So while some Texas schools are making progress, we need to continue to look at multiple, transparent measures and to take action to ensure that all students graduate prepared for college.”

– Dr. María “Cuca” Robledo Montecel, IDRA President and CEO
students, male students and female students, experienced a one percentage point increase from 2013-14 to 2014-15.

Second, the gaps between the attrition rates of White students and Hispanic students and of White students and Black students continue to be about the same or higher than 30 years ago. Between White students and Hispanic students, the attrition rate gap was 17 percentage points in 2014-15. The attrition rate gap between White students and Black students almost doubled from 7 percentage points in 1985-86 to 12 percentage points in 2014-15.

The full study is available on IDRA’s web site at www.idra.org and includes methodology, historical statewide attrition rates and numbers of students lost to attrition categorized by race-ethnicity and by gender, a county-level data map, a county-level attrition rate table, trend data by county, and historical county-level numbers of students lost to attrition.

Key findings of the latest study include the following:

- Texas public schools still are failing to graduate one out of every four students. One out of every four students (24 percent) from the freshman class of 2011-12 left school prior to graduating with a high school diploma.
- A total of 99,297 students from the 2011-12 freshman class were lost from public high school enrollment in 2014-15 compared to 86,276 in 1985-86.
- For the class of 2014-15, Hispanic students and Black students are about two times more likely to leave school without graduating than White students.
- In three decades, the overall attrition rate declined from 33 percent in 1985-86 to 24 percent in 2014-15.
- The overall attrition rate has been less than 30 percent in the last six study years: 29 percent in 2009-10, 27 percent in 2010-11, 26 percent in 2011-12, 25 percent in 2012-13, and 24 percent in both 2013-14 and 2014-15.
- From 1985-86 to 2014-15, attrition rates of Hispanic students declined by 31 percent (from 45 percent to 14 percent). During this same period, the attrition rates of Black students declined by 24 percent (from 34 percent to 26 percent). Attrition rates of White students declined by 48 percent (from 27 percent to 14 percent).
- The gap between White students and Hispanic students was 18 percentage points in 1985-86 compared to 17 percentage points in 2014-15, and the attrition gap between White students and Black students increased by 71 percent from 1985-86 to 2014-15.
- Since 1986, Texas schools have lost a cumulative total of more than 3.5 million students from public high school enrollment prior to graduation.
- The attrition rates for males have been higher than those of females. In the class of 2014-15, males were 1.2 times more likely to leave school without graduating with a diploma than females.
- From 1985-86 to 2014-15, attrition rates of male students declined by 23 percent (from 35 percent to 27 percent), while the attrition rates of female students declined by 31 percent (from 32 percent to 22 percent).

A supplemental analysis by IDRA education associate, Felix Montes, Ph.D., using linear regression models predicts that at the current pace Texas will not reach an attrition rate of zero until the year 2034-35.

IDRA continues to urge communities to come together to review issues surrounding school dropouts and to take action for the benefit of children and the future of Texas. Recently, IDRA supported a convening of community members and families in the Texas Rio Grande Valley to encourage superintendents to adopt a graduation plan to prepare college-ready students.

In addition to IDRA’s attrition analysis, the full report includes an analysis of the TEA’s latest dropout report and takes a special look at English language learners. The report also provides the supplemental prospective analysis and federal data across states. These and other resources are available at www.idra.org/Research/Attrition.

Resources


Roy Johnson, M.S., is director of Support Services. Comments and questions may be directed to him via e-mail at royjohnson@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 www.idra.org/South_Central_Collaborative_for_Equity funded by the U.S. Department of Education.
IDRA’s Transformational Research on the Dropout Issue – A Personal Reflection

by Josie D. Cortez, M.A.

Editor’s Note: IDRA conducted the first comprehensive study of school dropouts in Texas with the release of the initial study in October 1986. That study, entitled Texas School Dropout Survey Project, was conducted under contract with the Texas Education Agency (TEA) and the then Texas Department of Community Affairs. Led by principal investigator, Dr. María “Cuca” Robledo Montecel, IDRA President & CEO, the study was published in seven volumes. That first study found that 86,276 students had not graduated from Texas public schools, costing the state $17 billion in foregone income, lost tax revenues and increased job training, welfare, unemployment and criminal justice costs. Since 1986, IDRA has conducted an annual attrition study (see story on Page 1) using consistent methodology. Since 1992, the studies were led by IDRA senior education associate, Roy L. Johnson, M.S. Having had a key role in IDRA’s first study and other research and work on the dropout issue since then, Josie Cortez, M.A., shares her reflections in this article.

