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Equal Access to a Quality Education – The Civil Rights Issue of *Our* Generation

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Keynote Address, by Dr. María Robledo Montecel

President, Intercultural Development Research Association

Good morning. Thank you Bradley for your kind introduction. I have worked with Dr. Scott for many years and am privileged to call him friend and colleague.

How good to be with you this day to look together at the civil rights imperative of our generation: equal access to a quality education.

Over the 38 years of IDRA's work in research, policy, and training and technical assistance, we have partnered with and learned from many people in many places.

To those with whom we have worked and who are here today, thank you for your partnership. To those whom we have yet to meet in this conference, we look forward to the possibility of working together on behalf of children.

And to all, we pledge our commitment to keep working to make equal educational opportunity a reality in our lifetime.

At IDRA, I get to work with women and men who are deeply committed to children and who are superbly able to carry out this commitment in their work. Some of them are here today as presenters and facilitators and as part of the IDRA South Central Collaborative for Equity, our equity assistance center, headed by Dr. Bradley Scott. Thanks to each of you.

Secretary Ali has spoken eloquently and clearly to make the case for education as the civil rights issue of *our* generation. I could not agree more. I really appreciate...

There has never been a time in the history of education in this country in which equal opportunity has been a reality. It has never been the case that *most* minority students graduated from quality high schools or from any type of high school.

It has never been the case that schools prepared *every* student to succeed in college or in a good job that sustains them, their families and their communities. Further, it has never been the case that all sectors – communities, business owners, public officials and the voters who elect them – demanded a quality education for *every* child.

Landmark civil rights cases like *Brown vs. Board of Education* and *Mendez vs. Westminster* opened new paths toward integration and equity. But more than a half century later, the promise

of educational opportunity for all remains largely unfulfilled.

In fact, research suggests it may be slipping further out of reach. The nation is more and more at home with segregation, and resegregation. And segregation is not only on the rise, but our country seems to be more at home with a system of haves and have nots.

Despite the fact that the phrase “all children can learn” has become a mantra, despite the fact that student achievement data are now widely available and are disaggregated by race, ethnicity and other factors, and despite the fact that our schools are now dotted with success stories, there is much evidence that the last decade has actually seen a widening of the economic and education gaps.

Disparities and gaps in educational opportunity and outcomes continue to divide Americans based on class and color.

If you are Black or Latino, you are most likely to attend a high-poverty, segregated, under-funded school that is unable to graduate students and is unable to prepare students for college or today’s global competitive market.

While the pressure to reform has increased, the reality of reforms at the necessary scale eludes us. I believe one fundamental reason for that is this: You cannot layer standards or accountability measures on persistent and long-standing inequities and expect to get different results.

There are, of course, some successful spaces and places that belie the trends. But results for our children are not about exceptions, they are about creating a regularity for success. We have yet to develop what management consultants call a “Habit of Vision” – a consistent vision for quality education for *every* child in *every* school.

As long as success remains the exception rather than the rule, our children and families are relegated to lotteries and to “waiting for superman” instead of having regular access to high quality public schools.

Civil rights are not, should not and *cannot* be accorded by lottery.

We have to change this. It is time.

It is our children’s time.

We must build high quality schools for all – for girls and boys; for those with special needs and without; for the poor and the not so poor; for those who are White, Brown, Black and any color or any mix; for those who speak English and those who do not; for those who are immigrants and those who are not; for those who are documented and those who are not.

Excellence and equity for all. It’s the right thing to do, and it’s the just thing to do.

It is also a very challenging thing to do. Today and over the next few years, the grip of economic crises and the din of competing priorities and ideologies may put education in a holding pattern or worse, into a downward spiral, that is interrupted only to bemoan the next state, national, or international report card, or to pine for the next silver bullet, to berate educators especially if they are public employees, or to wish for the good old days when the browning of America was

not yet real.

Equal educational opportunity can remain a well-intended but unfulfilled promise or move to becoming the engine of shared prosperity for generations of Americans. Much depends on the clarity and the urgency with which you and I approach the challenge.

