



## **District Court Demands More State Investment All Our Children Deserve an Excellent, Equitable Education**

### **Inside this Issue:**

- ❖ **Education issues before the Texas legislature**
- ❖ **A superintendent writes letter to the president**
- ❖ **School leaders identify current civil rights issues facing schools**

**by María "Cuca" Robledo  
Montecel, Ph.D.**

*Editor's Note: At press time, Travis County Judge John K. Dietz released his final judgement in the West Orange Cove vs. Neeley school finance court case reinforcing the critical need for fair funding of Texas public schools. Details are available at [www.texans4fairfunding.org](http://www.texans4fairfunding.org), where you can also sign up for free email updates on this critical issue.*

With Judge John Dietz' school finance ruling in *West Orange Cove vs. Neeley* litigation in late September, the state opens a new chapter in Texas school funding debates that will reverberate for public education and our children. In analyzing this decision, we must look beyond the rush and hype, beyond the bold-face type about "Robin Hood's" fate.

We must look more deeply at how this suit came about, what Judge Dietz' ruling actually said, and, most critically, what this might mean for equity and for the future of Texas children.

Texas educators and communities have long fought for educational equity.

From the earliest major school finance cases, the pressing need for equity has been at the heart of school finance litigation. And the courts have affirmed through numerous cases that equity must be addressed.

Recapture provisions in Texas' current school finance system are the hard-won results of this work. Recapture directly benefits at least 90 percent of Texas public school districts, and all of Texas benefits from investment in our children.

But the school finance system and fairness depend on state, as well as local, support. State funding, however, has dropped, not risen. Since 1993, the state has reduced its contribution from 60 percent to 38 percent. When the responsibility for public school funding is transferred from the state to local property taxes, school districts must either assume a greater share of funding or cut back their programs.

As the state defaults in its responsibility to fund education, most school districts in Texas, and especially property-poor districts, are unable to deliver the quality education that all students deserve. Local school districts have been forced to tax at the \$1.50 at

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maximum rate allowed by law precisely because of the lack of state investment.

Given the lack of sufficient state support, Judge Dietz rightly ruled that the current funding system “fails to provide an adequate, suitable education.” Judge Dietz also found that the system is “inefficient,” a concept often equated with inequity. Judge Dietz noted that the current underfunded system perpetuates the education gap between the rich and the poor.

This finding suggests that in addition to expanding the overall level of support for all students, the state must expand its investment in programs that serve poor and minority students. Judge Dietz also noted that if the education gap continues into the future, the average household income will fall from \$54,000 to \$47,000. The percentage of adult Texans without a high school diploma will rise from 18 percent to 30 percent, increasing the need for job training and costly support services.

The judge stated that unless the state school funding issue is addressed

## What is most important, as the courts and legislature deliberate on school finance, is to ensure that any system holds firm to principles of excellence, fairness and equity.

“Texas in 2040 will have a population that is larger, poorer, less educated, and more needy than today.”

As the legislature deals with the need to provide fair funding for the common good, system components must be preserved, including recapture, school district-based adjustments (like small and sparse adjustment and cost of education index adjustments), weighted pupil funding for special population students (including compensatory education, bilingual education, special education, and gifted and talented), transportation and especially facilities.

Any changes made must preserve or expand the level of equity in the system. We must assure that Texas does not create an excellent system for some and a minimally adequate system for the rest. Recapture currently

generates approximately \$1.2 billion per year that benefit over 900 districts in Texas and 87 percent of our students. Any change must generate as much if not more money for equalization.

What is most important, as the courts and legislature deliberate on school finance, is to ensure that any system holds firm to principles of excellence, fairness and equity. IDRA will use the principles outlined below to evaluate funding plans proposed in the upcoming deliberations.

**Principle 1: Funding Equity** – Texas must maintain or increase the level of equity found in the existing funding system.

**Principle 2: Equal Return for Equal Tax Effort** – Texas must specifically provide for equal return for equal tax rates, for all school districts,

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# Major Education Issues Before the Texas Legislature in 2004

by Albert Cortez, Ph.D.

As we begin the run up to the January 2005 Texas legislative session, a number of important education reform issues are on the table. Perhaps the greatest challenge will involve measures to increase revenues to cover state-supported functions, including of course education.

## Texas' Revenue Crisis

Last year, the legislature basically was deadlocked on tax reform. This led to miniscule increases in state funding for most state services as well as to the ongoing need to actually cut back services in numerous important areas, including the state's child health insurance program.

In an attempt to complete unfinished business of the 2003 regular session, interim committees were appointed to explore alternatives and share their recommendations in this year's special session focusing on the school funding system.

Throughout this period there has been a general consensus that Texas needs to raise more revenue to fund the array of services that it provides its citizens. But there is a deep division on where the money should come from.

Driven by major conflicts over the unprecedented second re-drawing of political district boundaries, bitter

partisan divisions only served to widen the divide between important elements that are critical to adopting any major state tax proposal. On the positive side, policymakers have explored many possible funding sources that could facilitate some new consensus.

While education will no doubt be at the center of the battle for increased revenue, other big-ticket items, like health and human services, higher education, and the state's extensive transportation systems, will be competing for funds. Unless major tax reforms are adopted early in the upcoming session, all those dependent on state resources may once again come up short.

## Access to Fair Funding

Some reform of the school finance system is now perceived as urgent in light of a recent state court ruling that found some aspects of the system violated the state constitution (see IDRA statement on Page 1). More specifically, if the Texas Supreme Court upholds the latest court ruling, the legislature will need to increase the overall level of state funding for public education and the percentage that the state covers of the overall cost.

