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Texas Endorsement System Threatens to Track Poor and Minority Students

IDRA Calls on Texas State Board of Education to Ensure All Students Have Access to High Quality Curriculum

*Testimony Dr. Albert Cortez, Director of Policy, Intercultural Development Research Association
Presented to the Texas State Board of Education, November 20, 2013*

At IDRA, our goal is to assure educational opportunity for every child. We are deeply concerned about the state's move to dilute curriculum for many students. Couched in the language of *giving students choices* and helping struggling students *at least get a minimum diploma*, the new system weakens high school curriculum and further institutes tracking of students. It encourages placing students in different paths toward graduation, some college bound and some bound for labor.

IDRA recently released a policy note, "Tracking, Endorsements and Differentiated Diplomas – When 'Different' Really is Less," that gives an overview of the recent policy changes for curriculum, tracking and graduation plans for Texas schools. I have provided copies for you, and it is online as well.

As members of the Texas State Board of Education, you can take steps to make sure Texas does its job of providing an excellent education to all students across the state.

IDRA has three key recommendations.

1. Continue to require Algebra II for all students. For those who later choose to apply for college, this is critical in part because the SAT and ACT require knowledge of Algebra II. Removing the requirement will mean many students will find out too late that college options have been closed for some, limited for many.

It is worth noting that before the changes adopted by HB5, 80 percent of all graduating seniors were enrolled in the recommended 4-by-4 program. And Algebra II was a required course. We strongly encourage, under the new structure, that school districts use the distinguished achievement plan as their default for all students. Why fix what is not broken?

In a survey IDRA conducted among minority and low-income students, 95 percent of high school seniors said they want to go to college (Bojorquez, 2010). The issue isn't really whether or not kids want to go to college.

TG examined data on high school graduates whose parents did not go to college and who enrolled in a four-year institution. TG found that of these students who took Algebra I and geometry, only 11 percent went on to college. For the students who also took Algebra II, the

percentage jumped to 34 percent who went to college. And those who took math beyond Algebra II, 64 percent went to college. So the issue also isn't whether or not kids are capable of learning what they need to learn go to college.

The issue is whether or not our schools are preparing all students for college and career.

2. Make sure the endorsements do not become a dead-end for students, particularly those who are poor or minority. While the discussions about Algebra II have gotten much attention, it is really just a glimpse of a much larger picture. In fact, data show that "Algebra II is no longer sufficient to meet the mathematical requirements of any field of study, including occupationally-oriented programs" (Adelman 2006).

Higher math is critical, as are other subjects. Our state's drift toward connect-the-dot, diluted science and mathematics instead of rigorous courses moves us even further away from ensuring economic competitiveness and universally high expectations and college preparation for all students.

While it can make sense to nurture the interests of students, there are several dangers we must tend to. One lies in the fact that our school districts have varying levels of funds available for offering multiple endorsements with highly qualified teachers. It is critical that students across the state have access to rigorous courses that make them eligible for college, including via the Top Ten Percent Plan.

Another danger is that, within each endorsement path, some students may be guided toward rigorous courses that colleges will value, and other students may be guided toward weaker classes that become dumping grounds for certain kinds of kids. The fact that each endorsement requires different numbers of math, science or social studies courses to graduate creates major concerns.

The rigor of high school curriculum is a key indicator for whether a student will graduate from high school and earn a college degree. A study by the U.S. Department of Education shows that the rigor of the high school curriculum is the most important factor in a student's success and graduation from college – more important than the education level of the parents, their income, and their race-ethnicity (Adelman 2006).

Giving students choices of courses must not be done in a way that blocks their choice later to attend and succeed in college.

3. Set up triggers to be able to take action if the data show disproportionate routing of poor and minority students into non rigorous endorsements and courses, or that indicate that students in "career options" are performing below levels of college bound students. The state also should be monitoring performance on end-of-course exams and other assessments by students in regular vs. applied courses and by differing endorsements. Applied courses not producing comparable performance outcomes as college-focused courses should be identified and eliminated early in the endorsement selection process. Families must have clarity about which paths and which courses within those endorsements will best prepare students for college.

