



## Legislative Session Falls Short in Texas

**by María "Cuca" Robledo Montecel, Ph.D., and Albert Cortez, Ph.D.**

In the final days of the 2003 Texas legislative session, policy watchers shook their collective heads. On the one hand, people were thankful that some bad policy was set aside. On the other, they were disappointed that the state body lacked the political will, and in some cases the leadership, to do what was needed to improve Texas schools.

### **The Texas Context**

As the Texas Legislature began its final deliberations, observers proclaimed that it was a session that fell short in many areas. Facing a multi-billion-dollar shortage in revenue, many law-makers left themselves limited options by committing to no increase in state taxes.

Education at both the grade school and higher education levels was subjected to significant cuts, as were other programs such as child health insurance – issues significantly impacting Texas children and families.

And finally, the new conservative

political leadership in the state's House of Representatives further compounded the challenge by engaging in bitter partisan battles that caused a dramatic flight by liberal and moderate legislators in the latter days of the session, bringing legislative activity to a standstill for a critical four-day period.

The larger-than-expected budget shortfall also caused the session to take an early negative bent, with bitter battles waged over the size and targets of state budget cuts. Major non-education issues included insurance (tort) reform and an unusual attempt to re-draw U.S. congressional boundaries within two years of the last major realignment (rather than the once-per-biennium normal cycle).

These issues bitterly divided the state legislature along partisan lines and spilled over into most other areas being considered. Against this hostile and contentious backdrop, little substantive change was possible.

This article provides an overview of key education issues faced by the legislature, including public school finance, the use of public money for private schools, school holding power, access to instruction, and access to

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higher education. IDRA’s position on these and other key education issues are further outlined in the March 2003 issue of the *IDRA Newsletter* as well as on the IDRA web site, [www.idra.org](http://www.idra.org) (Robledo Montecel and Cortez, 2003).

### Public School Finance

Anxious to flex their new power in the opening days of the session, many conservative Texas legislators who have opposed the state’s equalization of school funding rammed a proposal through the public education committee. It would have eliminated the existing public school funding system and established committees to develop an alternative funding system.

But when many legislators came to realize that close to 900 of the state’s 1,000-plus school systems benefited from the so-called “Robin Hood” feature of the school funding system, the move to discard the existing public school funding plan quickly lost momentum. No alternative funding proposal surfaced until the last weeks of the session.

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After months of efforts to garner sufficient support, the House leadership re-surfaced a modified school finance plan that provided an additional \$150 per ADA (average daily attendance) in state funding to all school districts for each year of the next biennium. The ploy to sweeten the pot was designed to dampen school leaders’ opposition to the original House plan.

Unfortunately, the trade-off also called for sunseting the current funding plan in 2005. Efforts to modify the House proposal to ensure comparable or greater equity in any new system were turned back, and the bill was adopted by the Texas House of Representatives in late April. The Senate rejected the House plan in favor of a different proposal crafted under

the leadership of Lt. Governor Dewhurst.

The Dewhurst plan also called for major revisions to the Texas public school finance system. In this plan, the existing three-tiered funding system would be replaced by a new two-level plan. Tier 1 provided approximately \$4,300 per pupil and was to be funded, in part, by a new 75¢ state property tax.

The second tier was similar to the current Guaranteed Yield system in that it would guarantee every school district a total of \$32 per penny of local enrichment tax effort. For example a school district whose property tax base yielded only \$4 per penny would be provided an additional \$28 in state aid.

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# Writing on Purpose

## A Fourth Grade Volcano of Words

by **Juanita C. García, M.A.**

It was late March and the writing lesson with the fourth graders had been enlightening. Since the beginning of the school year, these boys and girls had prepared for their state's mandated test. But now the test had come and gone and it was finally time to have fun.

The teacher began the lesson with a focused discussion and asked several questions. "What is writing, anyway? What kinds of writing do you do every day?" The answers varied, but cumulatively the children called out: chore lists, letters, personal journals, jokes, short stories, poems, etc.

When asked, "What is fun about writing?" most of the students agreed that writing about what interests them is fun because they get to express their feelings.

When asked, "What is boring about writing?" the students agreed that they did not like tedious, assigned topics and "timed writing."

When asked, "What can you do to make writing better?" they responded adding descriptive words and details to make their writing come alive.