The legislature may also need to modify the system to resolve the challenge to the \$1.50 tax limit for maintenance and operations

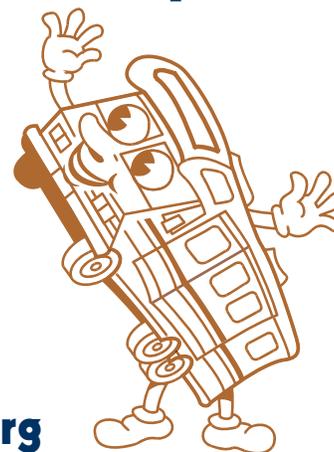
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# Education Equity vs. Education Adequacy

## Education Equity

For many years in Texas, there were huge differences in the amount of money available to educate children in public schools. Before 1995, some of the wealthiest school systems spent \$10,000 per student and had low school tax rates. Poorer school systems often had as little as \$3,000 per pupil and had much higher taxes.

“**Equity**,” or an **equitable system**, means that all communities – whether rich or poor – are taxed at a similar rate and have equal access to similar amounts of revenue per student.

**Equity is not the same as equality**; it **does not mean** that every school district gets the same amount of funding. Some schools need additional funding to serve students with disabilities, to provide bilingual education, and to provide free and reduced-price lunches. In a truly equitable system, every school district has enough funding to provide a quality education to all of its students.

## Why Fight for Equity?

Just as we insist that Texas have a quality highway throughout the state so that all Texans can travel easily and safely from north to south, so we believe that schools should

have the resources to serve all students, to build the skills and capacities they need to reach any destination. Much of the improvements in Texas schools in recent years are due to our equitable funding system.

## Education Adequacy

### What is adequacy?

Since the late 1980s, the issue of equity has taken a back seat to the topic of finance adequacy. Unlike the equity debate – which focuses on the disparity in funding between districts – the adequacy debate focuses on defining a **minimum level of funding** needed for every school to teach its students.

### Why does adequate set the bar too low?

The problem with adequacy is that it provides for education that is “**just enough**” rather than **excellent**. We have to ask ourselves, if we had adequate education, wouldn’t we have adequate, not excellent, employees? Wouldn’t we have adequate, not engaged citizens? Wouldn’t we have adequate, not excellent, opportunities for our children to go to college?

All children deserve the best possible education, adequacy for some and excellence for others is, by its very nature, discriminatory.

[www.texans4fairfunding.org](http://www.texans4fairfunding.org)

Source: Texans For Fair Funding Web Site, 2004

*Education Issues – continued from Page 3*

expenditures, which the lower court ruled is an unconstitutional state property tax because it does not provide local districts “sufficient local discretion.”

The legislature will also need to address the court’s concern with the achievement gap between the state’s low-income and minority students and its middle-income and White students. It will most likely increase the level of funding for special population students (compensatory education also referred to as “accelerated education,” bilingual education, and special education programs).

The legislature also will face the need for increased state support for all Texas schools. This may be dealt with by increasing the level of overall funding and/or proportion of education costs that are assumed by the state. It was noted during the *West Orange Cove*

court challenge that the percentage that the state covers for public schooling decreased from 48 percent in 1991 to a low of 38 percent in 2003. This decrease is largely the reason that local property taxes have increased at a record pace over the last decade.

Reacting to pressure from communities, some of the state’s political leaders have become advocates for a decrease in local property tax burdens that are offset by increases in state aid to local schools. While an attractive idea, school leaders validly complain that a simple replacement of state money for local property tax revenue will not provide any overall increase in the level of support.

A related point is that over-emphasis on reducing local property taxes could tie up much of any additional revenue collected from alternative

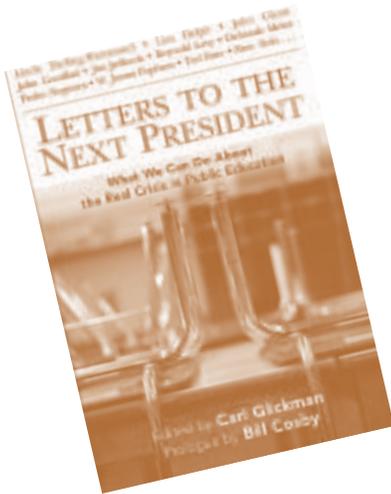
sources. This would leave many schools at the currently low level of funding and create the possibility of future resistance to other tax increases that might be needed to level school funding in upcoming legislative sessions.

The legislature also will face strong pressure to restore teachers’ health insurance funding, which was reduced from the prior year’s biennial budget. A lull in state-mandated increases in teacher and administrator salaries over the last few years may lead to a push for increases in those areas as well.

## Facilities Funding

Another major issue that cries out for state action involves addressing the new facilities funding needs in many Texas schools. A special set-aside amount of \$20 million was allocated for

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# Choking the Life Out of Classrooms

## A Letter to the President

by Sylvia Bruni

*Editor's Note: The following letter is reprinted with permission from the book, "Letters to the Next President – What We Can Do About the Real Crisis in Public Education" edited by Carl Glickman (New York and London: Teachers College, Columbia University, 2004).*

Dearest President,

What an awesome opportunity this is to write a letter to our next U.S. President, to send you an absolutely frank and personal message about public education in Texas – a state in crisis, as far as I am concerned. This letter is an account about what I have learned throughout a career that has spanned almost 40 years, half of them directly in my own classroom and the other half working with the greater community of youngsters and their parents, teachers, and principals. This message is drawn from my experiences working with Texas educators and students, whose lives are now being more and more colored and shaped by an accountability system that is fast becoming the end rather than the means to better teaching and learning.

Mr. President, I tell friends that I was an "accidental" teacher. In the 1960s, I was a college girl, the proverbial first generation in my family to go to college, and, quite frankly, my career goals were pretty simple. I majored in English because I loved to read and in Spanish because I loved Mexico, and I was certain I was going to marry a

Mexican and go on to live in that gorgeous and vibrant country.

Well my plans took a 180 degree turn when I met and fell in love with a local boy. I did what all good girls did in those days: I became a teacher. My life, my value system, and my view of the world were forever defined and enriched by that turn of events. The 17 years I spent in my senior English classroom introduced me to the wonderful talents and capacity for discovery that my students brought to the classroom.

