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Focus: Parent and Community Engagement

Hosting Superintendents, Quizzing Candidates and Marking Maps A Fully Engaged PTA Comunitario

by Aurelio M. Montemayor, M.Ed.

IDRA’s Quality Schools Action Framework places *governance efficacy* as a school system fundamental. It also shows *engaged citizens* as a lever of change. The ARISE South Tower PTA Comunitario is a case in point on how IDRA’s Family Leadership in Education model works simultaneously and organically with several elements of the framework to support quality schools. Here are some examples of families taking leadership and using actionable data to improve their neighborhood public schools.

Community PTA Invites Superintendents to Supper

In the spring of 2011, the superintendent of a large school district was the main guest at a supper hosted by a community organization that is nestled in some of the poorest unincorporated communities (colonias) in South Texas. The menu was traditional Mexican home fare cooked in several members’ homes and served hot at a community center that was once a modest home. About 30 minutes into the meal, the superintendent was formally welcomed by the organizing committee. A team presented a brief history of ARISE – the sponsoring organization – followed by that of the PTA Comunitario, which is an ARISE/IDRA project resulting from the IDRA Family Leadership in Education work with these families for more than 10 years.

The superintendent responded with very positive comments highlighting some cutting-edge work done in the school district in dropout recovery and

college preparation through a new college campus. The interactions and dialogue, all in Spanish, were about critical educational issues.

Closing remarks were made by the PTA president who acknowledged her growth as a leader through the support of the community and the training she and others experienced. She also respectfully reminded the superintendent that he is being taken at his word regarding school doors being open to the community. Some campuses have been less than friendly in welcoming this new form of PTA that is based in the community and whose leaders come from neighborhoods experiencing severe economic distress.

This same PTA Comunitario, six months later, held another supper for another superintendent, who attended with a school board member, another school staff member and their wives. The supper was again a collaborative and cooperative activity of various families. Several ARISE ladies made presentations similar to the previous supper. They added that it has been difficult to set up visits with administrators on the campuses where their children attend school.

The superintendent responded with warmth, saying that this visit reminded him of his growing up poor in a working class family and the sacrifices his parents made so that he could get a good education.

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“It is at the local level, with schools and communities working together, that the power of context can be a source of genuine and long-lasting change that benefits every student in every school with a quality education.”

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



(Hosting Superintendents, Quizzing Candidates and Marking Maps, continued from Page 1)

He promised to bring all of his principals to meet with the community in their center. He had at first thought of bringing them all to his office but reconsidered. He wanted the principals to have the same experience he just had of being in the community. As of this writing, the principals will be visiting on a 2012 March morning, and the PTA Comunitario is planning a light breakfast with a team of parents to present to and interact with the administrators who will visit.

Community PTA Questions School Board Candidates

ARISE spans several school districts in South Texas, and its members and volunteer families are familiar with attending public meetings. One such meeting was with candidates who are running for the school board. One parent leader asked about the candidates' position on a new bill that reintroduced three tracks for high school graduation. The parent's concern was the danger of many students being placed in the new non-college preparation track. The candidates pled ignorance of the new statute and promised to study up on the new tracking and graduation requirement policies.

The parents were astounded to find that they knew more than the candidates about rules and regulations that had a critical impact on their children. This was a direct result of the training provided at the PTA Comunitario meetings on substantive issues being faced by schools. Because the PTA meetings were held in Spanish, were highly participatory and the content was presented in a problem-solving manner, these parents have a high level of understanding of complex policy issues.

Community PTA Reports on Effects of School Funding Cuts

A third example of community engagement and

use of actionable knowledge came about because of a crisis in the funding of education. The state legislature for the first time in several generations cut education funding by billions of dollars when it had other options to avoid the cuts. IDRA launched the Fair Funding Now! initiative, and the ARISE PTA Comunitario was an early partner and participant. Several meetings were held, using bilingual materials.

One of the tools in the campaign is an online crowdmap where individuals can log in and actually report how the cuts have affected their schools. Most of the parents in this PTA Comunitario logged in at the community center because they don't have computers and Internet access at home. The first 30 entries on the statewide crowdmap came from this group in South Texas. Here are examples: "*Hubo recorte presupuestal en el departamento bilingue y perdimos 20 personas perdieron su trabajo.* [There were budget cuts in the bilingual department, and 20 people lost their jobs.];" "*Han habido recortes de maestros, transportacion, seguridad. Hay muchos estudiantes para cada maestro.*" [There have been cuts in teachers, transportation, security. There are too many students for each teacher.]"