These students enjoy writing, and they understand that writing is a vehicle for expressing their ideas and emotions. Unfortunately, many children – and

adults – have developed biases toward writing. These prejudices are blocks that have been internalized because of what some teachers, with good intentions, do to pressure students to improve their writing. For example, most writing tests are timed, and children often write to a prompt. Another teaching tradition that deters students from writing is focusing on the mechanics of writing instead of on the creative nature of writing.

Since last year, the Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA) South Central Collaborative for Equity has been working with a cohort of teachers on a Louisiana campus. The goal of this professional

development is to create and maintain model learning environments for language-minority students through the integration of language across the curriculum. It was designed to serve language-minority students at the school in order for them to achieve their full potential in the district's academic programs and to meet state performance standards on a par with their English-speaking peers.

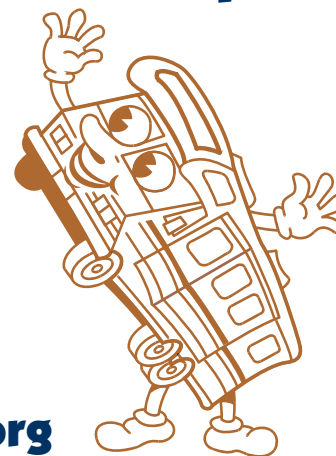
The South Central Collaborative for Equity is the equity assistance center, funded by the U.S. Department of Education, to serve the educational equity needs of Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas in

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## Take the IDRA Newsletter Field Trip!

### On IDRA's Web Site

- ✦ Read related *IDRA Newsletter* articles from 1996 to the present
- ✦ Access statistics, definitions, etc.
- ✦ Learn about Internet resources
- ✦ Find extensive useful Internet links
- ✦ Use IDRA's topical index to find what you are looking for



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

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the areas of race, gender, and national origin equity. The ongoing professional development program described here is FLAIR (Focusing on Language and Academic Instructional Renewal). See the box on Page 5 for more information on FLAIR.

This article discusses writing as an integration of language in all content areas, outlines nine stages of the writing process that combines the freedom of expression with the discipline of completing and perfecting a written piece, and discusses the role of quality children's literature.

## **Writing is a Process**

Writing is a thinking process that is a vital tool. If students are to use this tool skillfully, they need to encounter an approach to the writing process that can become their own (Frank, 1979). Vygotsky argued that writing must be relevant to life and that reading and writing should be something the child needs. Writing is not a motor skill, but a complex cultural activity (Moll, 1990).

Frank has developed the following plan for guiding students from the beginning stages of the writing process to the polished final piece. Incorporated into the plan is a painted poems writing lesson that was conducted with second grade English as a second language (ESL) students at the same campus. Once students learn and internalize this process, it is forever theirs.

## **A Nine-Stage Plan for Writing**

### **Stage 1: The Motivation**

This stage evokes and captures students' emotions. A children's literature book is an excellent resource to use in this very important stage. Through stories, children make associations with their world and surface images in their minds.

When the teacher in Louisiana worked with second grade ESL

students, she used the book, *Arroz con Leche* by Lulu Delacre, to introduce the lesson. She read a couple of the poems and discussed the importance of subjects in writing and had the class brainstorm subjects for their poem. After creating an exciting array of themes, the class decided on the science-based theme of volcanoes.

### **Stage 2: Impression Collecting**

This very important stage is the gathering of words as did Fredrick, the little mouse in Leo Lionni's book, who gathered words instead of helping the other field mice gather food for the winter. He later became their wordsmith. In this crucial stage, children are guided through the process of brainstorming words and thoughts to broaden the original idea and encourage creative thinking.

The teacher was totally amazed at the creative thinking of the children. Everything was accepted, including her ideas that modeled elaboration on existing thoughts. The teacher began by asking students, "What kinds of things would you see and hear and feel happening if you saw a volcano erupting?" she made a list of action words from their responses.

Once they had action words, she asked what colors they would see and collected a list of vibrant and brilliant color words. Finally, she asked the children what might be happening inside the volcano to make all those colors. And she collected a list of phrases such as "erupting lava" and "loud explosions."

### **Stage 3: The Rough Draft**

This is the stage where children write down their ideas after recording thoughts and feelings. It is important to let them write as fast as they can without stopping to correct. Talking and sharing are allowed because this generates more ideas.

The children combined words and

ideas from the three lists as they were guided with questions such as: "Which color fits with lava?" "What should we put with explodes?" and "Which action word goes with the houses idea?"