Classrooms can be magical places, offering teachers and their students limitless opportunities to discover worlds of knowledge. Even more important, they are microcosms of the real world, where exploration and discovery occur, rich discussions and arguments take place, and good citizenship habits are shaped. Similarly, classrooms can be joyous and exhilarating places. That was what my classroom was for me and I believe, for my students, as well, during all those 17 years of teaching.

The next 22 years have also defined me, but this collective

experience has been a more sobering one. I left the public schools and spent seven years working with our local university. Here is where I began to discover seriously troubling realities. I learned that almost 50 percent of our Webb county residents over the age of 25 had no high school degree. I learned that 47 percent of this population had a literacy level of one, meaning that they are unable to enter background information on a social security card application or locate eligibility information from a table of employee benefits.

I discovered that our local university, an upper-level institution, was having great difficulty with its junior-level students, who could not cope with college-level courses. Equally troubling, our community college had enormous numbers of its students failing

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with the author,  
Sylvia Bruni, online.**

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its entrance exams, forcing these same students to enroll in remedial reading, writing and math courses. Years later, I would realize that the very same students whom I had been teaching in my senior English high school class had been the survivors and that 50 percent of their brothers and sisters had dropped out – fallen somewhere by the way side sometime around their ninth-grade year.

Ten years ago, I came back to another public school system in my hometown, and here is where the story comes full circle. Just as I had

Through these types of hands-on experiences, they discovered that good literature was timeless in its relevancy to the everyday world that surrounded them. It was the most valuable and effective way of teaching and learning, especially for many of my students, who had come to my classroom table poor in their own worldly experiences. The hands-on learning activities that I had the time to lead them into helped them make the relevant connections that are essential for creating a lifetime of learning.

The assessment of what they learned and how well they had done so

**Make no mistake about what I am claiming here: The emphasis placed on a single high-stakes test in Texas as the measure by which we hold our public schools, teachers and students accountable is seriously flawed.**

discovered the vast potential and capacity that characterized my senior English students in my early teaching years, so have I now realized how seriously we have crippled that potential and capacity in these subsequent 20 years.

I came back to a public school system to find it gripped by a testing mandate that is choking the life out of our classrooms. That rich and stimulating curriculum that I had access to 20 years ago might still be on the books, but teachers now have little opportunity to tap into it. For example, those extended hands-on learning projects that made the Medieval and Renaissance literary periods come alive for my students are rarely, if ever, the rule today.

My students *lived* their curriculum and experienced the universal nature of good literature as they researched and sketched architectural renderings, composed original musical scores, and created portraits of haunting medieval figures.

was just as relevant in those earlier days, before *the test*. My students created portfolios of their own cumulative student work – their renderings, essays, compositions, performances, debates and reflective essays. All of this was actual evidence of student learning.

Today's emphasis on a state test makes this hands-on type of learning practically impossible. It is predicated, instead, on rigid timelines, on students digesting a fixed amount of facts and figures, and on a testing format that emphasizes memory and recall at the expense of critical thinking and thoughtful, purposeful learning. Then, we add to this narrow testing mix an assessment that is in a language that is often the second language of a student population whose English fluency is still very immature. Finally, we make the test a condition either for promotion to fourth grade or for graduation and the testing scenario is now wrought with high anxiety. For many youngsters this is a fatal mix.

Make no mistake about what I am claiming here: The emphasis placed on a single high-stakes test in Texas as the measure by which we hold our public schools, teachers and students accountable is seriously flawed. It goes against all that we know about authentic and relevant assessment of student learning, and it has seriously weakened our capacity to prepare our children to become thoughtful, successful and responsible citizens.

The evidence is all around us. Since the inception of the TAAS test, Texas continues to record alarming dropout rates, most recently ranging from 30 percent of its general student population to 50 percent of its minority student population. In February, 1999, the University of Texas reported to the Texas House Subcommittee on Education, complaining of “marked declines in the numbers of students prepared academically for higher education.”

Since 1982, when the first of the Texas tests was implemented, the rate at which Black and Hispanic students fail ninth grade has been steadily increasing, reaching as high as nearly 30 percent in the late 1990s. After George W. Bush became governor of Texas, the state's own college-readiness test, the TASP, showed a dramatic decrease – from 65.2 percent to 43.3 percent – in the numbers of test takers passing all three tests in reading, writing and math. In Texas, SAT scores, a barometer of sorts for college preparation, show no improvement in contrast to national scores. On the NAEP, another national test often used as a gauge of academic preparedness, the average statewide score gains in Texas surpassed those of the nation in only one of three comparisons – fourth-grade math.

Even more astounding – in light of the amount of national acclaim given to the Texas Testing Miracle – is the fact that, while Texas NAEP scores

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are sluggish at best from year to year, TAAS gains are touted as greatly increasing from year to year. From 1994 to 1997, TAAS scores showed a 20 percent increase! A similar discrepancy appears between the scores of White students and students of color, with the gap between the two on the NAEP widening yet appearing smaller and decreasing greatly on the TAAS.

What could possibly be causing such dramatic differences in test score results? Consider the following facts: Hard data inform us that since the advent of TAAS, the number of children excused from taking the TAAS test on the grounds of special education exemption has increased sharply – nearly doubling from 1994-1998. In fact, the number of youngsters being identified as special education students is, in some Texas communities, more than double the national norm.

Also, even though fewer high school students are graduating (slightly less than 70 percent in the 1990s) there has been a subsequent sharp upturn in

## **If we are ever to truly reform our educational system, it must be done on the basis of what we know about good teaching and learning.**

the number of GED test takers. The 2000 census data for my own border community, where minority students are a distinct majority of the population, shows that 45.2 percent of its adult population over the age of 25 has no high school diploma. Can we truly claim to be “leaving no child behind?”

