad estadounidense. Al igual que los demás niños, los estudiantes indocumentados están obligados a asistir a la escuela hasta que llegan a la edad exigida por la ley.

A raíz de la decisión *Plyler*, las escuelas públicas no pueden:

- negarle la matrícula a un estudiante basándose en su situación legal y/o inmigratoria, ya sea a principios del curso o durante cualquier otro momento del año escolar;
- tratar a un estudiante en forma desigual para verificar su situación de residencia;
- efectuar prácticas cuyo resultado sea obstruir el derecho de acceso a los servicios escolares;
- requerir que un estudiante o sus padres revelen o documenten su situación inmigratoria;
- hacer interrogatorios a estudiantes o padres que pudieran revelar su situación de indocumentados;
- exigir que un estudiante obtenga un número de seguro social como requisito de admisión a la escuela.

La escuela debe de asignar un número de identificación a los estudiantes que no tienen tarjeta de seguro social. Los adultos sin números de seguro

social quienes están solicitando que a un estudiante lo admitan a un programa de almuerzo y/o desayuno gratis, sólo tienen que indicar que no tienen seguro social en el formulario.

Los últimos cambios del Programa de Visado F-1 (de estudiantes) no cambiarán las obligaciones antedichas en cuanto a los niños indocumentados. Se aplican sólo a los estudiantes que solicitan del extranjero un visado de estudiantes y que están actualmente en los Estados Unidos en un Visado F-1.

Además, el Acta Familiar de Derechos y Privacidad Escolar (*Family Education Rights and Privacy Act*) le prohíbe a las escuelas proveerle a cualquier agencia externa – incluyendo el Servicio de Inmigración y Naturalización (Immigration and Naturalization Service – INS) – cualquier información del archivo personal de un estudiante que pudiera revelar su estado legal sin haber obtenido permiso de los padres del estudiante. La única excepción es si una agencia obtiene una orden judicial – conocida como una citación o subpoena – que los padres pueden retar. Los oficiales escolares deben estar conscientes de que el mero hecho de pedirle tal permiso a los padres podría impedir los derechos *Plyler* de un estudiante.

Finalmente, el personal escolar – especialmente los directores y otros administradores o personal docente – deben saber que no están bajo ninguna obligación legal de poner en vigor las leyes de inmigración de los EEUU.

Para más información, o para denunciar incidentes de exclusión escolar o retraso en la admisión a clases, favor de llamar a:

META	Nacional	(617) 628-2226	(Inglés/Español)
NY Línea de Urgencia de Inmigración	Nacional	(212) 419-3737	(Inglés/Español)
MALDEF – Los Angeles	Sudoeste/ Sudeste	(213) 629-2512	(Inglés/Español)
MALDEF – Chicago	Illinois	(312) 427-0701	(Inglés/Español)
MALDEF – San Antonio	Suroeste	(210) 224-5476	(Inglés/Español)
MALDEF – Washington D.C.	Nacional	(202) 293-2828	(Inglés/Español)

**Favor de copiar y distribuir esta hoja informativa.**

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the masses. They talk about making the connections between the natural calculus that a mother with limited resources has to compute to feed and clothe her children to the cold, hard calculus problem in a math textbook.

It does take some work to connect the dots, but they are doing it. You could never connect the dots if you saw no possible way to bridge those two points.

Framing the conversation with the spirit of Title I in NCLB necessitates words such as *value*, *belief*, *hope* and *vision*: “Every child can graduate,” “Every child is college material,” “Every family wants their children to learn.” Now we are telling the truth.

