



Families and Curriculum – Supporting Preparation3
Principles for Transforming a School District.....5
Immigrant Students’ Rights to Attend Public Schools7

Focus: Parent and Community Engagement

Rio Grande Valley Community Commits to Ensuring High Academic Region for All Students

by Hector Bojorquez

Community members from the Rio Grande Valley gathered recently to discuss shared educational visions and goals for Valley students. As described in an article last month, the convening was aptly named *Mesa Comunitaria Educativa* – Educational Community Board (Bojorquez & Montemayor, 2014). The meeting was the culmination of months of smaller meetings with community members focusing on the Valley’s assets and the impact of the newly-enacted House Bill 5, which lowers educational expectations and establishes a de facto tracking system destined to worsen already low college-going and success rates among Texas youth.

Across the Rio Grande Valley in South Texas efforts are reshaping what is possible for children, including dropout prevention; graduation planning; supports for students who will be the first in their family to attend college; amplification of community, family and youth leadership; a press for more equitable local, regional and state policy; development of quality bilingual early childhood education curricula and materials; strengthening of K-12 mathematics, science and language learning; and professional development, teacher preparation and placement to meet teacher shortages and gaps. The Valley is fertile ground for a variety of positive solutions to challenges encountered by public education. In this region, we find entire school districts raising expectations for all students and, in actuality, graduat-

ing and sending more students to college. We find community-based organizations collaborating with school districts to improve educational outcomes for all Valley students. Much of the Valley is transforming public education at a time when trends across the country point to increased privatization, shirking responsibility for equitable education funding, and, tragically, abandoning college as a goal for all students.

For several years, IDRA has been providing technical assistance to community groups to create PTA Comunitarios, community-based PTAs, where families and schools collaborate on addressing educational challenges in the area. It is in this context of abundant positive solutions in an increasingly despairing environment that *Mesa Comunitaria Educativa* was conceived.

Through *Mesa Comunitaria Educativa*, community, school, family and youth leaders came together for a series community-led planning meetings to examine the latest graduation, attrition and college readiness data along with a community scan of assets and strategies underway for raising graduation rates. The purpose of these gatherings has been to identify, spotlight and leverage what is working and to strengthen and forge strategic connections to graduate and prepare every child in the Rio Grande Valley for success in college and career. IDRA provided policy updates, fac-

(cont. on Page 2)

“Engaged communities who participate actively and who express their concern about the quality of education and act as partners in improving their own schools, are essential to transforming schools.”

– Dr. María “Cuca” Robledo Montecel, IDRA President and CEO

(Rio Grande Valley Community Commits to Ensuring High Academic Region for All Students, continued from Page 1)

itated discussions and assisted in designing the process at every step. Through these meetings attended by community leaders from ARISE, *Mano a Mano*, *Proyecto Juan Diego* and others, it was evident that groups and schools in the Valley bring many assets to the table, among them, years of experience in community organizing, a history of providing educational services when schools were unable, and a sophisticated understanding of educational policy.

Of great concern to many of the leaders present in the meetings was the looming implementation of HB5 and its dumbing down of curricula. The potentially disastrous effects of such a system were not lost on the majority of community members. After much discussion, it was decided that HB5 would be the predominant and overarching issue at the January event. Additionally, during the final meeting, a process was designed by community members to facilitate discussions to result in collaborative efforts between the community, school districts and institutions of higher education.

On January 25 at the South Texas College Cooper Center in McAllen, more than 70 people met to discuss educational issues in the context of college readiness for all. They included representatives from community-based organizations, the Pharr-San Juan-Alamo school district, La Joya school district, Donna school district and the president of University of Texas at Pan American, Dr. Robert Nelsen.

After sharing data from a variety of sources, that illustrated gains and areas of concern in the Valley, the conversation proceeded to the challenge presented by HB5. Dr. Nelsen was quick to point out that the measure potentially lowers educational standards and could cause fewer students to be

prepared for college. As the meeting progressed, Lourdes Flores, the current president of ARISE, stated in no uncertain words, "We want all our children to go to college." During the course of the meeting, IDRA released *College Bound and Determined*, which documents how PSJA ISD is transforming itself into an early college district by making "high school like college" (see Page 5). In effect, a shared vision became clear to all – college readiness for all children in the Valley. What followed were rich discussions about possible collaborations between schools concerning many different issues, including early childhood education, adult education, financial aid information and more. But the overriding concern was House Bill 5. The following concerns were stated plainly and unequivocally by all groups.