### **Stage 4: Re-reading for Sense and Readability**

Now the writers skim over the rough draft to see how it sounds. This is the heart of the fourth stage. The teacher guided the students to ask themselves, "Does it make sense?" She asked for a volunteer to read our rough draft of the poem, and the children decided on the changes.

### **Stages 5, 6 and 7: Sharing for Response, Editing, and Mechanics Check**

These stages involve getting reactions, suggestions and affirmations; changing and reworking the piece; and checking for spelling, grammar and any other possible errors.

After the poem was read aloud, the teacher asked questions, such as, "Which lines do you like just the way they are?" "Should any lines be dropped?" and "What should come next?" The revisions were made, and the class decided on the punctuation.

### **Stages 8 and 9: Final Copy and Presenting**

The children worked in cooperative groups to write and illustrate their own team copy of the painted poem. Then they showed off their finished pieces to the teachers who were observing the lesson demonstration.

This part is very important because in the context of the classroom, the teacher is the primary source of encouragement and support and it is here that the ESL students learn the power of language (Altwerger and Ivener, 1994). The children showed pride in their poem and a high self-

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esteem. Here is their poem:

Volcano explodes!  
Red, yellow lava turns into stone.  
Destroys houses and peoples'  
lives!  
Crashes and kills and people die!

## The Role of Quality Children's Literature

Impression collecting is a phase of the writing process that is the exciting collection of thoughts, feelings and memories. Quality children's literature nurtures ideas for student writers. Literature surrounds students with rich examples of language and helps them develop a storehouse of images and story patterns to draw upon for their own self expression.

Literature consists of two parts: story and language. Good quality literature captures children's interest through the storyline and models creative expression through the language. We all use language to make sense of our lives, and children must internalize the language around them in order to create a unified vision of the world.

The richer the textual and linguistic environment a child lives in, the more developed and sophisticated the child's vision and ability to express that vision can become. This is especially true for second language learners who need maximum exposure to both the native and second languages in order to grow (García and Bauer, 1998).

## Writing is Expression

Writing is a form of expressing thoughts and feelings. It is a transaction that has the power to unite or separate people (Farnan, et al., 1994). It is communication, and it is interrelated with reading. It is the product of a creative mind with the freedom to express and the discipline of perfecting a written piece.

## Focusing on Language and Academic Instructional Renewal

Increase your students' reading scores. Weave reading throughout the curriculum. Recapture your students' love of reading. With FLAIR, IDRA gives you a process for redesigning and re-energizing your reading program that is more responsive to the characteristics of diverse learners in your school or district. FLAIR promotes:

- Student data-based decision-making using state and local standards for mastering on-level reading comprehension objectives
- Integrating literacy skills in content-area teaching
- Supporting continuous vertical and horizontal communication among teachers in the school
- Empowering teachers by equipping them with certain knowledge and resources to make better classroom and instructional decisions
- Creating a "family" environment where everyone feels responsible for student success
- Using reflection and action as two critical instructional practices of successful reading programs
- Learning new ways to assess program effectiveness

### All students become successful readers!

FLAIR capitalizes on the campus leaders, mobilizing the principal, teachers, librarians and support staff as a force to tailor-make a reading program that is research based and that results in better achievement for all students.

This reading program helps people in the school community work together to transform every classroom into a powerful learning environment, where students and teachers are encouraged to think creatively, explore their interests and achieve at high levels. In turn, it uses the school's philosophy and process to create its own vision and work collaboratively to reach its goals.

*"I was used to teaching in blocks. FLAIR helped me to integrate math, science and social studies with authentic literature."*

– FLAIR teacher

*"Many programs came to our district, and they just told us what to do. What I like about this program is the follow-up process. IDRA will follow us from the beginning to the end."*

– FLAIR teacher

*"Our students are more excited about learning."*

– FLAIR teacher

For more information about bringing FLAIR to your school, contact IDRA at 210-444-1710; [contact@idra.org](mailto:contact@idra.org); or <http://www.idra.org>.

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The nine stages above follow a more natural and productive path to encourage students to become effective writers.

The following poem by one of the fourth grade students demonstrates her abstract thoughts about the word *emotion* and the power of expressing thoughts and feelings.

### Emotion

Cry with laughter,  
Weep with joy,  
Be happy as can be,  
For sometimes in your life sorrow  
must be.