## Resources

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## Highlights of Recent IDRA Activities

In May, IDRA worked with **4,176** teachers, administrators, parents, and higher education personnel through **50** training and technical assistance activities and **121** program sites in **12** states plus Brazil. Topics included:

- ◆ Reading Strategies for Secondary Students
- ◆ College Access Steps for Families of High School Students
- ◆ Advocacy for the Limited-English-Proficient Student
- ◆ WOW! Workshop on Workshops

Participating agencies and school districts included:

- ◇ Atlanta Public Schools, Georgia
- ◇ Bryan Independent School District, Texas
- ◇ Kansas City Missouri School District, Missouri
- ◇ Lakeside School District, Arkansas
- ◇ Southeastern Louisiana University, Louisiana

### Activity Snapshot

With help from the IDRA South Central Collaborative for Equity (SCCE), a New Mexico school district implemented a plan to restructure classroom processes to ensure greater access to learning opportunities for students. After an Office for Civil Rights investigation generated by a complaint under Title VI of the *Civil Rights Act*, the school district sought technical assistance to implement a correction plan to protect the civil rights of language-minority students. The SCCE is the equity assistance center funded by the U.S. Department of Education to serve schools in Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas. The center provided training of trainer sessions on how to embrace students’ culture in the classroom, how to conduct appropriate assessment of language-minority students, and how to develop appropriate teaching styles and classroom practices that value the second language learning characteristics of students.

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.*

# Texas Legislative Update 2007

## Lackadaisical Performance for Education Leadership

by Albert Cortez, Ph.D., and Anna Alicia Romero

As the Texas legislature opened in January of 2007, state education advocates were buoyed by news that state revenues would be substantially higher than what had been projected. Shored up by increasing economic windfalls from strong markets and higher than expected oil and gas revenues, many hoped that the monies available would provide the resources needed to increase overall state education funding above the modest improvements provided during the April 2006 special session.

But, as the Texas legislature wrapped up its work in the final days of the 2007 legislative session, the education community's general mood varied from resignation to indignation. And few, if any, saw much cause for celebration.

### School Finance and the Status Quo

Hopes for increasing state investment in public education were dampened by the state's policymakers' continuing dysfunctional emphasis of pitting lower property taxes against improved public education. Following the path laid by its expansive special

session commitment of state funding for mandated reductions in local property taxes, the legislature predictably chose to allocate the majority of new state funding to pay for the reduced local property taxation.

With the adoption of House Bill 1 last year, the legislature required local public school systems to reduce local tax rates to a maximum of \$1 by 2008-09. To offset reductions in local school revenue, the state increased state aid formulas so that schools would wind up with total revenues similar to the

the property tax cuts, thus leaving a fraction of the surplus to cover a list of long-deferred needs that included much overdue improvements in state funding for children's health insurance.

**Teacher Salaries vs. Incentives**  
– Teachers were understandably disappointed as efforts to increase salaries for the state's historically under-paid teachers produced a net gain of \$425 per teacher. One teacher advocate observed this "windfall" would provide enough money for a "weekly hamburger and coke at any

**Few state leaders have advocated increased funding for public education, reinforcing a long-held belief that Texas legislative leaders take no decisive action unless required to do so by some state or federal court.**

amount that would have been available before the mandated tax cuts.

This state dollar for local tax dollar exchange resulted in no additional funding for local schools. But it cost the state about \$8 billion in new state revenue commitments.

Going into the 2007 regular session, concerns about the need for increasing state taxes (over the increases that already had been adopted during in the 2006 special session) were allayed. But political leaders made it clear early on that nine out of every 10 new state tax dollars would be required to cover

local eatery."

Rather than increasing salaries, the legislative leadership, led by the governor, allocated an additional \$300 million to fund teacher "incentive" grants. This "pay for performance" approach to salary improvements often results in very uneven distribution of revenues across schools in the state. And it tends to reward school systems that already have numerous resource advantages over their neighbors.

The emphasis on these "performance" programs persisted

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despite the observation that numerous schools have opted to reject the special funding to defuse the internal conflicts that the program has created by making local school staff battle over how the allocation is to be divided among a school's staff.

Other critics have expressed concern that basing pay on performance provides additional incentives for cheating on measures that determine who gets rewarded, a problem that has been extensively publicized in state and national media.

While proponents, most notably the state's governor, keep promoting the concept, emerging research suggests that such approaches provide little overall improvement in student achievement and may exacerbate an over-emphasis on teaching only what is tested to the exclusion of all other content.

**Funding Levels Stagnate** – The education community's pleas for funding increases for the state's basic allotment (Tier 1), Guaranteed Yield levels (Tier 2) and school facilities went largely unheeded. None of the major state school formula components provided any meaningful revenue increases for a third straight session.