So where do we go from here? What lessons have I learned from my own 40-some-odd years working with Texas schools, their teachers and their children? What should the Texas experience teach us about what school reform and accountability should *really* be about? What can you, as our next American president, do to make a real difference? I would not have been able



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to tell you this years back, but it has become crystal clear today, as I’ve witnessed our world becoming more challenging and more diverse, and our school house more and more beset by forces that threaten, rather than support, our youngsters’ access to successful futures.

Mr. President, help us regain the awesome power that lies within our public schools – the power to link young people to great learning experiences. Help us reclaim those classroom activities which ultimately shape young people into productive and healthy

citizens, in every aspect of the word.

Public schools should be, and can be, pathways that guide young people toward vigorous citizenship grounded in those democratic values which today, more than ever, are absolutely essential in our world. To get to the reality of good citizenship we must provide a school house in which youngsters are engaged, inspired and challenged. Our schools should be filled with classrooms where both essential basic skills *and* the greater intellectual and social skills needed for the burgeoning 21<sup>st</sup> century are the rule: cooperative team work, problem solving, fair play, self expression and assertiveness, among others. I want to see a return to classrooms where

learning and motivation are intrinsically linked, and I want to assure that our educational system supports such classrooms and their teachers.

This is where you come in, Mr. President! Help us by becoming the lead advocate for those school practices that would literally stimulate and assure schools that are pathways to great teaching, great learning and great communities.

There is an enormous divide that separates those of us who teach, whether educator or parent, from those who set policy. If we are ever to truly reform our educational system, it must be done on the basis of what we know about good teaching and learning. School accountability and development should not be predicated on rigid and narrow assessment systems that run so grossly against the kind of teaching and education that we know schools should nurture and strengthen.

Help us facilitate the public dialogues that would bridge those gaps that exist today. There are critical issues which need to be explored: children’s rights to fair and equitable assessment; high-stakes testing versus authentic assessments; issues regarding resources, equity, and a “dumb-down curriculum” that concern so many of us who teach; and the equally worrisome role that partisan politics seem to play in these issues. Help us broaden that discussion and spur engagement within the greater community, which we sense

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is already sympathetic to public schools but is unsure about how to actively support them. Help the educators reclaim their voices also. I speak for them as one who entered this profession “accidentally” and gradually grew in my own knowledge of what would make me a really wonderful teacher.

It has been this eventful journey that has made me realize, just as it has my countless other colleagues, that we need to lead a true reform of our public school system *now!* What Texas set out to do 23 years ago with the introduction of that first TAAS test was perhaps well intentioned. However, after years of rigid, high-stakes testing, and equally rigid and stifling test-prep lessons that are totally out of sync with what makes rich teaching and learning, the results absolutely can not be claimed a victory, neither for our children nor for our state.

So, I say to you: Come to Texas and learn from our experience. Spend a day or two in our classrooms and visit

with our students and our teachers. Meet and visit with my granddaughter, Victoria, a bright and clever little third grader who this past spring agonized over the advent of the third-grade TAKS test – the first one ever to hang the threat of retention over the heads of Texas third graders. Beginning several weeks before the test was first administered, Victoria, who was reading fluently in her kindergarten year, bit her fingernails down to the quick and cried for hours. She was fearful about failing – in spite of having tried all the test-prep strategies that consumed hours of her classroom time week after week. Eventually, Victoria passed the dreaded test, but not before it left its mark on her. At the tender age of nine, this child experienced the fear of failure, a fear she simply did not have the maturity to deal with!

Just as important, however, come and meet those intrepid and dedicated teachers and principals who can still be found scattered throughout our schools, braving and enduring the testing system

while moving forward with marvelous teaching and assessment practices. They are too often the minority in what continues to be a test-driven Texas majority. The irony is that, as never before, we know and can speak about what makes for rich and relevant teaching and learning: lessons very much like those medieval literature experiences that my students and I so much enjoyed when I first began teaching. Yet, we are starving in the midst of a teaching and learning feast, forced to forego the good stuff for the sake of a test-driven, tasteless curriculum.

Help us reset our learning course. Help us reclaim the teacher’s voice so that it rings out not only in Texas but all across this country as well. What an awesome opportunity you have to really do it right!

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Sylvia Bruni is the acting superintendent of the Laredo Independent School District in Texas. Comments and questions may be shared with her via an online IDRA discussion board during January through March at [www.idra.org](http://www.idra.org).

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all levels of the state permitted tax effort.

**Principle 3: Excellent Education** – Texas must provide equitable access to excellent education (defined as equitable access to high quality curricula, teaching, support services and facilities) for all students in all school districts, precluding the need for and thereby prohibiting any local un-equalized enrichment.

**Principle 4: Access to Equalized Enrichment** – Texas must ensure that, if local supplementation of a state-funded adequate system is allowed, the entire additional local tax effort provides equal yield for equal tax effort, regardless of the local property wealth of individual districts.

**Principle 5: Recognizing Special Student Costs** – Texas must equitably provide add-on funding based

on actual costs of providing appropriate supplemental services to students identified as limited English proficient, low-income, or requiring special education services.

**Principle 6: Access to Equalized Facilities Funding** – Texas must provide equitable access to funding for school facilities so that all districts have equal access to facilities revenue for equal tax effort. Facilities funding should provide support for updating and maintaining existing facilities, as well as funding for new facilities. Special facilities-related needs for fast growth districts should be recognized in any proposed funding formulae.

**Principle 7: Maintaining Levels of State Support** – Texas must ensure that the state will fund a minimum of 60 percent of the overall cost of education in the state.

**Principle 8: Tax Burden** – Texas must base any potential requirement for additional state revenue on adoption of measures of taxation that do not result in a shift of tax burdens from high wealth to all other districts or from more affluent to lower income taxpayers.