We know of course that education really does matter. And it really pays off.

When education improves the preparation and productivity of American workers and entrepreneurs, it increases the wealth of the nation.

Education also increases individual wealth and is associated with greater civic participation, health and well-being, and economic competitiveness. College-educated people earn more than those who are not college educated – about a million dollars worth of earnings over a lifetime. Education also affects prospects for a job, particularly a long-term job.

And yet, in any given year, about one and a quarter million students don't graduate from high school. We know the painful stats well.

One out of four students – and almost 40 percent of our Black and Hispanic students – do not graduate from high school. That means that two of five Black and Hispanic students do not receive the most basic of education, let alone a world-class education.

The cost to the country is \$325 billion in lost wages, taxes and productivity for just one class of students who are lost.

By contrast, if every household were headed by an individual with at least a high school diploma, there would be an additional \$74 billion in collective wealth in the country.

An exemplary preschool program can yield a 17 to 1 return on investment. And our studies at IDRA have found that for every dollar invested in increasing high school graduation there is a nine dollar return in increased wages, more productivity and a bigger tax base.

Last March, President Obama called on the nation to increase the U.S. high school graduation rate to 90 percent by 2020.

And yesterday, as the President joined Univision for a town hall meeting on Hispanic education, he emphasized that his goal of restoring America to its role as the global leader in education will require that we invest in strengthening and expanding equal educational opportunities.

Initiatives like Grad Nation, led by America's Promise Alliance, are trying to create a movement to end the high school dropout crisis. Its first annual meeting was held in D.C. last week.

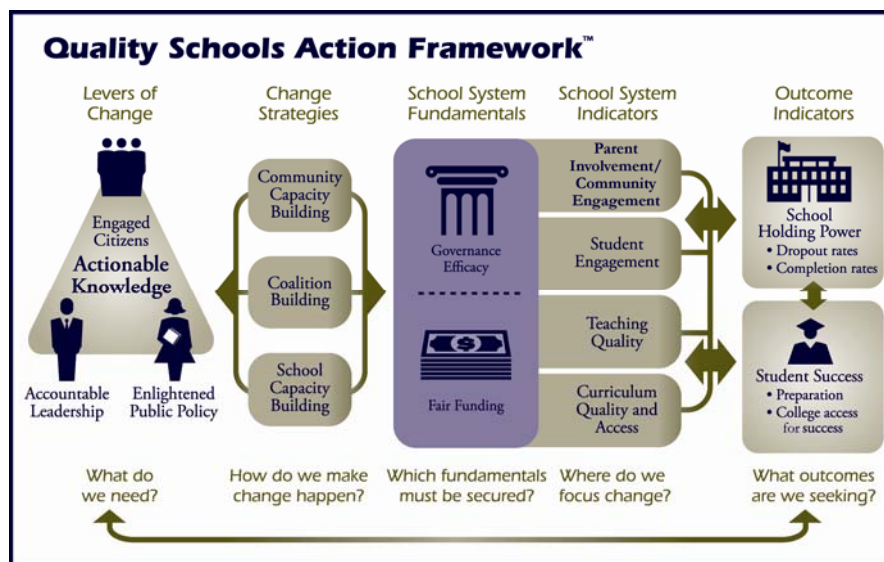
The Lumina Foundation has set up a big goal that by 2025, the proportion of Americans with higher education credentials increases to 60 percent from the current 39 percent.

We cannot meet the nation's goals of educating American youngsters to compete in a global economy without closing the racial-ethnic gaps in high school graduation and college completion rates. Those gaps and those inequities must be eliminated.

To do that, we have to connect across sectors in sustained actions, increase the performance

levels of public schools and higher education, and transform them into places of excellence and equity.

At IDRA, we have brought together what is known about how to do this in a book titled, [*Courage to Connect – A Quality Schools Action Framework*](#).



The model is based on three premises. The first is that educational systems, not children, are at issue. Schools are not underperforming because children in them are poor or black or brown. Rather, it is poor policies, poor practices and inadequate investments that hold our children back.