Calls for increased funding for special programs – including bilingual education and special education – also were ignored, with state leaders choosing to expand the Rainy Day Fund rather than dealing with the present day flood of school funding concerns.

Following the recent Texas Supreme Court ruling indicating that mediocre funding for Texas schools was sufficient, few state leaders have advocated increased funding for public education, reinforcing a long-held belief that Texas policymakers will take no decisive action unless required to do so by some state or federal court. Some reminded state leaders that while the courts had indicated that the marginally

# Tools for

## Engaging Community for Mutual Gain

Often, the voices of community members and parents are not heard when important educational decisions are being made. They are made to feel inadequate and unwelcome in many school settings, especially those whose culture, home language or economic status is not mainstream. But effective community engagement builds partnerships based on respect and a shared goal of academic success for every child. It depends on the meaningful integration of community members and parents into the decision-making processes of schools.

## A Snapshot of What IDRA is Doing

**Developing leaders** – IDRA is providing technical assistance in a New Mexico school district to create and implement an equity action plan called the “Multicultural Framework” to eliminate or reduce inequities in the entire process of education in the system of 138 schools. The process involves training all campus principals and all heads of departments, divisions and organizational operations on the framework followed by its actual integration into the “education plans for student success” for each campus. The anticipated outcome is increased success for all students regardless of race, gender, national origin, economic level or disability through elimination of education practices that deny access or discriminate and restrict opportunity for students because of the diverse characteristics.

**Conducting research** – IDRA has been commissioned by San Antonio College (SAC), one of five community colleges in the Alamo Community College District (ACCD) to conduct a research study to describe the first-year experience for first time college students at the college. The guiding research questions are based on the philosophical tenet that first-time college students have resources and assets that have yet to be tapped, and institutions of higher education need to adapt, align and coordinate their programs and services to ensure access and success for these students. The study will provide quantitative and qualitative analyses to inform a comprehensive, integrated approach for this student population that results in increased institutional persistence, such as increased retention and graduation rates.

**Informing policy** – IDRA is a founding member of the Coalition for Equity and Excellence in Public Education, a San Antonio-based coalition of community organizations and individuals who support the use of public money for neighborhood public schools and who oppose any effort to divert

*Tools for Action continued on next page*

# Action

public tax funds to subsidize private education. The group is dedicated to improving neighborhood public schools by helping to channel the community's support for public education. This spring, the coalition organized a letter-writing campaign in the San Antonio area and collected more than 2,000 letters expressing their support of public education to state leaders.

**Engaging communities**—IDRA conducted its *WOW! Workshop on Workshops* training for Houston Independent School District's Parent Teacher Association and Parent Teacher Organization leaders. This leadership training provided comprehensive, in-depth learning opportunities for leaders that build on the strength and knowledge each person brings, while developing new and effective strategies for engagement that focus on student success and creating family-friendly schools.

## What You Can Do

**Get informed.** See the Annie E. Casey Foundation's 18th annual *Kids Count Data Book* released in July. The new data book is a national and state-by-state report that includes information and statistical trends on the conditions of the country's children and families. Go to: <http://www.aecf.org/>.

**Get involved.** The Harvard Family Research Project has launched a new concept called *complementary learning* based on the belief that "for children and youth to be successful, there must be an array of learning supports around them." More information on complementary learning and key linkages are available on the HFRP web site: <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/>.

**Get results.** Communities for Public Education Reform is a coalition of grass-roots education organizing groups and national and local funders that seeks to improve education for students by giving community residents a stronger voice in shaping the policies that affect their public schools. CPER-funded groups will work to address a number of issues community members deem critical, including insufficient and inequitable funding for schools serving low-income students of color, inadequate and outdated school facilities, high school dropout rates, the lack of highly qualified and culturally competent teachers, and insufficient services for immigrant and special education students. Keep an eye out for more information to participate or get ideas by visiting the Ford Foundation's web site (<http://www.fordfound.org/>).