The Past

Written on an IBM typewriter three decades ago, the sheet of paper has that familiar patina that comes with age, but you can still make out most of the fading words: “I sympathize with the problems created for San Antonio school districts by the release of [IDRA’s] dropout data, but I take exception to the attempts of some districts to execute the messenger for reporting the bad news.” The “messenger” was IDRA.

It was 1986 as IDRA conducted the landmark research study of dropouts in Texas. Under the leadership of Dr. José A. Cárdenas, IDRA’s founder (and author of the typewritten letter), Dr. María “Cuca” Robledo Montecel, IDRA President & CEO, led the research together with Dr. Albert Cortez, Mr. Roy Johnson, and others. I joined IDRA and helped coordinate the research, focusing on what schools were doing to prevent students from dropping out. The study’s seven volumes became game changers in Texas education... but not without a fight.

A firestorm ensued with most school superintendents challenging the findings – “absolutely ludicrous” was probably the nicest thing said.

One superintendent’s phone call brought me to tears. Dr. Cárdenas, a former Edgewood ISD superintendent, took the call, and I began to learn some important lessons about institutions failing students rather than the other way around.

Fast forward almost three decades, and I am writing my final IDRA Newsletter article. Retirement looms ahead, and I can’t help but wonder how it all went so fast.

I’ve been involved with many research studies over the years. But IDRA’s 1986 dropout study stands out, mostly because it led to a series of “first’s.” It was the first to measure the extent of school dropouts in Texas through valid and reliable dropout indices; the first to collect and analyze benefit-cost data on the impact of dropouts on the criminal justice and human service systems in Texas; the first to identify and evaluate in-school and alternative training programs for dropouts in Texas; the first to conduct a meta-analysis of existing school district dropout documentation, design and implementation procedures for tracking student withdrawals in a sample of districts; and the first to generate estimates of macro-community dropout rates in Texas.

In 1986, the attrition rate for Texas high schools was 33 percent, which was nearly half a million students. Attrition rates differed markedly for three racial-ethnic groups in the state: 27 percent for White students, 34 percent for Black students, and 45 percent for Hispanic students. And nearly half of the Hispanic students who dropped out of school did so before leaving the ninth grade, compared to 18 percent of White students and Black students.

IDRA’s study had an extraordinary impact. On May 20, 1987, Texas’ 69th Legislature adopted (cont. on Page 4)
October 2015

Focus: Push Outs: Children of Color

(IDRA’s Transformational Research on the Dropout Issue – A Personal Reflection continued from Page 3)

HB 1010 to respond to the dropout problem in the state. Relying on IDRA’s study, HB 1010 mandated a Texas Education Agency-developed annual estimate of the dropout rate using “standardized statewide recordkeeping, documentation of school transfers by students, and follow-up procedures for students who drop out of school.” The bill also required the agency to calculate dropout rates by campus, district, county, and region for each grade level from seventh to 12th with ethnic breakdowns for each level.

School districts also were required to designate one or more employees to serve as an at-risk coordinator responsible for collecting and disseminating information regarding student dropouts and coordinating the district’s program for students identified as “at risk of dropping out of school.” The bill required school districts to identify “at-risk” students using specific criteria and provide a support program for any student needing one.

The Present

IDRA’s research is still having an impact. To this day, there remains a standardized way to identify, count and report students who drop out of school. There are dropout prevention programs and federal and state funds directed at reporting and preventing school dropouts. And there is research, evaluation, model and program development all focused on “at-risk” youth.

Not surprisingly, there also have emerged ways to “game” whatever accounting and reporting systems are in place, as well as efforts to discount IDRA’s methodology that is now in use by researchers across the country. No amount of gaming the system can change the fact that schools continue to lose too many students. Though attrition rates have declined over the 30 years since the inaugural study, rates remain unacceptably high. The challenge for local school districts, then and now, is to convert research findings into workable solutions to improve student achievement and reduce the high dropout rate in Texas.