When students are actively engaged in authentic, purposeful activities that capture their interest, promote interaction and facilitate

communication, and convert those into words, phrases, sentences and paragraphs, then they are well on their way to successful reading and writing. Their exploding volcanoes of feelings and experiences will gel into poems and scientific essays.

### Resources

Altwerger, B., and B.L. Ivener. "Self-Esteem: Access to Literacy in Multicultural and Multilingual Classrooms," *Kids Come in All Languages: Reading Instruction for ESL Students* (Newark, Del.: International Reading Association, 1994).

Farnan, N., and J. Flood, D. Lapp. "Comprehending Through Reading and Writing: Six Research-Based Instructional Strategies," *Kids Come in All Languages: Reading Instruction*

*for ESL Students* (Newark, Del.: International Reading Association, 1994).

Frank, M. *If You're Trying to Teach Kids How to Write, You've Got to Have This Book* (Nashville, Tenn.: Incentive Publications, Inc., 1979).

García, J., and H. Bauer. "Do You Want Your Students to be Reader? All it Takes is 15 Minutes a Day," *IDRA Newsletter* (San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development Research Association, April 1998).

Moll, L.C. *Vygotsky and Education* (New York, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

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## Highlights of Recent IDRA Activities

In June and July, IDRA worked with **3,536** teachers, administrators, parents, and higher education personnel through **102** training and technical assistance activities and **278** program sites in **14** states plus Mexico and Brazil. Topics included:

- ◆ Academic Learning in the Dual Language Classroom
- ◆ Data-Driven Decision-Making
- ◆ Title III Evaluation
- ◆ Migrant Comprehensive Needs Assessment
- ◆ Oral Language: The Center of All Learning

Participating agencies and school districts included:

- ◆ Albuquerque Public Schools, New Mexico
- ◆ Brooklyn Community School District, New York
- ◆ Canutillo Independent School District, Texas
- ◆ Grand Rapids Public Schools, Michigan

### Activity Snapshot

The W.K. Kellogg Foundation funds Project Alianza, a collaboration of IDRA and the Mexican and American Solidarity Foundation, to create a comprehensive and interdisciplinary teacher preparation and leadership development program to serve an increasing Hispanic student population in the U.S. Southwest and Midwest. The project is expanding the elementary education curricula at participating universities to enhance the abilities of teachers, parents, administrators, school board members and community leaders to collaborate effectively. It focuses on kindergarten through sixth grade teachers – grade levels where bilingual education is offered most and where there is a shortage of well-prepared teachers. Project Alianza is enabling universities to tap into three groups of individuals who possess the basic requirements of a prospective bilingual education teacher: bilingual teacher aides, students in traditional bilingual teacher-preparation programs, and teachers trained in Mexico to teach in their elementary grades (*normalistas*) and who are legal U.S. residents.

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.*

A wealthier district that produced \$28 per penny of local tax effort would be provided an additional \$4. In contrast to the current system, school districts whose property wealth produced more than the \$32 guaranteed level would be allowed to keep the extra revenue rather than surrendering the excess unequalized revenue to the state to help pay for the overall cost of education in the state, as is the case in the existing funding plan.

The proposal required adoption of a constitutional amendment reinstating a statewide property tax, which is currently prohibited by the Texas constitution. If the state property tax was approved by the majority of Texas voters, local school property taxes would be reduced as the state assumed a larger portion of local school costs.

The Dewhurst plan also called for an *expansion of the sales tax base* by including certain services currently exempted from state sales taxes and the dedication of certain revenues to support public education.

In contrast to the House plan that essentially eliminated the current funding system but provided no specific alternative, the Senate plan modified the finance system, but maintained many of the critical equalization features, including tax limits and recognition of district and special population costs. The significant differences between the two plans and major tension between House and Senate leaders resulted in a legislative stalemate; no major plan was passed during the regular legislative session.

To help local schools cover some of their rising costs, the legislature did appropriate an additional \$110 per student for each year of the upcoming biennium. A special session is expected to be convened, possibly in the winter but more probably in the spring of 2004, after special legislative committees have had opportunities to develop possible alternatives.

**The so-called pilot voucher program would have initially diverted more than \$250 million of state funding into private schools in Texas. After the 2005 school year, the program would have been expanded to include any school district where the majority of local school board members voted to participate in the state voucher activity.**

### **Using Public Tax Money to Fund Private Schools**

The debacle on school finance was mirrored in efforts to divert public money for private schooling. Although voucher proponents were salivating at the notion of having some of the state's political leaders openly supporting their cause, little headway was made on the issue after an initial flurry in the early weeks of the session.