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acceptable level of support was sufficient in 2005, continuing disregard of increasing local school funding needs could well trigger a return to litigation to seek a new ruling based on the costs of current school operations.

## Public Funding Stays with Public Education

Several voucher proposals were introduced in both the House and Senate during this Texas legislative session. To the good fortune of public school children, all voucher proposals failed. IDRA believes that public funding should not be diverted to private businesses and that the state must tend to providing an excellent public education for all of its students.

The two proposals filed in the Senate received public hearings and much of the attention during the session. They would have affected large numbers of Texas students. One, authored by Senator Janek, would have supported a 10-year "pilot program" affecting counties with populations greater than 750,000 (Dallas, Houston, Bexar). Within the affected counties, it would have targeted the *largest* school districts with 90 percent of students identified as economically disadvantaged. The proposal received a hearing, but was left pending in committee.

The other Senate voucher proposal, authored by the Senate Education Committee chairperson Shapiro, was different than those filed previously because it targeted one specific group: children with autism. Voucher proponents and opponents alike predicted that this measure would gain more traction than other measures because of the recent attention given to autism in the popular media. Additionally, children with special needs often have very organized and vocal advocates, and in recent years, other states passed voucher bills for

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autistic children (Ohio and Utah). Despite claims that voucher proposals would help the neediest children, the proposed measure would have given a voucher to any family regardless of its ability to pay for private schooling. While the autism voucher proposal was passed out of the Senate Education Committee (with a vote of 5-3), it was blocked in mid-April from being heard on the Senate floor and remained inactive.

Simultaneously, several other senators and representatives looked for public school solutions. They collaborated on a package to fully address the needed support for autistic students and the personnel working with them. Except for one, the various proposals made their way through the process but were stalled in the powerful House calendars committee.

Few attempts were made in the House of Representatives to advance any of several measures to publicly fund vouchers. None received a public hearing, and there was one unsuccessful attempt via an amendment on the House floor to create a voucher pilot program.

The House chamber's sentiment on the privatization schemes was best articulated with a resounding rejection during the floor debates on the state budget. A bipartisan-supported amendment prohibiting the Texas Education Agency from allocating funds for any private school voucher program passed overwhelmingly (129-8).

## **School Holding Power**

Education advocates were initially encouraged by increasing public concerns about the high numbers of school dropouts and by the emergence of new coalitions bent on improving state counting and reporting procedures and on supporting expanded dropout prevention efforts.

In January, a number of

organizations hosted a legislative briefing on the Texas dropout issue with the intent of educating legislators and their staff. The groups included the Center for Education at Rice University, the Center for Public Policy Priorities, Children At Risk, IDRA, and the Texas Center for Educational Policy at the University of Texas at Austin.

The groups noted that in more than 20 years of studying the issue, Texas high schools have been ineffective in guaranteeing graduation for all its students. The advocates emphasized the need for immediate changes in the way public policy identifies students who prematurely leave school without a diploma and the urgency of instituting systemic changes to public education that will engage students, schools and families for student success and college preparation.

HB 1, passed in May 2006, included a specific allotment for secondary level schools to keep and graduate students. In 2007, various proposals were filed in both chambers that would address dropout prevention and high school readiness.

In the session, the early optimism was quickly dampened as key state political leaders expressed their opposition to any substantive reforms in this area, based on the contention that the state was "doing enough" in the area of dropout counting to satisfy NCLB requirements.

Despite the expressed resistance, Rep. Noriega filed a proposal to improve dropout counting methods and reporting, and others pushed for allocation of funding for prevention and recovery efforts. Unfortunately, the method of counting who is a dropout was not addressed. Current methods used by TEA still sets aside many students to slip away between the cracks and become forgotten.

In the end, one measure, an amalgam of several different proposals, made it through the process to final passage. The measure provides

numerous opportunities for grant funding and new laws for dropout prevention, high school reform and college/work readiness. Some of the programs to be offered include the following.