Over the years there have been many attempts to “execute the messenger for reporting the bad news.” Despite this, IDRA has remained steadfast. Our attrition reporting continues year after year, as this IDRA Newsletter issue demonstrates. We continue to do this not out of habit or holding on to the past. We continue to do this because it is still needed.

If you don’t count students, then they don’t count. If communities, schools, families, policymakers, researchers and evaluators don’t know the magnitude of the dropout problem, if they don’t know the cost (in dollars and human capital), if they don’t know whether or not their prevention programs are keeping students in school, then students will continue to be in schools that place them in “at-risk” situations so that their leaving school becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

There is evidence that schools can transform and become places where students, families and communities are engaged in meaningful ways. And there is evidence of successful dropout prevention programs, such as the IDRA Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program that keeps students in school by their making a difference in the lives of younger students.

Compared to 30 years ago, more students – particularly minority, low-income, and English learner students – are graduating from high school; more students are getting into and graduating from college; more teachers are better prepared to help their students succeed academically; more school administrators are better equipped to lead; and more families are better informed and engaged in the education of their children.

The Future

Despite progress, more needs to be done. And it can only happen if we all continue to seek and tell the truth, standing together with those who believe as we do that all children are valuable; none is expendable.

On a personal note, I may be retiring from IDRA, but I’m not retiring from caring about children and the injustice and inequity they still face in education. There is still much work to do. But I can rest easier knowing there is still an IDRA to take on a task. Paraphrasing A.A. Milne, “How fortunate am I to have been part of a place that is so hard to say goodbye to.”

Josie D. Cortez, M.A., is a senior education associate in IDRA’s Department of Civic Engagement. Comments and questions may be directed to her via email at josie.cortez@idra.org.


Meet Roy Johnson, M.S.
IDRA Director of Support Services and Evaluation

This year, the IDRA Newsletter is highlighting our staff’s varied and diverse talents and backgrounds. Roy Johnson, M.S., directs evaluation work at the IDRA and is the lead author and researcher for IDRA’s annual school attrition study. He manages many of the organization’s research and evaluation activities, ranging from federal to corporate funded projects, international to national, state to local in scope. Mr. Johnson has more than three decades of experience in educational evaluation and research at all educational levels from elementary, secondary and post-secondary. From his youth, Roy has had an interest in equal opportunity and has providentially worked in settings focusing on equity of opportunity in employment and in education. Following his graduation with a master’s degree in urban studies, he worked for two years as an equal employment opportunity and affirmative action officer. After this tenure, he joined IDRA where he has focused on equal opportunity in education for over three decades. Beyond his professional endeavors with IDRA, Roy’s life is characterized by his commitment to his faith and family. Hailing from a family of 14 including his parents and 11 siblings, he was reared to be committed to his faith in God and his loyalty and devotion to family, both immediate and extended.
For School and College Success –
The Power of Non-cognitive Skills

by Nilka Avilés, Ed.D.

Of course, all students inherently have the ability to think critically, solve problems, interact socially and persist in tasks. They are creative and resilient. When the adults and institutions that surround them support, nurture and encourage these competencies with trust, high expectations and respect, students’ non-cognitive skills blossom.

Borghans, et al., (2008) define non-cognitive skills as personality traits that unpack patterns of thought, feelings and behaviors. Non-cognitive skills, referred to as habits of mind, matter for students’ long-term success. They can be observed, intentionally-cultivated, reinforced and mastered by integrating a pedagogy that facilitates the flowering of the internal strengths and powers of the learners.

As educators, we should plan effectively to construct the tasks and challenges that will drive learners to think critically, solve complex problems, increase interaction and communication with other learners, and persist because of the intrinsic drive that is unleashed. When we do this, students can generate ideas, analyze them, create, produce, and ultimately exhibit behaviors that are socially acceptable to peers and self in a dynamic and engaging learning environment.

Non-cognitive skills also can be informally assessed as each skill requires a level of proficiency. When the skills are used, the effects should be reflected upon and modified for continued practice and improvement. Cognitive and non-cognitive skills are valued in the marketplace and are important to the economic success of communities. And educators are exploring ways to take an active role in equipping students with these skills (Rodríguez & Avilés, 2014).