- Families were concerned that the lowering of standards by the legislature was tied to previously-reduced funding. The community was immediately struck by the fact that the full amount of funding taken away during the 2011 legislature would not come back. The critical need for equitable funding was a recurring theme during the conversations.
- Across the state, students with average or below average academic performance will not be supported or encouraged by schools to go to college.
- Students from economically distressed neighborhoods will be disproportionately targeted for vocational training.
- Many parents will be blind-sided by schools rushing to implement the new Endorsement curricula without effective counseling on implications. Anecdotal evidence was shared by several parents who are already seeing this occur.

- Schools will, in effect, be in charge of making decisions for families and students.
- Average or below average students will be steered away from graduation plans that do not require Algebra II – since Algebra II is no longer a graduation requirement – which will make it more difficult for them to get into college.



As a result of the meeting, a core group of leaders decided to take on the task of monitoring the effects of HB5 on college access and success rates in the Valley. This will require collaboration among community groups, school districts and colleges to share data as needed. Communities will set college access and success goals and monitor the outcomes of state policies as they are implemented. IDRA will facilitate *Mesa Comunitaria Educativa's* efforts. Ultimately, however, it is the community's vision that will further drive change in the Valley.

Hector Bojorquez is an education associate in IDRA's Field Services. Comments and questions may be directed to him via email at comment@idra.org.

IDRA South Central Collaborative for Equity

For more information about the IDRA South Central Collaborative for Equity or to request technical assistance, contact us at 210-444-1710 or contact@idra.org.

Additional resources are available online at http://www.idra.org/South_Central_Collaborative_for_Equity/

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Publication offices:
5815 Callaghan Road, Suite 101
San Antonio, Texas 78228
210-444-1710; Fax 210-444-1714
www.idra.org | contact@idra.org

Maria Robledo Montecel, Ph. D.
IDRA President and CEO
Newsletter Executive Editor

Christie L. Goodman, APR
IDRA Communication Manager
Newsletter Production Editor

Sarah H. Aleman
Secretary
Newsletter Layout

Families and Curriculum – Supporting Preparation of Students for College and Post-secondary Education

by Aurelio M. Montemayor, M.Ed.

Parent educators and liaisons have been part of public school outreach for many decades. The Title I federal support to public schools funds parent involvement. The challenge has always been to have authentic and meaningful connections with families especially those who are economically disadvantaged, of color, recent immigrants...or all of the above. A strong alliance between schools and community organizations is a means of maintaining excellent public schools, and incidentally, meeting the spirit of the law in federal parent involvement requirements.

The education system is complex and not easy for laypersons to navigate. It would seem to be more so for poor, Spanish-speaking recent immigrants from unincorporated communities on the fringes of towns. Yet groups of these families have been able to understand basic graduation requirements, the value of dual credit courses and the pitfalls of minimal, non-college preparatory tracks. They understand that pre-Algebra in the eighth grade is an advantage for all students and that even without understanding the content of the math curriculum, it is critical for entering college.

The PTA Comunitario, derived from IDRA's Family Leadership in Education model, has been a context for families to learn about and take action on educational topics that are critical for understanding their children's education. Some curricular issues for parents include:

- Graduation requirements,
- Sequences of courses in core content areas,
- Distinctions among regular, advanced/honors and dual credit courses, and
- Key ideas about standards, curriculum and instruction.

Some of the major challenges parents face are patronizing or deficit views of families both by

schools and traditional parent organizations and often their ideas that family leadership in education requires money and formal education. We've seen educators operating under the assumption that poor, less educated parents and those whose first language is not English are challenged to understand educational issues. There is also a critical need for participatory, dialogical meetings in the language of the participants, and adaptation educational jargon for lay person groups.

These families aren't looking for a watered-down curriculum. They expect schools to use appropriate and effective ways of teaching their children so that they learn the content and are prepared for post-secondary education. Families can ask critical questions about what is being taught and the degree to which students are learning what is required and necessary. Families can survey their own children and others in their community about a series of issues that directly connect to the curriculum and instruction.

A student may be asked: How are you doing in your math class? What is helping you learn and what is blocking you? When you have questions are they answered? When you don't grasp a concept, in what other ways is it being taught? These kinds of questions have been discussed, practiced and used for family community surveys and provide valuable insights to families, organizations and schools (Montemayor, 2007).