High quality education is for all. We urge public officials and the citizens of Texas to affirm the right of every child in Texas to receive an education that is excellent and equitable.

Many Texans have signed on to a Texas Latino Education Coalition declaration featuring these same principles. Visit [www.texans4fairfunding.org](http://www.texans4fairfunding.org) for more information.

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# Contemporary Civil Rights Challenges of *Brown vs. Board of Education* School Leaders Identify Current Issues

by Bradley Scott, Ph.D.

School leaders from five states gathered recently to examine civil rights issues facing students today. The session was held by the IDRA South Central Collaborative for Equity, which is the federally-funded equity assistance center for Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas. The center's annual focus group and work session was comprised of representatives from each of the state departments of education, school districts, the Offices for Civil Rights that serve the region, and other technical assistance providers.

This year's session highlighted selected issues that need special attention. The participants created a context for their assessment of the top civil rights issues that should be addressed throughout the region by first receiving a refresher presentation on the *Mendez vs. Westminster* and *Brown vs. Board of Education* court decisions that affirmed the right of individuals to receive an equal education in public schools that were not segregated by race. (For more information on fulfilling the promise of these court cases, see [www.idra.org/mendezbrown](http://www.idra.org/mendezbrown) and the November-December 2003 issue of the *IDRA Newsletter*, which is also available online at [www.idra.org](http://www.idra.org).)

## Identifying Issues

This review served as a foundation for a set of civil rights issues the group felt were important to continue to address if the promise of *Brown* and *Mendez* are ever to be achieved.

The participants then identified persistent issues regarding race, gender and national origin. A summary of their findings are below.

## Persistent Issues on Race

- Inadequate resources and inappropriate funding to support the highest quality education for students regardless of their race.
- Staffing that does not reflect the racial-ethnic diversity of the students.
- Staff that is poorly trained to instruct and educate students who are racially and culturally different.
- Continued comparative low achievement in high poverty, high minority districts.
- The politics of education that seems intent on destroying public schools by concentrating students by race and poverty in the worst facilities and educational experiences with the least prepared teachers and blaming students and families for schools not succeeding.
- The continued re-segregation of students by race and class.
- The persistent under-representation of minority students in gifted and

talented and advanced courses.

- The persistent over-representation of minority students in special education programs.

## Persistent Issues on Gender

- The lack of understanding and concern for gender issues in public education.
- The continued dehumanization of girls and women in all forms of media that create persistent stereotypes about the roles of girls and women.
- The belief that gender equity is only about girls and little to do with boys.
- The belief that only girls are victims of discrimination, hostility and violence in schools.
- The continued under-representation of girls in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) courses and careers.
- The continued double standard regarding matters of access for girls versus boys in courses, activities, opportunities and outcomes in schools.
- The persistent attempts to derail Title IX of the *Education Amendments of 1972* by the desire to create and implement single-sex schools (i.e., charter schools and programs) and classrooms in circumstances not otherwise allowed by Title IX.

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- The continued over-representation of boys in disciplinary actions, suspensions and expulsions.

## **Persistent Issues on National Origin**

- Lack of knowledge and understanding of the law regarding English language learners.
- Poor understanding of the civil rights requirements to serve English language learners.
- Lack of appropriate teacher preparation and certification to serve English language learners.
- Poor to non-existent efforts to engage and seek the support of parents and families to support their children’s success in schools.
- Inappropriate curriculum and materials to support student mastery of course content.
- Inappropriate assessment and placement of English language learners, particularly in special education and low-level courses.
- Inadequate resources and funding to support quality instructional and co-curricular programs for English language learners.

While there were many emerging issues that the focus group were able to identify, many of these emerging issues centered on the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB), resources allocation and distribution, technology integration, and legal considerations. Among the emerging issues were the following.

## **Emerging Issues on Race**

- Appropriate disaggregation and use of data on student outcomes by race and accountability for student success by race.
- The exclusion (from challenging programs and courses) of students by race to prevent failures and poor assessment results.
- The increased racial backlash

because of the NCLB.

- The use of “diversity” as a marker for racial inferiority and the resultant continuation of practices that discriminate by race.
- The use of “safe” and “unsafe” as a marker for racially identifiable school settings that are also viewed as less desirable to attend in a given district.
- Changing perceptions about race relations and the cause and effects of current race relations in schools and communities.
- Parent “choice” and school vouchers promoted as contemporary ways to support “White and middle-class flight” particularly from urban and minority dominant schools.
- Appropriate considerations for districts entering unitary status.

## **Emerging Issues on Gender**

- The new attacks on Title IX, particularly the current and emerging discussions on single-sex education.
- The gender equity discussion extended to boys and men.
- A woman’s right to choose.
- Gay, lesbian, trans-sexual and trans-gendered issues in public school and implications for Title IX.
- Economic sexism and careers for men and women in an era of changing demographics.
- The exclusion of gender from the disaggregation of data in the Title I provisions of the NCLB.

## **Emerging Issues on National Origin**

- The failure of budget allocations to be data-driven where English language learners are concerned.
- The attempt to disengage English language learners from schools, classes and grades to avoid test result issues.
- A critical shortage of support for student success for English language learners and their families in the hyper-growth states and

communities.

- Local communities’ newness in working with families who speak a different language, particularly in those communities that historically may have only dealt with Black and White English-speaking populations.

## **Technical Assistance**

The challenge presented to IDRA was to retool technical assistance to provide more long-term support to schools. The focus group participants still want workshops and training sessions that would give useful, immediately-applicable strategies for classroom teachers. But they also insisted that even training should be expanded to include more classroom-based demonstrations, more side-by-side teaching, and more in-class coaching and mentoring.