Family Engagement to Improve Education

These three examples illustrate several things. Parents can plan and carry out sophisticated events with a high level of interaction with school administrators and school board candidates. They can collect and document data about their schools and make direct connections between policy decisions made in the state capitol and what happens to their schools.

The content of the superintendent meetings was about critical issues in the education of children.

Even though the events have been courteous, warm and polite, the parents were able to bring out critical issues affecting parent engagement and ultimately influencing the education of their children.

Their questioning and dialogue in public settings was informed and deliberate. Because all the families that have been participating in this leadership development process are used to engaging in critical conversations, have been analyzing and making sense of school data, deliberating about school policy, curriculum and graduation requirements, they can pose questions and engage in dialogue with educators. This is especially notable because these families are considered by many educators as not being very interested in the education of their children or as not being educated enough themselves to understand educational issues and challenges.

These families that are so vibrantly engaged in the education of their children are encouraging them to be in the college preparation track and to take (cont. on Page 6)

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

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Family Engagement in Early Childhood

IDRA's New Semillitas de aprendizaje™ Cartitas Letters Home Series

by Laurie Posner, MPA

It is said that from the earliest hearths of the world and the first impulse toward human language, we have had stories. Grandparents, mothers, fathers and teachers pass down tales to children, who, in turn, fashion stories from their days. And that place where art meets necessity binds us across generations.

But in the formal context of the classroom, not all children have had access to the rich world of the story. In 1864, Congress passed a law prohibiting Native American children from being taught in their own languages. By 1923, more than 30 states had passed laws mandating English-only classroom instruction. It would not be until the mid- to late 1960s (following the federal *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* in 1965 and *Bilingual Education Act* in 1968) that most states enacted laws in support of bilingual education – or at least decriminalizing the use of languages other than English in public schools.

Still, in linguistic and socio-economic terms, a wedge had grown between formal and family education, often privileging the former at the expense of the latter. But a large and growing body of research has challenged the conventional wisdom of the school-home divide. A synthesis of 51 studies by Anne Henderson & Karen Mapp (2002) concluded that there is a consistent positive relationship between family engagement and improved academic achievement. They found that family engagement is tied to higher grades and test scores, enrollment in higher level programs, passing classes and earning course credits, better school attendance and social skills, graduation, and advancement to postsecondary education. “When schools, families and community groups work together to support learning,” the researchers found, “children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer and like school more” (2002).

These findings hold true for students of all ages and across socioeconomic, racial/ethnic, and educational backgrounds (Mapp, 2004).

Charles Payne & Mariame Kaba found that recognizing parents and community members as assets to the process of raising student achievement can predict the quality of a school (2001). Research by Eric Dearing, et al., (2006) examined the association over time between family involvement in children’s K-5 education and literacy development, finding that improvements predict increases in K-5 literacy development and have greater implications for children’s literacy than do family income, maternal level of education or child ethnicity.

Despite the finding that community and parent involvement is pivotal to school success, persistent barriers thwart the growth of meaningful school-family partnerships. These obstacles include seeing language and cultural differences as barriers (rather than as strengths) as well as deficit-based interactions that suggest to families that they either are irrelevant to student success or are the principal cause of student failure. Many teacher training programs give too little attention to preparing teachers to build vibrant partnerships with diverse families and community members.

Mariana Souto-Manning & Kevin Swick suggest that part of the fault may lie in a paradigm of parent and family involvement that “is couched in a compensating... model where particular parent attributes may be seen as deficiencies or weaknesses” (2006). Although some ground has been gained in overcoming barriers and paradigms that have proved to be unworkable, the full possibilities of family-school partnership remain untapped.

In the area of early childhood, IDRA has developed its Semillitas de aprendizaje™ bilingual supplemental curricula and materials to build on what is working and help address this gap. Semillitas de aprendizaje, which includes richly illustrated big books and small math and self concept readers that foster literacy and numeracy in young children, is grounded in research and 30 years of field experience in creating dynamic early learning

(cont. on Page 4)

The new Cartitas or “letters home” series is designed as a companion piece to the Semillitas de aprendizaje™ books – fostering school-family partnerships around storybooks that speak to children.