- ***A study of best practices for dropout prevention*** that would examine best practices of campuses and school districts around the country. A report of findings would then be prepared for the Texas Legislature by 2009 that would identify high-performing and highly efficient dropout prevention programs, identify the dropout prevention programs that have the most potential for success in Texas, and recommend legislation or other actions necessary to implement a dropout prevention program.
- ***Grants for student clubs*** meant to engage students will target those who are considered at risk of dropping out, not including athletic activities, and require matching local funds.
- ***Personal graduation plans*** may be developed for students beginning in the ninth grade, if districts choose, to outline a path for students to take courses necessary for graduation and for entry into the workforce.
- ***Collaborative dropout prevention programs*** for school districts or open-enrollment charter schools to work with local businesses, local government agencies, non-profit organizations, faith-based organizations, colleges and universities for research-based intervention programs.
- ***Funding for science labs*** for smaller school districts in need of renovating or constructing facilities where students can experiment and learn about science.
- ***Professional development for public school teachers and administrators*** to train public school teachers on "implementing curriculum and instruction that is aligned with the foundation curriculum... and

- standards and expectations for college readiness.”
- **Mathematics instructional coaches pilot program** for teachers in under-performing schools.
  - **Teacher reading academies** for teachers in an academically unacceptable campus teaching reading, mathematics, science or social studies in grades six through eight.
  - **Mathematics, science and technology teacher preparation academies** established by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board to improve the instructional skills of teachers.
  - **Reading assessment and intervention for students in seventh grade** who do not master the TAKS reading portion in the sixth grade.
  - **College readiness standards** and expectations to be incorporated into the state curriculum for courses in grades nine through 12.
  - **College preparatory courses** to be developed and offered by the 2008-09 school year. The State Board of Education and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board will develop and recommend the essential knowledge and skills for new college preparatory courses in mathematics, science, social studies and English language arts.
  - **High school completion and success initiative council** will be created, headed by the education commissioner, and include the commissioner of the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, three gubernatorial appointees, two members appointed by the lieutenant governor and two appointed by the speaker of the House. In December of every even numbered year, the council will prepare a report for the legislature that includes recommended changes in law that would promote high school completion and college/workforce

readiness.

- **“Education: Go Get It” week** for middle, junior and high school students to impress upon students the importance of higher education.

Limited grant funding for dropout prevention and college readiness programs and for teacher professional development are a step in the right direction, but many of our schools will be left without much needed support to direct their students toward academic excellence.

### Immigrant Education

This session was especially politically charged with the issue of immigration. Even before the legislative session began, a number of proposals were filed affecting various aspects of immigrant students’ lives, including their education, from pre-kindergarten to higher education.

One proposal would have required

### End-of-course exams will be administered in high schools replacing the TAKS beginning with entering freshman students in 2011-12.

public schools to report students’ citizenship status for “statistical purposes” and place them under one of the following categories: U.S. citizen or national, legal alien, or illegal alien. Legal questions regarding the state role in immigration enforcement caused this proposal to fail to move along through the process.

Five measures were filed in the House to repeal legislation authored by Rep. Noriega and other members in 2001 that allows immigrant students who are Texas residents and in the process of achieving U.S. citizen status to pay in-state tuition to institutions of higher education. One of the measures was passed out of the state affairs committee and was later defeated during House floor debates on a point of order.

Clearly, policymakers were trying to test the limits of the 1982 Supreme

Court ruling in *Plyler vs. Doe* (a Texas case), with the aim of promoting a politically popular agenda, rather than being mindful of the court ruling stating that immigrant students are protected by the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment’s Equal Protection Clause.

Public schools must be about the business of educating and preparing our students to achieve academically and for being capable members of the workforce. They must not be relegated to being extensions of the Immigration and Naturalization Service. (See Pages 6 and 7.)

### Ensuring Student Access to Instruction

The lack of a cluster funding atmosphere in Austin contributed to lack of support for much-needed increases in bilingual program funding. The current leadership was not inclined to do much in the area of increased education

funding beyond meeting obligations reflected in the school finance and tax related legislation adopted in the 2006 special session.

However, bilingual advocates did ensure that no major detrimental revisions in the current program requirements were given serious consideration in either the House and Texas Senate.