Beyond that, the group felt that long-term, sustained technical assistance should help schools and communities to:

- Navigate the requirements of the NCLB particularly where the disaggregation of data may reveal under-service, discriminatory, service, or non-existent service to students by race and national origin;
- Implement the requirements of Title III for English language learners in a manner that does not victimize learners because they speak English as a second language;
- Create seamless articulation between Title II and Title I of the NCLB;
- Improve teacher quality and teaching quality particularly for diverse students to better meet the requirements of NCLB;
- Identify potential sources of unintentional, but very present, forms of discrimination that may negatively impact minority and low-income students under NCLB, Title VI, CRA and Title IX;
- Address and make practical sense

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## Research Findings – Part III

# Expectations Drive Effective College Recruitment Strategies

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

Colleges need to identify and remove institutional barriers for students and their parents. This is among the key findings from an IDRA study of San Antonio College that are informing strategies that the college will use to improve its recruitment of Hispanic, low-income students.

This is the final in a series of three articles in the *IDRA Newsletter* presenting the results of this research study, with SAC's permission.

IDRA interviewed different groups of respondents to identify the most critical factors that impacted a decision to enroll in college and graduate. Focus group and individual interviews targeted key stakeholders including: high school administrators, counselors, high school students, parents of high school students, and current SAC students. High school administrators were also surveyed.

IDRA developed the survey, focus group interview and individual interview questions in partnership with the SAC advisory committee. Parallel questions were developed for each of the surveys and interviews in order to triangulate responses by group and identify points of convergence or divergence among groups.

It is important to interpret these

**If institutions begin with the expectation that all students are college bound and that their families value education and achievement, then many barriers to post-secondary education can be removed.**

findings cautiously given the nature of focus group interviews. While the methodology provides an opportunity for in-depth probing and a greater understanding of the issues, the findings are not representative or generalizable for all colleges and universities. In the final analysis, additional studies should be conducted to gain greater understanding of what has emerged from these interviews.

Key questions across all groups included:

- What has helped students the most in preparing for college?
- What are the most important things that help to select a college?
- What are the barriers of students going to college?
- What are the benefits of going to SAC?

- What are the reasons for choosing SAC over other colleges?
- What are the reasons for choosing other colleges over SAC? And
- How can SAC help students prepare for college and support them once they enroll?

IDRA conducted content analyses of responses across all groups. These analyses yielded clear patterns across the seven areas of parallel inquiry for all groups. Following are the responses from the five respondent groups: high school principals, counselors, high school students, parents and current SAC students.

When answering **what has helped students most in preparing for college**, respondents most often mentioned visiting college campuses while still in high school and their parents' and families' encouragement.

The top three things that respondents cited as **helping students select a college** included matching individual student goals and scholarships to college, convenience in terms of access and transportation, and online access to help with registration.

The most frequently mentioned **barriers that students encounter** on the road to college were inadequate academic preparation, competing work and family responsibilities, and the lack of transportation.

Respondents listed **benefits of**  
*Research Findings III – continued on Page 12*

**going to SAC:** location (proximity), access to students' homes and work, resources and support for students, ease of transition to a four-year university, convenience allowing for students to live at home and continue working, its low cost (mentioned by every group), and its small class size.

The top reason for **choosing SAC over other colleges** was its low cost. The top reason for **choosing other colleges over SAC** was its reputation as an extension of high school – not academically challenging, same high school classmates enroll there, etc.

Respondents suggested **ways to help students prepare for college and support them** once they enroll. These included providing better student support services such as tutoring, mentoring, daycare and counseling; providing transportation options for students such as a SAC shuttle for the neighborhood; and providing financial support through scholarships.

## Implications and Recommendations

The implications and recommendations from this IDRA research for SAC can be organized into the following five focal areas: communication, academic preparation, recruitment, financial aid and support services. While these recommendations were provided for SAC specifically, they can provide insight for other K-12 and higher education institutions.

### Communication

- First find out *who* is getting information and then find out among those who do receive it, what conflicting or vague messages students and their parents are receiving about what is needed to enter and succeed in college and communicate the correct information.
- Make sure student and parent

## “Live the expectation that all students will succeed.”

– interview respondent

language needs are addressed in all oral presentations and written materials.

- Communicate the expectation that all students are “college material.”
- Make students and their parents aware that getting into college is not the hardest part of the college experience, but that challenges to staying and graduating can be addressed and overcome.
- Make sure that students are clear about what it takes to succeed in college, including college academic standards and the importance of strong high school preparation.
- Make sure that high school staff, college staff, and students have regular and ongoing communication.

### Academic preparation, coordination and alignment

- Provide solid academic preparation in the K-12 system.
- Create strong partnerships with the local school districts. Establish a memorandum of understanding to clarify roles and responsibilities. Regularly exchange information, knowledge, resources and staff in a true K-16 partnership.
- Align high school and college curricula and assessments so that the same knowledge and skills across institutions are emphasized.
- Coordinate with high school teachers, articulating high school and college content areas.
- Allow students to take placement exams in high school so that they can prepare for college and understand college-level expectations. Then offer support to those students who need help.
- Reward high-performing students

by enabling them to begin college work.

- Expand successful dual or concurrent enrollment programs between high school and college to include all students, especially minority and low-income students, and ensure their success.
- Coordinate with K-12 education reform efforts that help prepare students for college.
- Connect data systems across institutions so that each can identify and address student needs and issues.
- Sequence undergraduate general education requirements so that appropriate senior-year courses are linked to post-secondary general education courses.
- Improve articulation between the community college and four-year institutions given that Hispanic students' pathways to college differ from those of other ethnic groups.
- Provide extra time and help for high school students who are struggling in making transitions.
- Create a unique niche for SAC that distinguishes it from the other nearby community colleges and four-year universities.

### Recruitment

- Use unconventional recruitment strategies that include direct communication with community groups rather than conventional school settings.
- Use media (print, radio and television) to expand reach to non-traditional students and their families.

### Financial aid

- Remember that many Hispanic students have myths and misconceptions about their eligibility for financial aid and are unaware of the financial aid that may be available, much less how to navigate the system.