Cartitas Letters Home

Date _____

My dear family...

I can't wait to tell you about all the new things I am learning in school. This month, we are reading a story about a miner named Jorge. He finds a beautiful gold nugget in a mine. I want to learn more about the rocks and minerals near where we live and make a rock collection. I can learn to count rocks and sort them by color, shape, and size. Then, I want to find a special stone to give you as a gift.

Partners in Learning

Question: My child is naturally curious and eager to learn new things. What activities can we do at home to complement what they're learning in school?

- Bring out your child's "inner sleuth" to improve her powers of observation: Create a scavenger hunt, making up clues with your child. The clues can be pictures about where to find the next clue, or words that you can read aloud together.
- Foster physical coordination with indoor and outdoor games that involve jumping, running, dancing, clipping, climbing and playing.
- Help your child improve concentration: Have him pick out a stone that looks like Jorge's gold nugget that he can paint and decorate.
- Share your love of the world around you, with stories about the sights, sounds and smells of your favorite places. Picking out children's books about faraway places that you and your child can read together is another great way to spark their imagination and learn about the physical world. If you'd like some ideas about books we love at school, just let me know. It's also love to hear about the books you like best so we can share them with other families.

If you have suggestions, ideas to share or time to come by and read to the children, call me! My door is always open.

Dear family of _____,

At school we are helping the children learn to read, measure and count, and become keen observers of the natural world. We're also giving the children lots of activities and physical exercises to build teamwork and physical coordination. We're tailoring activities to be sure they work for all the children in our class and build on your child's unique strengths and gifts. It is wonderful to have your child in my class – I look forward to continuing to get to know your child and your family so that together we can help your child learn and grow!

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(Family Engagement in Early Childhood, continued from Page 3)

environments for English language learners. The new Cartitas or “letters home” series is designed as a companion piece to these books – fostering school-family partnerships around storybooks that speak to children.

Why “Letters Home”

The letters home concept comes from a recognition that, from the earliest years, family-school interactions need to get started on the right foot and develop around trust; ongoing, shared responsibility; and reciprocal, strengths-based partnerships (Rodríguez, et al., 2011; Halgunseth & Peterson, 2009). Like the Semillitas de aprendizaje books and supplemental curriculum, the Cartitas series stems from research conducted by IDRA through its Reading Early for Academic Development (READ) project, funded by the U.S. Department of Education. This project established in preschool centers “classrooms of excellence” to ensure reading, cognitive and emotional success for all preschool children through a print-rich environment with appropriate accommodations for children with disabilities (Villarreal, et al., 2008). Building stronger teacher, child and family relationships is a pillar of the classrooms of excellence model. Through this model, parents are recognized as full partners in their children’s education and valued first teachers.

Each of the 20 Cartitas (10 English, 10 Spanish) is organized around themes and activities that arise from the bilingual big book stories and small math and self-concept books (García & Rodríguez, 2011) and is designed for early childhood educators to send home to families.

Centered on the power of the stories, the intent of Cartitas is multifold: to share with families how their children are progressing in class; to offer practical, shared school-home activities that nurture children’s development, literacy and numeracy; and to open a channel of communication that values the language, culture and contribution of families, teachers and children.

For example, as children read the big book, *Two Smart Chicks ~ Dos Pollitas Lista*, a story about the little chicks, Clara and Carla, who are learning about geometric shapes in school, the Cartita offers a summary of the book; ideas about counting, sorting and singing games (red rectangles and sunny circles); and questions (What did Mrs. Cluck learn?) to expand on children’s



understanding of the story.

As children read *Curios Tomás ~ El Curioso Tomás* about a boy who visits his grandmother in the country, the Cartita offers ideas about cooking a shared family recipe and drawing a map that children can decorate with sights they might see along the way.



And as children read the big book, *My Summer Coat ~ Mi Abrigo de Verano*, about a girl named Esperanza who longs to wear a coat in summertime like the bears she has seen in the zoo, the Cartita offers ideas for extending themes in the book: picking out clothes for warm and cold days, drawing the seasons or taking a visit to the zoo.

Every Cartita also includes room for teachers to share a personal note about what the child loved to do in school that month, an invitation for families to visit the classroom, space for children to draw a picture about the story, and a powerful quote or idea that celebrates diverse languages and cultures. The Cartita paired with *Jorge, the Miner ~ El Minero Jorge*, about a miner who finds a gold nugget, for example, includes a quote by Nelson Mandela, “It is what we make of what we have, not what we are given, that separates one person from another,” and by William Shakespeare, “All that glitters is not gold.”