A House education committee plan to force 11 of the state's largest school systems to participate in a "pilot" voucher plan met with serious early opposition but was eventually adopted by the House Committee on Public Education on a 5-3 vote.

Although the initial plan called for unlimited student participation, efforts to make it more palatable to local school leaders led to incorporation of amendments that limited the amount of revenue that could be diverted to no more than 5 percent of a district's budget. The amended version also limited the number of students that could be funded to no more than 3 percent of a district's students.

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The early success of voucher

proponents quickly lost momentum as coalitions of public school organizations and community-based advocacy groups expressed their concerns with the plan. These efforts resulted in significant opposition to the measure in both the House and Senate as legislative members began to recognize implications associated with adoption of those proposals.

Even with the later revisions, most Democrats and many Republican members expressed reservations about the plan, leading voucher proponents to withhold their proposal from a vote by the full House membership. Even if the House's school voucher proposal had been adopted, stronger opposition to the plan was expected to surface in the Senate, with final passage deemed doubtful.

Later efforts to append pilot voucher provisions onto other House plans were turned back. Undeterred, even before the close of the regular session, voucher proponents vowed to resurface the issue during the anticipated special session on public school finance.

In related efforts, voucher proponents also attempted to promote the use of state funding for what have come to be called "virtual charter schools" – used to describe education efforts that proposed to use technology to deliver instruction in non-school settings. In this variation of diverting public funding to private education ventures, the state would have been required to provide funding for students

receiving home schooling, either directly or by reimbursing parents for purchasing computer hardware and software developed and sold by private vendors.

State funding for virtual (online) charter schools was also proposed. Support for these proposals came from voucher proponents as well as private sector groups who recognized the benefits of state adoption of such plans. All of these efforts to divert public money to non-public schooling were eventually rejected, but only after extensive debate and significant pressure on legislators from the pro-voucher camps, efforts effectively countered by a coalition of groups committed to keeping public money concentrated in public schools.

### **School Holding Power**

Despite early optimism that the Texas legislature would finally get around to significantly improving the way it counted and reported dropouts, very little was actually accomplished during the 2003 session. Although the state did modify its procedures in order to more closely track the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) dropout procedures, no changes were made to the process used to categorize different pupils for dropout counting purposes.

As a result, Texas will continue to exclude as non-dropouts students who have supposedly transferred but for whom no enrollment information is received. It will also continue the current practice of excluding pupils who say they are enrolling in GED programs and students who have earned all their credits but were denied a diploma because they failed the exit level TAAS. None of these students will be counted as dropouts.

Because the state will continue to use its extensive number of “leaver” codes to diminish the actual number of dropouts reported, and since NCES

## **Because the state will continue to use its extensive number of “leaver” codes to diminish the actual number of dropouts reported, and since NCES accepts whatever data is provided by the state (using its own state-level definitions), adoption of NCES procedures is not a significant improvement.**

accepts whatever data is provided by the state (using its own state-level definitions), adoption of NCES procedures is not a significant improvement.

While some members considered introducing legislation that would have improved the state’s dropout counting process, strong opposition to more accurate dropout procedures surfaced from state administrator’s groups, school board organizations, and some legislators more concerned with protecting the image of schools than acquiring better dropout data on behalf of students.

During deliberations over the plans, opponents expressed concern that schools would be “punished” by having their accountability ratings downgraded if true estimates of local dropouts were developed. Some noted that opposition may have been weaker if more accurate counts were simply generated but not used for accountability purposes. However, advocates noted that lack of accountability would make such numbers essentially useless for school improvement purposes.

Even as new reports surfaced documenting the widespread abuse associated with Texas dropout reporting procedures, the state continued to avoid improving its dropout counting procedures. Until local communities refuse to accept the obvious manipulation of dropout data, nothing will be done to address the issue, and the state will continue to suffer millions of dollars in lost revenues.

More importantly as long as knowing the real status of our students

is not a state policy reform priority, thousands of students will continue to be lost – not only from schools – but also reflected in losses in tax revenue and income that comes from decreased levels of education in Texas residents.

### **Access to Instruction**

Early in the legislative session, a few conservative legislators announced their intent to abolish the Texas requirements related to bilingual education and English as a second language (ESL) instruction for students who are identified as being limited English proficient (LEP). But strong opposition surfaced and included a cross-section of groups such as the Texas Association for Bilingual Education, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, and LULAC. The strong objections voiced by many Hispanic leaders to efforts to weaken state programs serving English language learners no doubt contributed to an eventual decision to leave current requirements unchanged.