*Research Findings III – continued from Page 12*

- Be aware of Hispanic students' responsibilities and obligations (work, economic, family) and increase financial aid to lessen their struggle.
- Be aware of Hispanic students' work ethic and aversion to building up debt, and adjust financial aid as needed.

## **Support service and systems**

- Establish support systems for students who are historically underserved. Design and implement strategies to address their inexperience with a college environment.
- Include multiple components in the support system, including counseling, mentoring, tutoring, enrichment activities, financial aid and academic support.
- Tailor services to students' age and experience.
- Provide incentives such as waiving a course fee at the university if a student is enrolled in nine hours at the community college.
- Waive test fees and be flexible with test dates.
- Create powerful peer student and faculty support systems that address

academic and social support needs.

- Connect students early in their academic careers with local employers.
- Ensure that students take courses as a cohort so students can relate to each other's age and experience.

Perhaps the most important message heard during many of the focus group discussions related to expectations and the need for institutions to "live the expectation that all students will succeed."

If institutions begin with the expectation that all students are college bound and that their families value education and achievement, then many barriers to post-secondary education can be removed.

Then college access and success becomes an issue of identifying and removing institutional barriers and deterrents for students and their parents. This research provides some of the approaches and strategies that colleges and universities are using to change the status quo in recruitment, retention and graduation of Hispanic students.

## **Resources**

Adelman, C. *Answers in the Tool Box: Academic Intensity, Attendance Patterns and Bachelor's*

*Degree Attainment* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1999).

Bueschel, A.C. *The Missing Link: The Role of Community Colleges in the Transitions between High School and College. A Report for the Bridge Project: Strengthening K-16 Transition Policies* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University, February 2003).

Education Trust. "Ticket to Nowhere – The Gap Between Leaving High School and Entering College and High Performance Jobs," *Thinking K-16* (Washington, D.C.: The Education Trust, 1999) Vol. 3, Issue 2.

Fry, R. *Hispanics in Higher Education: Many Enroll, Too Few Graduate* (Washington, D.C.: Pew Hispanic Center, 2002).

Venezia, A. and M.W. Kirst, A.L. Antonio. *Betraying the College Dream: How Disconnected K-12 and Postsecondary Education Systems Undermine Student Aspirations. Final Policy Brief* (Stanford, Calif.: The Bridge Project. The Stanford Institute for Higher Education Research, 2003).

Villarreal, A. "Challenges and Strategies for Principals of Low Performing Schools," *IDRA Newsletter* (San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development Research Association, 2001).

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- of conflicting obligations that arise under NCLB versus Title VI and Title IX, such as single-race and single-sex schooling practices, zero tolerance practices and safe school practices and disciplinary actions, particularly over-representation issues;
- Identify research-based best practices that positively impact student outcomes by race, gender, national origin, and income for implementation in a variety of school settings including rural and remote settings; and
  - Integrate the use of technology in

instruction, data collection and analysis, and information management of issues by race, gender and national origin since appropriate porting by these categories is essential for adequate yearly progress and other reporting requirements.

IDRA has undertaken many of these suggestions by creating focused educational initiatives for English language learners, multicultural educational frameworks for curriculum and professional development, girls in STEM, equity in funding and resource allocation, and school reform for increased student success.

School district personnel wanting technical assistance and training in areas listed above or other educational concerns that would improve their capacity to serve all students should call upon the SCCE services that are provided at no cost to assist them to serve all students and create greater academic success and achievement regardless of their race, gender and national origin.

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the current school year. But it supported only a very small percentage of schools that need help in off-setting school facilities needs. In fact, the limited funding was confined to a mere 16 public school districts, excluding more than 95 percent of all schools.

Yet Texas schools in many communities are dealing with dramatic increases in numbers of students. The need for new schools will continue to be a challenge facing state legislators.

Critics of the state's current school funding program say that the funding process does not provide a reliable source of revenue to address all districts' facilities needs. This has been validated by data showing that in just about every year since the program was created, the instructional facilities allotment appropriation has *never* had enough revenue to cover all districts that apply for and qualify for some level of support.

Until this issue is addressed, local schools may continue to suffer from overcrowded classrooms and higher local property taxes to support new school construction. Whether the legislature will have the capacity or political will needed to address this particularly challenging issue remains to be seen.

### **Access to Higher Education**

Over the last decade, funding for higher education has not kept pace with either inflation or with increases in student enrollment. Also, federal support has decreased for higher education programs, particularly federal financial aid to help families cope with rising tuition and related expenses. These factors have combined to limit the post-secondary opportunities realistically available to Texas' high school graduates.

One important policy that has helped to diversify enrollment at Texas' two largest universities is the "Ten Percent Plan," a program created by

the Texas legislature that guarantees admission to state colleges and universities for all students graduating in the top 10 percent of their high school classes. This program was promoted as an alternative to affirmative action policies.

After the adoption of the Ten Percent Plan, Texas universities witnessed an increase in the number of students applying for admission, including substantive increases in students applying from high schools that previously had very few students applying for and granted admissions to the state's two largest universities (the University of Texas at Austin and Texas A&M University in College Station). Research revealed that prior to the Ten Percent Plan, less than 50 schools accounted for more than one half of admissions. After the plan began, the entering class included a far greater diversity of feeder high schools.

As the proportion of entering freshman admitted under the Ten Percent Plan increased, both major state universities actively promoted modification of that plan in 2003.

One proposal would have capped the percentage that "top 10" students could constitute of the entering freshman class. It was defeated in the last hours of the legislative session on the basis of serious concerns expressed by African American and Hispanic legislators. Despite its 2003 rejection, these major institutions likely will continue to push for modifications of the plan in order to afford them greater "discretion" in freshman admissions decisions.

A related issue will involve a revisiting of legislation adopted in 2003 that allowed state universities extensive discretion in setting higher tuition and fees. Observations that these increases were not matched with increases in state financial aid for students has raised concerns that some portion of the state's population is being denied affordable access to higher education

in Texas.