Efforts by dual language program advocates did lead Senator Shapiro to call for a moratorium on any new policies related to Texas’ limited-English-proficient students until an interim study on best practices can be conducted and used to guide potential major reforms in future sessions. Toward that end, the legislature funded a study comparing the effectiveness of bilingual program models.

In other last minute developments, dual language advocates also won

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approval for implementing a number of pilot dual language, local option enrichment programs in 30 selected communities around the state.

IDRA has some concerns with unintended consequences that may result from both the comparative study of different bilingual models and dual language enrichment initiatives and will monitor both closely in anticipation of the potential impact on existing bilingual program requirements.

### **Ensuring Access to Quality Teaching**

IDRA staff monitored proposals focusing on improving student access to high quality teaching. One such effort was a proposal by Rep. Hochberg that placed restrictions on the number of lesser experienced and uncertified teachers in schools identified as low performing on the state accountability system. Another proposal by Rep. Alonzo sought to provide accelerated certification paths to increase the number of fully certified bilingual and English as a second language teachers. Neither plan made it out of the House public education committee.

Instead, the governor's strong support led to the adoption of increased funding for pay for performance incentives, despite lack of evidence that those efforts resulted in sustained student improvement.

### **Accountability and Testing**

State policymakers also opted to change the way student achievement is measured and how schools report it.

*A 15-member select committee on public school accountability* will oversee a process for a comprehensive review of the accountability system for public schools. The committee will review current policies, explore how other states report school data, hold public hearings around the state and produce a report with recommendations by December 2008.

***End-of-course exams will be administered in high schools*** replacing the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills beginning with entering freshman students in 2011-12. High school students will need to pass a series of 12 end-of-course exams in order to graduate with a diploma. These tests, to be administered by computer, will be developed for the following courses: algebra I and II, geometry, biology, chemistry, physics, English I, English II, English III; world geography, world history and U.S. history. The test will make up 15 percent of the student's final grade in each of these courses. Students must make at least a score of 60 and, if failed, may retake it several times. End of course exam grades will be combined, with a score of 70 required for graduation. TAKS testing will still be a reality for students in grades 3 through 8.

***College readiness*** concerns were addressed with the legislature's commitment to pay for the administration of either the SAT or ACT, depending on which the student chooses. Students in the eighth grade will be able to take the practice form of the ACT, and students in the 10th grade will be able to take the practice form of the SAT.

### **Increasing Minority Students' Access to College**

IDRA also continued to conduct research designed to inform policies for improving minority student access in Texas higher education, analyzing data on high school feeder patterns to the University of Texas for the years spanning 1996 to 2003. A summary of findings was compiled in a policy brief, and major findings were disseminated to state policymakers, selected school leaders, and targeted urban and rural communities. IDRA analyses predicted that major changes or limits to the plan would result in reductions in the number of students with access to the state's major universities directly as a result of the Ten Percent Plan.

IDRA helped coordinate multi-organization efforts to defend and preserve the existing Ten Percent Plan despite a major push by the University of Texas at Austin to impose a 50 percent cap on automatic Ten Percent Plan admissions.

Coordinated efforts by MALDEF, IDRA, the NAACP, the Urban League, Texas Association of Black School Educators, Texas Association of Chicanos in Higher Education, and LULAC, led to consideration of various alternative plans that included keeping the existing plan intact, providing for a much higher limit and a sunset provision on the limit if the universities adopting a cap did not improve their minority and rural enrollment performance.

IDRA released key data reflecting benefits derived from the current Ten Percent Plan by historically under-included high schools from around the state (see "Ten Percent Plan in Texas – IDRA Releases Policy Brief" in the June-July issue of the *IDRA Newsletter*).

While differing measures were approved by both chambers, the House rejected the conference committee report very late in the session. Thus, no changes were made to the Ten Percent Plan after all.

### **Final Words**

As the clock ticked away the final minutes of the 2007 session, advocates of public education once again came away disappointed at the legislature's lackadaisical performance during its latest 180-day run. Many would have given the state's leaders an F for effort, but minor enhancements to state educational policy may have helped raise the grade all the way up to a D.