The second premise is that equity goals are fundamental and inextricably linked to success.

Schools can and must educate all groups of learners to comparably high achievement levels. They can and must provide equitable access and inclusion, treatment and opportunity to learn for all groups of learners. And resources must be equitable and accountability shared.

Equity goals must be in place and monitored within schools, across schools within a school district, and across districts within each state.

The Six Goals of Educational Equity and School Reform, developed by Dr. Scott and embraced by the equity assistance centers across the country.

The third premise of the model is that systemic educational problems require systemic educational solutions. Solutions must address schools as a system. Not only must we do each thing right but we must connect the right things in smart ways that produce results for everyone.

And the framework attempts to tell us, based on research, based on experience, what are the individual right things to do but how do we connect them so that we produce results for everyone.

So what are the things that matter and how do we connect them?

We begin with the end in mind. We ask five critical questions that give us a way of thinking

about all the important pieces: What outcomes are we seeking? What do we need as levers of change? How do we make change happen? Which fundamentals must be in place? and then Where do we focus our change?

I don't know about you, but I feel this way and perhaps some of you we live in a pop-up world. And things pop up and disappear. And sometimes don't stay long enough to register or for us to make the connection with what else is needed and when and who has to do what. So this is a very practical way of looking at all the pieces even as you concentrate on one piece or in connecting the pieces.

The [Quality Schools Action Framework](#) calls on us to make connections in several ways – *meaningful* connections: students connecting with teachers..., teachers connecting with parents, parents connecting with students, school leadership connecting with teachers, and different sectors connecting with each other and across the educational pipeline.

We also have to track expected outcomes both on *student* metrics of success at many levels, including college, and on *school* metrics of success focused on the ability, the willingness and the capacity of institutions to keep students in and learning through graduation and completion *and* to prepare them for college and a career.

Knowledge, information, evidence and outcome data must be not only rear-mirror assessments (how did we do?) but also integral to present and future strategy that we are using.

We must connect school outcomes – graduation and college readiness – with who and what produces those outcomes; connecting actionable knowledge to support engaged citizens, accountable leadership and enlightened public policy so we leverage change; building capacity at the school and community levels in support of local coalitions to make change happen; ensuring fair and equitable funding and efficacy in governance; and then connecting the four key school systems indicators to focus change: parent engagement, student engagement, teaching quality or effective teaching, and curriculum quality and access. And not only individual, but connected to each other.

This frame, this lens, is markedly different from the “report cards” we have gotten used to. In the field of education, the report card has become the centerpiece of student, state and national assessments of outcomes and school effectiveness.

In its Round-Up of National Education Report Cards, the Center for Public Education identified more than a dozen such national reports. At all levels of the education continuum, nationally and internationally, within and across the states and districts, these report cards are based usually on aggregated individual student performance.

Report cards of these types have raised awareness but have contributed far less to school improvement might be expected. There is a growing movement as well to connect data across the educational continuum – early childhood through to middle and high school and college completion – and that is good, again not only student metrics but institutional metrics are key.

Outcome indicators must be tied to data about the conditions that give rise to the outcomes. How else do we know what to change? It must be coupled with best practice and models for action. How else do we know what might work? I assert also that outcome indicators must tied to citizen engagement and not only to consumer choice or to public relations campaigns.

The *No Child Left Behind Act* ushered in unprecedented parent reporting mechanisms and mandates for parent involvement (tied to Title I funds). But implementation of the law has been *overwhelmingly* focused on testing. The testing industry is now a \$1.1 billion industry.

Outcome data are very rarely tied to clear information about the conditions that are related to those outcomes and the disparate impact these produce or the effective practices that will cause change.

A number of our local partner schools and coalition organizations are using this type of information to do that very thing. They are tying outcome data to the fundamentals of fair funding, and good governance and about teaching quality, student engagement, curriculum quality and access, and parent engagement to drive and monitor local changes.