The continuation of policies that recognize the need to provide specialized instruction for children enables Texas to remain among those states that still require schools to address the unique language-related needs of students in the process of learning English, providing an alternative to xenophobic policies in states such as Arizona, Massachusetts, and California.

In a related development, however, the state education agency – facing reduced staffing created by legislative cuts in the state agency

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# Mexican and American Solidarity Foundation Releases New Book

A new book published by the Mexican and American Solidarity Foundation (MASF) highlights the importance of the relationship between Mexicans and Mexican Americans. The book, *Las Organizaciones Mexicano Americanas, Hispanas, Mexicanas en los Estados Unidos*, was unveiled at an event in Mexico City. The attendees at this event were composed of more than 200 individuals from the Mexican public and private sectors, as well as board members of the MASF. Board members of the MASF include: Dr. Blandina Cárdenas, Dean of the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Texas at San Antonio; Mr. Héctor Flores, President, LULAC; Mr. J.R. Gonzales, Chair, U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce; Mr. Fernando Solana, former Secretary of State in Mexico; and Dr. Josué M. González, Director of the Center for Bilingual Education and Research, Arizona State University.

The authors, Graciela Orozco and Roger Díaz de Cossí, are founding members of the MASF and, along with Esther González, have distinguished themselves as pioneers in the investigation and analysis of various aspects of the Mexican, Mexican American and Hispanic community in the United States, a topic of which they have various studies.

This book takes into account the efforts of many organizations that have defended the interests of individuals of Mexican origin and other Latinos within the United States, and proffers practical tools that facilitate communication and joint endeavors that are of mutual interest to Mexicans on both sides of the border.

Dr. María Robledo Montecel, executive director of the Intercultural Development Research Association and a MASF founding board member, said, “The organizations detailed in this book have achieved much in educational, health and housing services, and there is still much to be done.”

The MASF has worked for 10 years encouraging the convergence and understanding between the Mexican and Mexican American community in the United States. This binational organization has offices in Mexico and the United States.

Copies of *Las Organizaciones Mexicano Americanas, Hispanas, Mexicanas en los Estados Unidos* can be purchased through the MASF web site at: <http://www.fsma.org.mx/Publicaciones/Libros/LibroOrganizaciones.htm>



**Dr. María Robledo Montecel, executive director of Intercultural Development Research Association and founding board member of the Mexican American Solidarity Foundation, addresses fellow board members and audience.**

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budget – recommended that bilingual and ESL monitoring visits be reduced from three- to five-year intervals. Some local districts’ desire to reduce state compliance oversight, taken in tandem with some legislators’ push to reduce state monitoring efforts led to the adoption of policies that may reduce the extent of state monitoring of compliance with program requirements.

Given the anticipated reduction in state oversight, the role of communities

in ensuring local compliance with state and federal requirements will become even more important. Though the state may be more limited in its efforts to protect the rights of LEP children, advocates should note that the Office for Civil Rights also has jurisdiction in this area and should be contacted if violations in requirements related to the education of language-minority children are suspected.

## Access to Higher Education

Although proponents of reforms in higher education approached the current session with high hopes, budget cuts to most institutions caused most advocates to focus on retaining much of what had been acquired during past sessions. Despite efforts to hold the line, institutions of higher education suffered from across-the-board cuts (7 percent) as well as targeted cuts in

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selected higher education programs.

In contrast to past sessions where policies to expand the number of minority pupils were a priority, little was heard about the status of the state coordinating board's plan for "closing the gap," which had been the focus of extensive discussion prior to the 2003 session. Ironically, preliminary data on progress made toward the coordinating board's goals had revealed that the state was already lagging behind in achieving its five-year targets, strongly suggesting that more or different strategies would be required.

Rather than expanding its efforts, proposals to "cap" the percentage of pupils ensured admissions into Texas' major universities under the state's Ten Percent Plan were introduced and seemed headed for adoption. Senators West and Van De Putte raised last minute opposition as they were concerned with the possible impact of the senate proposal and the lack of public hearings on the issue. This led to a filibuster, resulting in the rejection of that proposal in the closing hours of the 2003 session.