Less than stellar increases in low-income and minority enrollment at Texas colleges and universities may have been impacted by lack of sufficient financial aid for many students. Texas leaders' complaints that many capable Texas students are opting to enroll in out-of-state institutions may in fact be attributable to the fact that other states are offering Texas students better financial aid packages.

The state also will need to address an array of issues having to do with improving student preparation for college; facilitating transitions from high school to post-secondary schools; developing more effective college-based support programs; and assessing institutional capacity to keep students enrolled until they graduate.

### **School Holding Power**

At one time, Texas was considered a national leader in requiring schools to report dropout rates. But starting in the early 1990s, the state created a complex procedure to allow schools to categorize students into various "leaver" categories. These provided many ways for schools to exclude large numbers of students from dropout counts and related calculations. The more onerous categories, for example, allow Texas schools to not count as dropouts who are "believed" to have transferred to another school – without requiring schools to verify their enrollment at the new school.

IDRA released its latest attrition study last month, finding that Texas schools actually are failing to graduate two out of every five students. Concerns about low credibility of the state agency's reporting of dropout data continues to grow.

This will continue to create pressure for the legislature to change the state's dropout counting and reporting process. Some have proposed a shift to a "graduation-" or

“completion-focused” accountability measure. But IDRA is concerned that this alternative can be as easily manipulated if the state continues to rely on data based on the current leaver coding process.

Others have advocated the use of student tracking systems to provide more accurate indicators of school holding power. But care will need to be exercised to ensure that if alternative tracking systems are adopted, safeguards must be created to ensure that they are not manipulated in the way that existing dropout counting process both encourages and facilitates.

As more and more studies reinforce IDRA’s research showing

that student dropout counts are severely under-estimated, we suggest that it may be time to recognize and support schools and programs that show evidence that they can help reduce dropout rates. IDRA’s own Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program is one of a small number of programs that have a track record of helping schools effectively address the dropout issue. Schools may need either additional resources or incentives to re-allocate resources to encourage them to take bolder steps to address this long-standing critical issue.

### Access to Quality Teaching

Few would disagree with the notion that all Texas students deserve access to well-qualified, well-prepared

teachers. Data compiled by the State Board of Teacher Certification however documents ongoing shortages in critical areas, including math, science, and those who work with students who do not speak English or students with special education needs.

Until new programs and incentives are created, schools will be plagued by the need to hire non-certified personnel, request emergency permits and assign teachers to work in subjects that are outside their area of expertise.

Student advocates should demand changes in Texas’ student accountability provisions that require students to pass state tests for promotion or graduation. The provisions

## Highlights of Recent IDRA Activities

In September, IDRA worked with **10,421** teachers, administrators, parents, and higher education personnel through **55** training and technical assistance activities and **168** program sites in **nine** states plus Mexico and Brazil. Topics included:

- ◆ Students Bridging Technology for Parents
- ◆ Preparing Qualified Teachers for English Language Learners
- ◆ Coaching and Mentoring Teachers
- ◆ Unbuttoning Pockets of Excellence and Equity

Participating agencies and school districts included:

- ◇ Atlanta Public Schools, Georgia
- ◇ Dysart Unified School District, Arizona
- ◇ East Baton Rouge Parish, Louisiana
- ◇ Education Service Center – Region XVII, Texas

### Activity Snapshot

Given great disparities in higher education access and success of Latino students, IDRA has created a new Texas initiative called InterAction, which is supported by the Houston Endowment, Inc. The initiative includes a series of policy action forums leading into a statewide seminar that will present the policy solutions identified by forum participants who represent three communities of interest – the border, urban, and rural areas. The first forum was held in November and included K-12 educators, college and university leaders, and community and business advocates. Participants are using a framework for dialogue by IDRA that identifies seven distinct areas of opportunities for reform: preparation, access, institutional persistence, affordability, institutional resources, graduation, and graduate and professional studies.

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.

should at least consider whether such students had access to qualified teachers. In those cases where students were not provided such access, policies should direct grade placement committees and other school officials to consider this as a factor when deciding a students' academic fate.

Barring state action, legal advocates should consider a litigation-based strategy to provide relief for the thousands of students who are impacted by the state's persistent teacher shortage in certain subject and specialty areas.

### Summary

Over the last few biennium Texas has been at a crossroads, grappling with an array of educational policies whose effects will be felt for generations. One set of choices, including increased state investment in our public schools, will lead to expanded opportunities for all students, promises of a well prepared workforce, and prosperity for an increasing number of Texas citizens. Other choices, including privatizing and increased standards

## Over the last few biennium Texas has been at a crossroads, grappling with an array of educational policies whose effects will be felt for generations.

without increased support, will result in dysfunctional responses, limited opportunities, and an overall decline in the population's level of education.

No doubt that to do better the state of Texas will need to do more. But will state leaders take up the challenge and do what is needed? Judge Dietz asks a similar question noting: "Are we at this present day, to turn our back on 168 years of heritage of Texas public education and say we aren't prepared for the sacrifice? Are we to say that to close that gap is too hard, costs too much money, and that we simply give up? Are we prepared for a Texas that is dismally poor, needy and

ignorant? I think not... Again I repeat it is the people of Texas who must set the standard, make the sacrifice, and give direction to their leaders. And the time to speak is now. These problems only get more difficult the more we wait... The lesson is this, education costs money, but ignorance costs more money... More money invested in education benefits first the children of Texas, or in other words our future. It also benefits our entire community because educated people make more money, spend more money, and pay more taxes" (2004).

IDRA will monitor these issues throughout the legislative session and, in the summer of 2005, will present to you an assessment of how well the legislature lived up to its challenge.

### Resources

*West Orange Cove vs. Neeley*. State District Court Summary Decision (Austin, Texas: State District Court, September 2004).

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