They do so through a portal that we developed at IDRA that we call OurSchool. It is available at www.idra.org, in our website. One such group that is using it, a group of women in south Texas who created the first PTA Comunitario. A PTA based outside of the school, working in the school, with the school but based in community to create change. The women leaders of ARISE, are from the unincorporated areas of rural South Texas, the colonias, that don't have the physical infrastructure to their neighborhoods much less the kinds of infrastructures in their schools that are needed. And they are working to make sure their children get a good education in their neighborhood public schools through PTA Comunitario.

This PTA, based in the community and led by poor women, many of whom do not speak English, has met with the school administration, other community groups. They have shared their hopes and aspirations for their kids, they have offered their assistance to the school, they have created a plan of action and, as a regularity, they review outcome indicators of dropout rates and college-ready rates, the conditions that give rise to them, and school progress toward meeting their children's needs.

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. In both the Latino and the African American communities, we know how to keep our eyes on the prize and the hands on the plow. And both are required, with good information and active participation, accountability and policies that protect children and practices that educate our children can become real.

Let me share just a bit more about the actionable knowledge piece of the framework. Our Graduation for All initiative began back in 1986 when IDRA was commissioned to conduct the first statewide study of dropouts in Texas. The study resulted in landmark state policy, HB 1010, that required districts to collect data on dropouts. And our annual studies keep the focus on the issue and the extent of progress. The methodology that we developed at that time has become the prototype for the cohort methods are being used nationally to count dropouts and to develop "promoting power" indices.

Today, IDRA's OurSchool portal includes Texas dropout data that neighborhoods at the local level can use to know what is going on in their school and to call themselves into action around this – whether it be into action around policy, around investment, or around the quality of their neighborhood public schools. Web-based data are available about every high school campus in Texas.

Community officials can look at the rate at which their students disappear, the actual numbers of

students, whether or not they pass minimum competency tests, the differences by ethnic group, the ACT/SAT rates, the status of quality teaching, and whether or not rigorous academic programs are being offered.

Community teams can use data about their local dropout and graduation rates, disaggregated by subgroups, and data on the related school factors of parent involvement, student engagement, curriculum access and teaching quality in order to develop comprehensive plans of action to graduate all students.

In a number of cities, including San Antonio, El Paso and across South Texas, plans are underway to use these school-level data to engage the public in school reform and community action.

Community buy-in and oversight comes from shared understanding and data, about the whys, about the hows and the results of school change. This strategy by the way is largely untapped in school reform efforts. We have been asked to lead the development and use of the type of data portal that we created in Texas in other states and are looking for ways to make that happen.

Let me say one other brief word about the impact that the quality of education in a local community. We always hear that education matters to the individual and to society. And of course that is so. But the quality of education provided in a local school system also affects the local community in important ways.

Folk at the Rand Corporation reviewed a substantial body of literature and found strong evidence that the quality of neighborhood schools has an effect on housing values.

A 1 percent increase in reading or math scores was associated with a 0.5 percent to 1 percent increase in property values.

They found an effect on crime rates with a one-year higher education level in a community associated with a 13 to 27 percent lower incidence of murders, assaults, car thefts and arson.

And they found effects on tax revenues with increased earning and sales, and higher property tax revenues from residences and businesses.

Schools belong to the community, they are part of the community, they shape the community, and the community is shapes the schools.

There also was evidence that school quality in a community is associated with greater civic participation in that community, including more voter participation, more tolerance and acceptance of free speech, more involvement in community arts and culture and higher newspaper readership.

This month, David Bornstein, who wrote *How to Change the World*, has been doing a series of opinion pieces in the New York Times that point to success in using “collective impact” and “collective success” strategies.

He writes about the Strive project in the Cincinnati Public Schools and the connections among partners inside and outside of schools that have a focus on data and are based on common goals, shared ways to measure success toward the goals, regular communication, and what is called a “backbone” organization that is focused full-time on managing the collaborations.

As we proceed with these types of collaborations, I believe that we must keep in mind that Latino and African American communities themselves are part of the solution.