One school district and several grassroots community organizations are developing new and important collaborations and alliances in south Texas. The Pharr-San Juan-Alamo Independent School District in the lower Rio Grande Valley and organizations from the Equal Voice network, have established new and strong connections. Several events at the beginning of 2014 exemplify these evolving connections. A Saturday meeting, (cont. on Page 4)

The PTA Comunitario, derived from IDRA's Family Leadership in Education model, has been a context for families to learn about and take action on educational topics that are critical for understanding their children's education.

(Families and Curriculum: Supporting Preparation of Students for College and Post-secondary Education, continued from Page 3)

Mesa Comunitaria Educativa brought together families, community organizations, school district administrators and staff and college administrators (See Page 1). The conversations were about high school graduation requirements that were paths to college, and full and equitable funding of schools. Among the powerful elements of the meeting was the opportunity for people to work with their peers in roundtables and the multiple connections that participants were making from their vantage points and experiences.

Another event two weeks later further illustrates these new connections. A full-day staff development for all the parent educators of the PSJA schools was focused on community connections. Three organizations presented. Proyecto Azteca, which provides housing for the poorest residents of their communities; *La Union del Pueblo Entero* (LUPE), with its roots in the farmworker organizing of Cesar Chavez and that focuses on multiple issues, including recent immigrant advocacy and rights, college access and education; and ARISE, A Resource in Serving Equality, which works intensely in some of the poorest *colonias* in community and leadership development. Each organization presented its history and services with the intention of identifying where the families whose children attend PSJA schools could connect with the services of those agencies.

The afternoon was hosted at a community center: ARISE Las Milpas south of Pharr, Texas, where the parent educators could experience the barrio environment and see the many displays of the community services and activities at that site – an enlarged simple wood-frame home to which a large room was added so that meetings of up to 50 people could be held. The center staff talked about their weekly work (an average of 50 home visits in a week), the early childhood and health classes held in the homes, and the larger community events in which they participated. The parent educators were deeply moved and shared their learnings and planned activities at the end of the day. Key ideas that emerged from the parent educators: we must connect with families directly as these community organizations do, and we must connect with the activities of these organizations to expand our reach and strengthen the family-school relations.

The PTA Comunitario model supports and encourages parents to assess curriculum and instruction without attempting to convert them

into teachers or curriculum specialists. Schools and teachers would be well served to ask families about these things and listen carefully to responses. A parent doesn't need to know English or algebra to be intimately aware that her child is not understanding the math lessons and is quickly losing interest in school and, even more critically, doubting his or her capacity to comprehend algebra. Families must be validated for understanding when curriculum and instruction is ineffective with their children and searching for ways to support their children's academic success. Community organizations have proven that they can provide valuable partnerships to improve education in schools.

Resources

Bojorquez, H., & A.M. Montemayor. "Mesa Comunitaria Educativa – Community Collaboration for Education Advocacy," *IDRA Newsletter* (San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development Research Association, March 2014).

Montemayor, A.M. "This We Know All of Our Children are Learning," *IDRA Newsletter* (San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development Research Association, May 2007).

Aurelio M. Montemayor, M.Ed., is a senior education association in IDRA's Field Services. Comments and questions may be directed to him via email at comment@idra.org.

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- Alert: Immigrant Students Right to Attend Public Schools
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- Links to research on parent and community engagement
- Flier on IDRA's four dimensions of parent leadership in education

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Principles for Transforming a School District

by Hector Bojorquez

Note: The following is an excerpt from *College Bound and Determined*, released by IDRA in February 2014. The full publication is available free online at <http://budurl.com/IDRAeNcbdt4>.

It would be a mistake to think of what is happening at PSJA as a program or a collection of initiatives or just a district that has a college-going culture. It is more accurate to think of PSJA's transformation as that of a district that made a conscious decision to scale-up early college high school models to the entire district. It is a transformation that raises, in actual fact, the expectations for all students. In this publication we explore how PSJA has accomplished such a radical transformation so that others may advocate for similar transformations in their community schools.

These principles come from reviewing hours of interviews and observations. They were gleaned from many thoughts and statements made by key staff, but are the solely result of viewing PSJA's processes through IDRA's change model: the Quality Schools Action Framework. These principles are how we best present the process in which a district can make similar changes and is not meant to represent PSJA's evolving policies. Families, educators, principals, superintendents, school boards and policymakers are invited to take away the following key principles from this document.

