

# **National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities**

## **Teleseminar Transcript – December 8, 2005**



### **“Increasing School Holding Power for All Students”**

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#### **Part 4: Seven Lessons from Texas About Dropouts and School Holding Power**

**DR. MARIA “CUCA” ROBLEDO MONTECEL: DR. ROBLEDO MONTECEL:** Seven lessons from Texas. Lesson number one. Losing children from our school system is a persistent and unacknowledged problem. It is certainly so in Texas, as we have been discussing. It is also the case nationally. Gary Orfield, from the Harvard Civil Rights Project, reports that there is a dangerously high, these are his words, “dangerously high percentage of students” – and, of course, we know these are disproportionately poor and minority – “that disappear from the education pipeline.” The Harvard Civil Rights Project states that, nationally, only about 68 percent of all students who went to the ninth grade will graduate on time with a regular diploma. They also say, interestingly, that dropout data misleads the public into thinking that most students are earning diplomas. We find this to be so in Texas and across the country, as well.

The problem is persistent. It’s existed for a very, very long time, and I think it would be important to reassert that since every student counts, and we simply must count every student, and that’s the reason why we have insisted, for almost 20 years now, on clear and credible counts, which the state of Texas has yet to create.

Lesson number two. Fraud is a red herring, distracting us from the real problem that is before us. Undercounting is the result of institutional intransigence, and not massive fraud. Let me tell you why I say this. There have been many stories in the media coming out of Texas, for example, in Houston, that are very compelling stories of fraud. And that should be addressed, and that should be changed. But what is also very important to know is that even if all those school districts reported data within the letter of the law, there would be a serious undercount of students. That is so in Texas, and according to the Harvard Civil Rights Project, that is so across the country. Some of how that is done is by creating leaver codes. Texas, currently, has 29 of those. And so students who *are* dropouts are not included in the dropout count, even though they never received a high school diploma. As recently as four or five years ago, Texas had as many as 43 leaver codes. So the definition is obscured; the issue is skirted; and, therefore, we need a credible definition. But it is a question of how the dropout methodology counts. It is not, the undercounts are not a result of terrible people in school systems who are trying to obfuscate this problem, or fraud everywhere. It is, in fact, that the actual definitions that are used can very, very definitely change what the numbers look like. And in Texas, the credibility of the numbers that are used has suffered so much from many, many counter pieces of data. Many newspapers have done investigations, etc. The important thing about this is that in Texas and everywhere in the country, as long as knowing the real status of our students is not a state policy reform priority, then thousands of kids will continue to be lost, from school, certainly, but also from tax revenue, and tax bases and everything else that we talked about during the first segment.

Lesson number three. Accountability systems did not create dropouts. This is a, I think, very important and a key lesson. As I talk with people across the country, and visit schools across the country, I find many people who think that the very, very serious and real pressure that is put on school systems by accountability mechanisms, such as those in *No Child Left Behind*, is, in fact, causing the dropout rate to be higher. While that, in fact, may be so – and I have a very big concern about that – it is also so that it is not accountability systems that created the dropout issue to begin with.

Those of you who are either old enough, or have seen or remember the Civil Rights Commission Report from the early 1970s, know that those findings told us that 80, 90 percent dropout rate among Latinos in the southwestern part of the United States were not uncommon. There were no accountability systems at the time. As a matter-of-fact, I know a school district in Texas that had a 95, almost 100 percent dropout rate for Latino students who had very, very high status with the agency, and who never was questioned, in terms of their accreditation. So I think it is important to make this distinction and to remember that losing children from school systems has been a long, long, long health problem that, unacceptably, high dropout rates pre-date the accountability systems that have been developed over the last several years.

It is possible to create accountability systems that do not hurt children. And when you create accountability systems that do not hurt children, then you will not create dropouts. But in order to do that, you have to decouple high-stakes testing from accountability systems because what is happening right now, of course, is that we do have high-stakes testing; children are being hurt. In Texas they are being retained at the third grade, at the fifth grade level if they do not pass our state-mandated competency test. And we know that retention rate almost doubles the chances of dropping out of school.

Lesson number four began to speak about just a little bit, and that is that high-stakes testing and accountability systems must be uncoupled. All of us know that testing of students to promote school accountability is not a new idea. Students have been tested for decades using many kinds of tests, locally-developed and otherwise. But a new dimension has emerged in the use of a single test to make decisions concerning the students, whether they're promoted, whether they're graduated from high school, etc. The push for using state tests in Texas, and otherwise, as a primary basis for promotion, retention, and graduation decisions is based on this very incorrect assumption that a single test score tells you all you need to know about student achievement. In Texas, we know from very recent research on our minimum competency testing program – the TAAS and now the TAKS – that improvement in state test scores did not simultaneously result in higher test scores on national tests, and that despite rising state test scores. Texas students were not graduating in higher numbers. So school accountability should not mean that high-stakes decisions in children's lives are made on the basis of tests, or that tests dictate what children learn.

I think it is important that Texas and other states continue to measure school performance. My belief – and I have been trying to discuss with as many people as will listen – my belief is that measuring school performance can be done more efficiently and at less expense if we move into a system that tests a sample of students, students from each school, in order to see how each school is performing. And, of course, those of you that know NCLB know that current federal

policy does not allow that kind of sample testing for accountability. That doesn't mean we should not do it.

Lesson five. We cannot afford to decide that some kids count. That is, I think, pretty obvious to many people by now; although we haven't seen it in the results, yet, but we are producing – and that is that we cannot afford to decide that some kids don't count. The costs are huge for students, for their families, for their communities. Dropouts, as you know, are more likely to be unemployed. They earn less money if they do get work. In Texas and in other states, the great majority of inmates in prison are high school dropouts. Lots and lots and lots of costs. We can't afford it from an economic perspective. And I think from a moral perspective we cannot afford it. We should not have it be okay to have students losing a chance at life because they happened to be in the wrong school, or they happened to come from the wrong side of town, or they happened to speak the wrong language, or they happened to have the wrong color of skin. I think we cannot morally justify that to ourselves.

Lesson six. Dropout data is not a legitimate reason to give up on public education. I say this because here in Texas and in so many parts of the country, there's a strong push to fix public schools by making them disappear, and by privatizing public education. My sense is that giving up on public education is certainly not going to solve the dropout problem. As a matter-of-fact, we know that already from some empirical data around charter schools in Texas and other parts of the country, graduation rates are not rising. Private schools, I believe, don't have the capacity – when we have looked at this and researched data – don't have the capacity or the capability to absorb large numbers of poor students. And, of course, private schools are not accountable to the public for actions or results. If we distribute public money for private schools, it, of course, takes away money from our communities and results in higher taxes for homeowners and businesses.

Excellent neighborhood public schools are really the foundation of strong communities. And I believe that they are the foundation, actually, of our entire democracy. And, so, I find it rather, disingenuous is the best word that I can find, when people assert that because we have a high dropout rate, we should then abandon public schools, and abandon the neighborhoods that own those public schools. The best way to strengthen public schools is, of course, to strengthen public schools, schools that are accountable to all of us.

And then, finally, lesson number seven. It's really time – we've discussed this throughout our time together today – to move from dropping out to holding on. We need the public will; we need the commitment to do what needs doing. And I think, quite importantly, we also need a framework within which we can look at what needs to be done.