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cross-race, cross-sector leadership development initiative, Fulfilling the Promise of *Mendez* and *Brown*, IDRA held community dialogues aimed at strengthening public education recently in New Mexico and Arkansas.

In Albuquerque, students were asked to take photographs and give commentary about their school experiences in the context of these landmark cases. Their powerful images and words were shared with the local community in a gallery setting before the action-focused dialogues took place. In Little Rock, high school student groups created oral reports about their experiences that they shared with community members, educators and leaders from state and local levels. In both cases, students' powerful insights and recommendations became pivotal in the planning by local leaders for action that is forthcoming.

For one group of students in IDRA's internationally-acclaimed Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program, a leadership day activity involved the use of IDRA's video discussion guide, *In Our Voices*. The video features student musicians who tell the stories of young people reflecting on important issues as they move from high school to college and into civic engagement as leaders in their communities. Their stories, reflected in vignettes, are based upon composite life experiences of Latino students. Questions are posed for reflection that can be helpful to group discussions among educators, parents, students and community members in their planning. Copies of the scripts and musical lyrics are available for use in schools and communities.

And IDRA's Youth Tekkies are helping their parents and other adults understand technology and navigate online to access important information about their schools through community-based organizations.

## Sample IDRA Publications on Community Engagement

### A Community Action Guide – Seven Actions to Fulfill the Promise of Brown and Mendez

By R.G. Rodríguez, B. Scott, and A. Villarreal, IDRA (2005)

### Promoting Student Leadership on Campus: A Guide for Creating a Culture of Engagement

By R.G. Rodríguez, A. Villarreal, and J.D. Cortez, IDRA (2002)

### Improving Educational Impact through Family Engagement

By R.G. Rodríguez, A. Villarreal, A.M. Montemayor and J.D. Cortez, IDRA (2002)

### Family and Community Engagement Survey

By R.G. Rodríguez, A. Villarreal, and J.D. Cortez, IDRA (2002)

### Community Engagement Review and Planning Guide

By R.G. Rodríguez, P. McCollum, and A. Villarreal, IDRA (2002)

For other articles and resources,  
visit the IDRA web site at  
[www.idra.org](http://www.idra.org)

## Being Vigilant

Through engagement of different voices – educators, students, parents, business leaders and community members of all races and sectors – greater understanding and shared vision can be reached. Together, schools and their communities can weave a fabric of effective action that results in academic success at all levels for young people and improve quality of life for our communities and for our nation.

It is precisely through the diversity of perspectives and integration of efforts at the local level that community engagement can result in more effective networks. Such engagement helps students and their families successfully navigate education systems and eases transitions from early childhood to kindergarten, through middle grades, and from high school to college.

We must be ever vigilant that our

engagement efforts go both deeply and broadly enough to meet parents, families and students within their communities. We must work more purposefully toward maintaining a valuing, asset-based approach that is highly relational and designed to provide personal, targeted support for *each* student and family. In this way, we will help our public schools be more relevant and more responsive to the needs of our communities, more inviting and vigorous centers of learning and teaching, and more reflective of our inter-connectedness as a people.



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**Episode 16: “Five Dimensions of Mathematical Proficiency” IDRA Classnotes Podcast** – Kathryn Brown outlines the five dimensions of mathematical proficiency and provides tips on helping students develop their mathematical thinking.



**Episode 14: “Good Schools for Children Learning English” IDRA Classnotes Podcast** – Josie Danini Cortez, M.A., an IDRA senior education associate, outlines an IDRA study of 10 bilingual education programs across the country with high academic success of their students.



**Episode 15: “Learnings from the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program” IDRA Classnotes Podcast** – Linda Cantu, Ph.D., and Juanita García, Ph.D., discuss several things they have learned during

more than two decades of experience with IDRA’s highly-successful dropout prevention program, the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program.



**Episode 13: “Access to Higher Levels of Mathematics” IDRA Classnotes Podcast** – Kathryn Brown, an IDRA education associate and developer of IDRA’s Math Smart! model, discusses how all students should have access to quality instruction in math that ensures success on all assessments, enrollment and completion in higher-level mathematics courses.

**[www.idra.org/podcasts](http://www.idra.org/podcasts)**

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