If non-cognitive skills are critical for school success, how can we as teachers and school administrators address these skills? What mindset must teachers and administrators adopt in order to effectively address students’ non-cognitive skills that foster habits of mind?

Addressing Non-Cognitive Skills

Many students fall through the cracks when the school systems they are in fail to provide opportunities for students to develop non-cognitive skills in each classroom. Many school systems, unfortunately, maintain a student deficit approach that becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, inappropriately guiding the interaction between teacher and student (Robledo Montecel & Bojorquez, 2015).

What teachers must do is apply a valuing, asset-based lens in viewing students, one that focuses on students’ strengths and searches for opportunities to strengthen skills through the use of job-embedded strategies that foster success. As teachers provide the right environment and opportunities, students reap the benefits of knowing when and to what degree the skills are to be used, mindfully showcasing their skills and behaviors productively.

Simply put, they are able to recognize the opportunities in which they need to be engaged in utilizing one or more than one of the skills successfully (Costa & Kallick, 2008; García, 2014). School teachers and administrators should be energized to focus on solutions and create new opportunities for students. The new mindset often challenges educators’ belief systems in how they see learners, making a difference in how they interact with their students.

Costa & Kallick (2008) indicate that habits of mind consist of skills, attitudes, behaviors, signals, or indications, past experiences and trends or predispositions that students need to reference when they are challenged with real-life situations. Some of these skills are determination, self-discipline, motivation, self-directed learning, organization, persistence, involvement, collaboration, communication, problem solving, and attentiveness, among others. These have to

(cont. on Page 6)
be taught with an asset-based mindset. They then can be nurtured and cultivated as teachers create the learning environments where these non-cognitive skills can emerge.

How can we create a school culture that leverages correlation of non-cognitive and cognitive skills?

The kinds of indicators of an asset-based campus that equally support cognitive and non-cognitive skills are:

• collaborative work using cooperative learning structures;
• students engage listening, speaking, reading and writing;
• students working on holistic or multidisciplinary projects;
• students sharing and providing feedback to each other and;
• teachers acknowledging persistence, fostering the way individuals and teams discipline themselves, allowing for individual and group learning and prizing collaboration.

Educators make a difference for today’s youth, when they focus on the assets students bring and build relationships while seeing students through a lens that cultivates their inherent abilities (Montemayor, 2015).

School leaders themselves must have grit: (1) persist in believing all students are valuable; (2) practice determination, understanding that failure is not an option; and (3) be resilient to keep going despite the emotional stresses of everyday tasks in schools.

Teacher efficacy refers to having impact on students’ learning and success. Asset-based educators refuel and inspire each other to embody mindsets of confidence in reaching all students. These teachers advocate for excellence regardless of circumstances.

Therefore, by keeping students in mind, we provide opportunities for youth leadership, voice and empowerment by facilitating the knowledge, attitudes, beliefs and actions to inspire desired performances and solutions to the everyday challenges students may face. Because non-cognitive skills are not part of the traditional essential knowledge and skills or the content curriculum, they are not tested. However, they must be measured as critical in the learning achievement of students. Furthermore, it is crucially important that the non-cognitive skills be strengthened to reap the benefits in higher cognitive achievement (Heckman, 2006; Heckman & Kautz, 2012, 2013; Rosen, et al., 2010).

When a school culture has grit, it enables teachers to self-reflect on which strategies help them guide students to think critically, brainstorm, apply knowledge and find solutions to problems drawing from previous experiences to build on their repertoire of beliefs, attitudes and strategies that foster learning. The more educators facilitate opportunities for students to work on project-based activities, experiential tasks, reflection after each task, and individual or group exploration where students demonstrate expected behaviors by using strategies to practice the skills, the more their inherent strengths can be developed into vital competencies that will increase academic achievement. For example, exposing students to IDRA’s non-cognitive skills scenarios where students collaboratively work in groups to answer challenging questions and find creative and purposeful solutions to the situations is a good start (see story in August 2015).