Each gold and blue letter for home is illustrated with children’s artwork and drawings from the story. At heart, the letter is meant to open a school-home dialogue, centered on shared stories, mutual respect, and each child’s growth and learning.

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Youth Take on Budget Cuts – “We Want Fully Funded Schools”

by Hector Bojorquez and Aurelio M. Montemayor, M.Ed.

It was a mild October evening, so the meeting was held outside in the yard in part of the gravel driveway and the lawn between the main house and a guest double mobile home. The screen was a sheet hung on the mobile home wall. Tables and chairs for 80 were set out and filled as the evening progressed. Hot dogs were the main item on the menu. The bulk of the attendees spanned sixth graders through freshmen in college. All of them had some connection to ARISE, some had been volunteers in the summer program and others were children of PTA Comunitario members.

This group of young people had been brought together to be part of the IDRA's Fair Funding Now! initiative, which has informed community leaders across the state about the state's draconian cuts to education (see Posner, 2012). This particular event was intended to engage those who are directly affected by the state's actions: our youth.

The success of this event did not take place in a vacuum but is a result of the host organization's long-standing tradition of engaging community youth as leaders in their own right. ARISE, a community-based organization in the Rio Grande Valley, has developed the leadership skills of Valley youth as an expression of their asset-based philosophy that banks on the gifts and talents of every one of its members, always including local youth.

IDRA has played a pivotal role in guiding ARISE leadership to carry out projects that develop or leverage student leaders. IDRA assisted with a self-named Youth Tekie group that staffed a community technology center. Tekies trained parents on technology skills and disseminated information on school accountability through IDRA's OurSchool portal and the Texas Education Agency's AEIS databases (Bojorquez, 2010; Montemayor, 2006). That effort revealed that students were highly aware about the Texas' accountability system, standardized tests, college admissions exams and the effects of testing on their schools. Young people who often saw themselves as mediocre or bad



students demonstrated nuanced perceptions about such issues as the disparity of how well the school performed on the state-required test compared to the very few students who were actually prepared for college as assessed by the ACT/SAT.

IDRA and ARISE acknowledge, encourage and position all students, regardless of academic standing, to participate in a wide spectrum of leadership roles. It is a shared core belief of both organizations that youth leadership is an untapped yet fundamental resource. We have witnessed the sophisticated insights students bring to the table, and IDRA through ARISE continuously brings educational information to Valley youth. We gathered these students, because of our belief in them and to involve them in what is one of the most important issues in Texas education: the school funding crisis.

On this October night, the microphone was handed over to the crowd of more than 80 students so that they could introduce themselves and share comments. Students represented several school districts, mostly from Donna ISD and Pharr-San Juan-Alamo ISD. They identified themselves as great students or so-so academically, but all knew they were an essential part of the process. They listened intently to a highly technical presentation – remarkable considering their ages and how schools generally perceive these students.

(cont. on Page 6)

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(Youth Take on Budget Cuts – “We Want Fully Funded Schools,” continued from Page 5)

Students, just as their adult counterparts, were informed the following:

- \$6.4 billion was cut from Texas education;
- Classrooms in property poor school districts lost about \$26,000 more than wealthier districts;
- No money was provided for educating new students;
- No solutions were given by the state;
- The emergency funds available were not touched in spite of the very obvious need; and
- No increased collection of funds was planned in a state that is the second wealthiest in the country and 47th in amount of taxation.

Students were taken to IDRA’s Fair Funding Now! website (<http://budurl.com/IDRAfairfund>) where they were shown the extent of the cuts in their counties and districts. Students were unanimously shocked and dismayed. Their testimonies and questions speak for themselves.

- “Is this why Mrs. ___ and Mr. ___ are no longer at school?”
- “There are no more tutoring sessions before or after school.”
- “The bus leaves us at the end of the street.” [This meant that the bus was leaving students at the neighborhood’s entrance rather than near their homes.]
- “Teachers are buying papers and pencils.”
- “We don’t have science experiments anymore.”
- “Our teacher bought the animals for dissection this year.”
- “Is this why Coach ___ is teaching algebra this year?”
- “Is this going to get worse?”