1. All students should be prepared for a college and career-ready future.

Every student needs to be prepared for the future through a rigorous curriculum taught by qualified teachers in a school culture of high expectations. The recipe for preparing a student is not new and includes equitable funding, rigorous curriculum, qualified teachers, and engaging and meaningful educational practices. These concepts need to be applied to all students and not just to the top 15 percent of students who are deemed college-bound. As has been said of standardized tests, success in education is not a measure of intel-

ligence, but what a lifetime of opportunity and privilege can afford. This is the role for the 21st century educator, to provide equitable educational opportunities to all students from prekindergarten to college completion.

2. Making high school more like college serves all students.

At the heart of PSJA's transformation is a well thought out plan to transform the entire system into an early college district. Most of the changes you will read about deal with how PSJA has made college available to all students while being in high school. This is nothing short of revolutionary and must be taken as the most important change, since the entire system had to change to facilitate that goal.

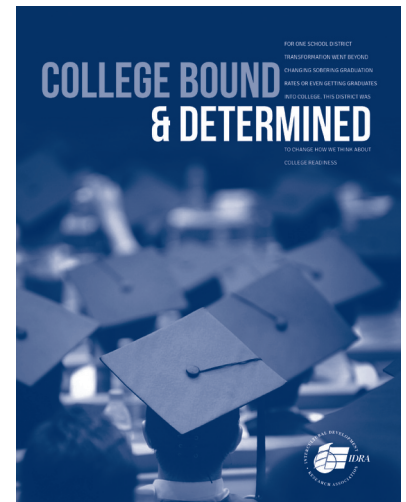
3. A career-ready future is a college-bound future and not an end run to a vocational education.

Career readiness initiatives must begin with the assumption that, in this modern world, there are no shortcuts to a successful career that do not include a college-bound future. It is a fact of modern life that without the rigor of college, students are ill prepared to succeed and maintain a good life full of economic opportunities. As the crash of 2008 reminded us, one can no longer be prepared only to work in industry or construction jobs because of the volatility of the free market. At any moment, the world hiccups, and our jobs are outsourced or vanish altogether because of technological advances. Educators must assume that all students must be prepared for uncertainty by preparing them with the highest rigor and not for lowest common denominator jobs.

4. Transforming our schools means transforming entire systems.

IDRA has long held that to achieve equitable educational opportunities for all children, entire systems must be assessed and overhauled. From more than 40 years of research and experience, IDRA has outlined what systemic change

(cont. on Page 6)



(Principles for Transforming a School District, continued from Page 5)

looks like in our Quality Schools Action Framework. We propose that schools are systems with outcomes, inputs, fundamental needs, change strategies, change agents and valid data. Simply put, equitably funded school systems are transformed when families and educators know what is happening in our schools and take meaningful actions to change practices and policies. It is a framework where every aspect of educational systems is to be examined and transformed.

It is in that spirit that the PSJA experience embodies a simple but powerful message: Entire systems must change to transform. It is not enough to change one policy, set lofty goals, provide one training, change staff, institute a groundbreaking program or even change superintendents. Transformation occurs when educational institutions are viewed as systems with parts that work together, where expectations are raised at all levels, and groundbreaking approaches affect everything and everyone. As you read this document, keep in mind that simply taking one piece of the PSJA experience and implementing it will not be enough to transform a school district. If anything, this document is an appeal to families, educators and policymakers to look at changing the whole and not simply individual parts of a school system.

5. Data transparency is an absolute prerequisite for authentic change to occur.

A problem cannot be addressed without knowing the full extent of the situation. A school or district cannot fix a problem if it is not acknowledged that something needs to be fixed. When negative data arise, we must seize the opportunity to find causes and work toward addressing those issues. Too often in education there exists an unfortunate tendency to disregard bad news by killing the messenger or switching to brighter news. The public is left to wonder about the integrity of educators when we are not completely transparent about our challenges as we are about our successes. As you will see throughout this document, PSJA's leadership insists on being honest about data in order to honestly identify problems, set goals, evaluate progress and maintain positive community relationships. When everyone knows about challenges, everyone can share in bringing about solutions.