Rather than increasing financial aid and student support programs, legislators spent more time debating proposals to increase course requirements, increase student tuition and fees, and otherwise limiting, rather than expanding, student access. Shortage of state monies, coupled with a need for the infusion of new revenue into state-funded institutions contributed to adoption of new provisions that provide expanded local discretion for state colleges and universities to increase local tuition without state approval.

To their credit however, state lawmakers did create a new group to monitor the impact of those increases on university access. In contrast to past sessions, higher education lost more than many sectors dependent on state funding.

## **Rather than increasing financial aid and student support programs, legislators spent more time debating proposals to increase course requirements, increase student tuition and fees, and otherwise limit, rather than expand, student access.**

Post session analyses of higher education cuts indicated, however, that not all institutions suffered equally. The University of Texas and Texas A&M University systems suffered proportionately smaller cutbacks compared to other state-funded colleges and universities.

Though the recent U.S. Supreme Court decision on affirmative action will allow Texas colleges to expand efforts to increase their diversity, the cuts in higher education funding may inhibit the efforts of many to increase diversity of their students and staff.

### **Reform in an Era of Budget Shortages**

Given the importance of the state context in policy reform efforts, researchers have noted that adoption of large-scale education reforms was always much more difficult when state monies were limited. Though speaking of school finance reform, that observation is no doubt applicable to many other education issues.

In three decades of monitoring legislative developments, IDRA has noted that access to additional revenue facilitates state transitions to new funding systems and also supports the pairing of desired changes with additional funding in order to ease or facilitate instructional, administrative or other reforms.

Texas' unprecedented improvements in education over the last decade were no doubt supported by substantial increases in general levels of funding for education. More importantly, increased kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade funding also supported increased levels of school funding equal-

ization, which in turn, flowed badly-needed revenue to poorer schools. Texas' school finance reforms also targeted resources to pupils with special instructional needs.

This additional equalized funding allowed historically under-funded schools to upgrade their teaching staff and related teaching support systems and was the real engine that drove the increases in student achievement reported in much of the national media.

During that time, Texas institutions of higher education also benefited from increasing revenues, including funding delivered through the state's South Texas Initiative, which targeted significant increases in state funding for institutions that historically received less than their fair share of higher education revenues. Spurred by growth in revenue, many of these same institutions were the pace-setters in statewide efforts to increase both the number and diversity of students enrolling in Texas colleges and universities

In contrast to that era, the current Texas context is characterized by major revenue shortfalls. Efforts to increase state revenues by increasing taxes on current sources, including sales taxes, have met with some understandable resistance, given the regressive nature of this tax.

Unfortunately the resulting cuts in service (such as cuts in education and children's access to health care), though expedient over the short term, may have serious long-term consequences. State leadership in searching for creative and effective solutions to the current budget crisis has been sorely lacking.

*Legislative Session – continued on Page 12*

# Minority Women in Science: Forging the Way

by Keiko E. Suda, Oanh H. Maroney, M.A., Bradley Scott, M.A., and María Aurora Yáñez, M.A.

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**"Being a scientist can open doors to opportunities that you may  
never have dreamt of or even considered."**

– Patricia Hall, M.S., one of the scientists featured in *Minority Women in Science: Forging the Way*

## The Need for Diversifying State Revenue Sources

Though currently mired in concerns over diminishing revenues, Texas is really suffering from the effects of an antiquated tax structure. Unlike most states that fund state services from three sources including sales taxes, property taxes and state income taxes, Texas currently taps only two of the sources – sales and property taxes.

Over-reliance on this limited revenue base tends to over-burden the two revenue sources, leading Texas to have the dubious distinction of having among the highest local property taxes and sales tax rates in the country.

While booming economic times and ever-increasing real estate values

had allowed the state to overcome such limitations, skeptics had predicted that state leaders would someday have to confront the state's out-dated revenue structure. Whether political leadership will emerge to create the public will to do what is clearly needed, however, remains a question.

Until these larger policy challenges are confronted, Texas may continue to band-aid its educational programs, until as in eras past, the systems require major surgery. Unfortunately demographers note that in order to avoid social and economic declines in the upcoming decades, investment in education will be required today. The window of opportunity, though still open in Texas, became notably smaller as the 2003 session was gaveled to its close.

## Resources

Robledo Montecel, M., and A. Cortez. "Public Education Reform Priorities in Texas: IDRA Perspectives," *IDRA Newsletter* (San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development Research Association, March 2003).

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