Texas is poised to have many students not being prepared for college, and many more who will need remediation when they enroll in college after taking these watered-down courses.

Less is not better.

Weaker is not better.

It is not elitist to expect our state to do its job and take responsibility for the academic success of all students, including Latino and poor students who are now the majority of students in Texas schools.

A vital state must have educational parity for all students and not parcel out one set of opportunities for some and minimal expectations for others.

The research and decades of experience behind IDRA's Quality School Action Framework™ show that a high-quality curriculum is essential to success for all students for them to reach a true level of college readiness. (Robledo Montecel & Goodman, 2010)

Children have shown that they will rise to the level of expectation that is created for them and to the level of challenge and support that is provided to them. Schools have shown that they can be highly successful by embracing high expectations for all rather than sorting some students into college and others into job training. In fact, among best, high-impact innovations, none involve silver bullet responses or weakened expectations. Instead they demonstrate a set of key features that include assuring that students have access to quality teaching and a high quality curriculum.

Let me share with you a few examples.

IDRA partnered with a school district in south Texas to implement our Math Smart! and Science Smart! professional development models. Passing rates increased for African American, Hispanic and White students. And the schools doubled the passing rates of English language learners. This was accomplished by increasing the capacity of teachers and administrators to engage all students by focusing on their assets to enhance learning; by promoting collaboration in a professional learning community, supporting the district's mission to enhance the math and science curriculum and increase student academic achievement; and creating systemic changes in policy and instructional practices to eradicate achievement gaps.

Don't give up on Texas teachers.

In another example, IDRA has transformed the traditional PTA organizational model into a more effective vehicle for parents that is based in communities – called PTA Comunitarios. The first started in the Rio Grande Valley with very poor families living in colonias. They came together to examine data on how their own children, and children across the region, were doing and to partner with their schools to expand educational opportunity. As a result, a significant number of their 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, 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.

Don't give up on Texas families and communities.

In one more example, a school district serving primarily minority and low-income students learned that 40 percent of students who were dropping out were doing so in their senior year. Under the superintendent's leadership and with the support of community, the district partnered with a nearby college, set up a college and career academy, and staffed it with the best teachers. The students were then encouraged to come back – not to the same conditions that had them drop out in the first place – but rather to finish high school and at the same time begin college coursework. The district reduced its dropout rate by 75 percent in two years, and become a leader in connecting high school students to college with more than 1,500 students participating in dual college credit courses during the last school year.

Don't give up on Texas students.

Texas must move from its low expectation that only some of our state's students can be successful to expecting and supporting all of our students to graduate college-ready.

Policymakers and schools should not make pre-college decisions on behalf of students or track them into low-level courses that limit career options. To create true opportunities for all of our children, we must commit to high quality curriculum for all students and full, equitable funding of all our schools, especially those neighborhood public schools in our neediest communities.

Our state can do better, our students deserve better, and our future depends on better.

Resources

Adelman, C. (2006). *The Toolbox Revisited: Paths to Degree Completion from High School Through College*. U.S. Department of Education. <http://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/research/pubs/toolboxrevisit/toolbox.pdf>

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Robledo Montecel, M., & C.L. Goodman (eds). *Courage to Connect: A Quality Schools Action Framework™* (San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development Research Association, 2010). <http://www.idra.org/couragetconnect/>

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IDRA is an independent, private non-profit organization, led by María Robledo Montecel, Ph.D., dedicated to assuring educational opportunity for every child. At IDRA, we develop innovative research- and experience-based solutions and policies to assure that (1) all students have access to and succeed in high quality schools, (2) families and communities have a voice in transforming the educational institutions that serve their children, and (3) educators have access to integrated professional development that helps to solve problems, create solutions, and use best practices to educate all students to high standards.