The presenters continued to probe about their school situations. More questions and stories spilled out, “Will things stay like this?” “What can we do?” The presenters then guided the students to an online crowdmap (<http://schoolfunding.crowdmap.com>) where stories are being collected across the state. They were challenged to enter their testimonies for themselves and to help the adults in their families to report the challenges that their local schools were facing. The students also committed to share what they learned with their peers and families.

In the poem, “The Leaden Eyed,” Vachel Lindsay states: “Let not young souls be smothered out before they do quaint deeds and fully flaunt their pride.” The second line of the poem is: “It is the world’s one crime its babes grow dull; its poor are limp, ox-like and leaden-eyed.” These youth, these families care very much about their education. They are neither dull nor limp, they are ready for deeds based on actionable knowledge. They know money really does make a difference for quality education. And they know they have a voice in what happens next.

Resources

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(Hosting Superintendents, Quizzing Candidates and Marking Maps, continued from Page 2)

dual credit and AP courses. The parents are vigilant of what courses their children are taking and their grades. A significant number of the ARISE staff children have gone on to college, some entering as sophomores because they’ve accumulated a year’s worth of college credits while still in high school. Some are pursuing a master’s degree while struggling to find the financial aid necessary, and others are teaching in the very schools they attended. These families are not yet English proficient and are working hard in low paying jobs, but their children are now on the road to become degreed professionals.

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Courageous Connections...

Canton, Mississippi Youth... On Opening Pathways to College

On a Saturday the 11th of February 2012, students from Canton High School in Mississippi gathered with members of their families and the community, the mayor and educators at South Liberty Baptist Church to reflect on how to expand pathways to graduation and higher education. Part of IDRA's Pathways project, funded by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, the youth day was carried out in partnership with Canton Public Schools, the church and the nonprofit, Critical Exposure. It was part of an initiative that fosters cross-race community action dialogues to open paths to all students, in keeping with the promises of landmark civil rights cases, such as *Brown vs. Board of Education* and *Mendez vs. Westminster*. Working with IDRA, Critical Exposure and a journalism teacher, the students used documentary photography to illustrate barriers and opportunities to going to college.

With their photographs, the students emphasized that opening paths to college means overcoming costs and barriers to transportation, juggling family responsibilities, and learning about what is possible, affordable and unknown. Supports that matter include: the encouragement of teachers and parents; information about college options, how to apply, requirements and how to pay for college; valuing of higher education by a teacher or family member; help in maintaining a steady focus on higher education; information about college from someone who has gone to college and succeeded and local role models in various careers; and encouragement from local faith leaders and congregations.



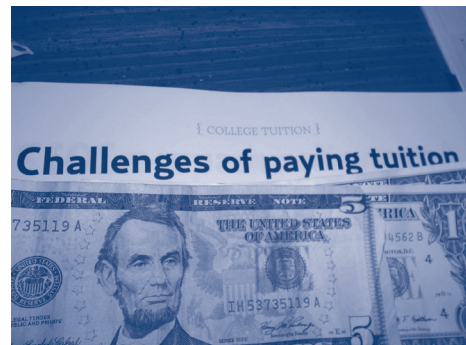
Participating Canton High School students with their teacher, Ms. Anderson, and Mayor Dr. William Truly. Dr. Truly: "There is no more important thing to be doing on a Saturday than hearing the perspectives of youth about education."



Title: Even if I Had a Car, I Wouldn't Be Able to Afford the Gas

By William Kittrell, Ninth Grade

"The price of gas is getting so high that just having enough money to pay for gas going to and coming from school would be hard."



Untitled

By Ariel Coley, 11th Grade

"Tuition for college is very high and money is low! We need more jobs in Canton that could help us start saving money for school."



Title: Not Fitting In

By Tameria Lewis, 11th Grade

"This is a picture of a boy standing to himself... I feel like when I leave to go to college I may not fit in with the other students."

Find Out More

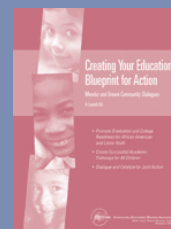
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Focus: Parent and Community Engagement

“Our families contribute much. The day-to-day activities that families do with their children – story-telling, singing, playing games, reading, talking and listening – all these have intellectual, emotional and physical benefits that enhance the child’s development and are strengths that the school can use.”

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

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