Our educational goal then is to create a school culture that focuses on building collective efficacy in schools to support students and educators in energizing, developing, and habituating non-cognitive skills purposefully and with intentionality to increase opportunities to grow mindsets and transform lives. This powerfully directs all of us toward accepting responsibility, believing in our own strengths and increasingly developing constructive behaviors that make schools more efficacious and successful. Non-cognitive skills matter, can be cultivated in schools, must be a defined goal of public education and must be supported by policy.

Resources

Nilka Avilés, Ed.D., is a senior education association in IDRA’s Department of Student Access and Success. Comments and questions may be directed to her via email at nilka.aviles@idra.org.

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Editor’s Note: IDRA sponsored a national essay competition among participants in the IDRA Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program, a nationally-recognized cross-age tutoring program of IDRA. Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program tutors wrote about how the program helps them do better in school and how they help their tutees to do better. Six students received prizes. Below is one of the winning essays. Others are posted on the IDRA website (www.idra.org).

Middle School First Place

Agustina García
7th grade, Dr. Javier Saenz Middle School, La Joya, Texas

The Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program is a great experience that every student should participate in during their middle school years. For those individuals who think there is no hope for their future, this is the program for you. I had no desire to receive an education, and because of my bad behavior, my teachers and parents did not think I would succeed in life. This all changed when I was chosen to participate in the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program. Because of what I have learned through this program, I have learned to develop positive characteristics that will help me achieve greatness in my life. Let me explain my reasons as to how this program changed me from the person I once was.

The Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program made me a better student and individual. I used to get into so much trouble at school, mainly because I was hanging out with the wrong people. I was easily influenced to do things that I know I should have not been doing. I described myself as being rude and disrespectful to not only teachers, but also to my parents. I felt like I would not amount to anything because everything I always did was a failure. My parents would try to advise me on how to follow the right path in life and that education was the answer to my success. But everything they told me went into one ear and out the other.

As I started my seventh grade year, I thought everything was going to continue exactly as the previous year. I would be in more trouble, and my grades would be low. As I approached registration day, I noticed that my counselor gave me a schedule that included a class called Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program. I had heard some things about this class, but I did not really know what it was all about. I asked my counselor what this class was, but she just informed me to wait until I attended and my teacher would tell me all about it.

Upon entering class for the first day, I noticed I was surrounded by some friends I knew, the majority of them being smart students. I asked myself, “What in the world am I doing here?” When class started, Mr. Ramirez, our teacher, began to explain the purpose of the program and added by informing us that we would be getting a monthly check for our work with tutoring. It all seemed too good to be true. I was shocked and could not believe that my counselor believed that I could be a part of this awesome program. As the class went on, I began to feel a sense of belonging, and maybe this was something good for me that would change my attitude and view on school. I was right!

Over the next several months, my views on education and life changed. I was starting to apply myself more in my schoolwork, and I even began to join organizations, such as student council and UIL, to try to learn and be a role model for others in my school and community.

Every day when we go to Clinton Elementary to tutor my tutees, I get excited to know that I am making a difference in their lives. I feel needed when I walk into my class, and my tutees begin to jump up and down yelling my name, “Ms. Garcia!” There are times when we don’t go tutor because there are scheduling conflicts at my school. During these times, I feel like my tutees miss me, and I feel like I am letting them down by not being there for them to support their learning. The relationship I have built with these kids will always remain in my heart.

There were some other changes I noticed with myself. My grades began to go up, and before I knew it, I was getting the honor roll. I always asked myself how I was supposed to tutor kids when I myself was failing my own classes. This inspired me to get on the ball and begin to study hard. My confidence went up, I had more motivation, and the cool part was that my teachers and parents began to notice this positive change also.

Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program Winning Essay

The Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program has changed the type of individual I once was. I no longer want to be referred to as the student who is a troublemaker and doesn’t seem to care about her education. I want to be looked at as a role model, responsible student, and community leader. I cannot let my friends tell me what I can and cannot do just to try to fit in with them. I get very excited when we take college tours as part of our field trips because I am now looking at a teaching career in my future. I would have never thought of becoming an educator and making a difference in the lives of others if it wasn’t for the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program. Because of this program, my life has meaning and prospective future.
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IDRA Attrition Study & Resources Online

2015 Study: Texas Public School Attrition Study, 2013-14

See Results: College Bound & Determined

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