IDRA Research for Family and Community Involvement

IDRA is concerned with the education of all children, with special emphasis on economically disadvantaged, of color, recent immigrant and English learners. The research literature often is disappointing because so much is based on deficit concepts of children and their families. For many decades IDRA's research, including *Hispanic Families as Valued Partners – An Educator's Guide* (1993) provides background information about minority families and recommends ways of involving them in their children's schools. This publication describes a process for assessing a school's current parent involvement program and then redesigning it to increase the involvement of Hispanic families. The recommendations draw on this research and on the work IDRA has done in the areas of home-school partnerships, family literacy, adult education outreach, electronic networks for adult learners, and parent empowerment. Over the years, our research and practice have led us to IDRA's model of Family Leadership in Education, which was synthesized in the U.S. Department of Education's publication, *Engaging Parents in Education – Lessons from Five Parental Information and Resource Centers* (2007). And this model and its best practices are now a part of IDRA's PTA Comunitario approach, currently funded as part of USDA's Investing in Innovation Fund (i3) project. More information on IDRA's PTA Comunitario work and our model of Family Leadership in Education is available online, as are more examples and resources from IDRA's research work.

6. Schools—not students, not families, not neighborhoods—must change.

This is a powerful idea that must take root in the hearts and minds of all educators. When we are hit with bad news, poor test scores and poor college success data, all our thoughts must begin with the following question: "How can we change our schools to change this outcome?" Too often the responses offer a litany of mostly well-intentioned, refrains: "We must take care of the poverty issue before we can fix our schools." "Our parents need to be well educated for our scores to go up." "Language differences have caused this decline." "You can't expect poor children to do any better." Unfortunately, all of these sentiments can lead us to accept ideas, educational policies and practices that diminish the importance of higher education for all students. We must change our institutions to see our students and families as part of the solution rather than the source of the problem. IDRA has provided leadership in viewing families and students as assets

instead of problems to be fixed, and, again, PSJA has shown success by implementing policies that embody this attitude.

Hector Bojorquez is an education associate in the IDRA's Field Services. Comments and questions may be directed to him via email at comment@idra.org.

Immigrant Students' Rights to Attend Public Schools

Alert for Registering Students for School

As schools are registering students for the next school year, this alert is a reminder that public schools, by law, must serve all children. The education of undocumented students is guaranteed by the *Plyler vs. Doe* decision, and certain procedures must be followed when registering immigrant children in school to avoid violation of their civil rights.

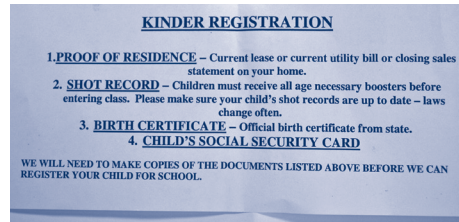
As a result of the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Plyler vs. Doe*, public schools may not:

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

Yet a number of schools are posting notices like these pictured (right) and on school websites that indicate Social Security cards and birth certificates are required before a family can register their child for school. Such practices are in direct violation of *Plyler vs. Doe*.

Rather, it should be clear from the beginning that students without a Social Security number should be assigned a number generated by the school. For example, some school districts are including language in their enrollment notices, like:

- The XYZ Independent School District does not prevent students from enrolling if a social security card is not presented. The Social Security number is used for identification purposes when reporting student information to the Texas Education Agency. The campus



will assign a computer generated number when a card is not presented.

- Providing a Social Security card or number is optional. The XYZ Independent School District will not refuse enrollment of any student opting not to provide a social security card/number. In lieu, a state identification number will be provided for educational purposes only.
- If the student does not have a Social Security number, XYZ ISD will assign a Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) number. No student may be denied enrollment solely because of failure to meet the documentation requirements. Enrollment is provisional, however, pending receipt of the required documentation and verification of eligibility.

Not only should undocumented students not be discouraged from attending, they are required to attend school under the state's compulsory education laws. And parents should be assured that the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act restricts schools from sharing information with the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency.

At IDRA, we are working to assure educational opportunity for every child. Help us make this goal a reality for every child; we simply cannot afford the alternatives. Denying or discouraging children of undocumented workers access to an education is unconstitutional and against the law.

For more information, see our School Opening Alert (in English and Spanish) online (www.idra.org).



org). And listen to IDRA's Classnotes Podcast episode on “Immigrant Children's Rights to Attend Public Schools.”

For help in ensuring that your programs comply with federal law, contact the Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, Educational Opportunities Section at 877-292-3804 or education@usdoj.gov, or the Department of Education Office for Civil Rights at 800-421-3481 or ocr@ed.gov. You also can contact the OCR enforcement office that serves your area.

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

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



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