Maintaining urgency and clarity in sustainable education reform depends now in large measure on community will and informed engagement of our communities.

Fair funding and effective governance are a fundamental piece of the education challenge.

In Atlanta, at one of the schools we work with, Dr. Lucious Brown came in to the school. The school had graffiti, nobody wanted to go in it, it was dangerous. Nobody was learning, nobody was teaching, parents weren't there. And Lucious Brown, as the principal, came in, kept almost all of the teaching faculty, and the school is in a totally different place now.

So even as we focus on effective teaching, let us not lose track of the other pieces. So that is what this framework helps us to do.

I was pleased to see the recent launch of the Commission on Equity and Excellence. Its findings next December about the impact of school finance on educational opportunity and on the federal role in finance issues will be important as we address persistent inequity in high poverty and high minority schools.

Let me tell you how persistent. IDRA has worked with MALDEF in Texas over many years. We still work on school finance issues. It is our key issue.

In 1993, we were in the third round of the *Edgewood* case in state courts, and we pointed to the fact that there still remained \$700 dollar difference between students in rich and poor schools, and therefore in White vs. minority schools. And this \$700 difference – that remained after the system was being looked at for equalization and changes were being made – could buy you \$17,500 worth of books or instructional materials or computers per classroom. For each classroom. That's a substantial gap.

And so the Legislature decided that they couldn't shock the property rich districts and that they had to ease in equity and they developed hold harmless provisions which kept the inequity in place. That was 18 years ago and the hold harmless provisions are still there.

And when we are trying to deal with a \$27 billion shortfall in Texas right now, those provisions are still being fought for. The provisions that create inequity.

As a matter of fact today, Texas' top 50 wealthiest schools are 72 percent White. Texas' poorest 50 schools are 94 percent Hispanic. We also have big problems with intra-district inequities.

And as of last week, a demographic became official with an announcement by the Texas Education Agency: schools in Texas are now majority Latino at 50.2 percent. Without addressing fair funding, we relegate that majority to the margins and the State to the bottom of economic competitiveness.

Let me return us for a moment to the [Quality Schools Action Framework](#). The framework focuses change on the system indicators that research and experience say matters:

- parent partners involved in consistent and meaningful ways,
- engaged students who know they belong and are supported by at least one caring adult,

- competent caring educators who are well-paid and supported in their work, and
- high quality curriculum that prepares students for 21st Century opportunities.

I spoke earlier about the first indicator: parent and community engagement. The second indicator, student engagement, is an absolute must. IDRA research about why Latinos leave school before graduating point to an essential disconnect between schools and students. The disconnect happens for many reasons and manifests in different ways, but engaging students is key.

Instead of engaging students, though, schools often disproportionately single out African American and Latino students, especially males, for expulsions, suspensions, and discipline matters.

Let me give you another Texas example. Our research indicates that referrals to disciplinary alternative education centers have nearly doubled in the last 10 years with over three quarters of a million students sent to these centers and excluded from schools and regular curriculum, and that four out of five students sent to those centers are not there because of serious offenses as intended in the original legislation.

And who is sent most often? Yes, Latinos, African Americans, special education students and low-income kids.

And the teachers who teach minority kids who do manage to stay in schools? Segregated minority and high poverty schools are far more likely than high wealth schools to have less qualified teachers and are less likely to have academically rigorous and high quality curriculum.

Secretary Duncan has said that compliance reviews will aim to make sure that students have access to a college preparatory curriculum, advanced courses, and high quality science, math, and technology courses. Amen to that.

Recent research on math curricula and college participation found that among students whose parents did not go to college, 64 percent of students who took advanced math courses (beyond Algebra 2) attended college, compared to 11 percent for those who were only took Algebra I and geometry. Curriculum quality and access are absolutely essential for student success.

One final example that I think illustrates the importance of thoughtful, data-based, coherent plans that connect K-12 with higher education and community to improve educational opportunities for all children. Looking at dropout data, the Pharr-San Juan-Alamo school district in South Texas discovered that 40 percent of kids dropping out of PSJA were doing so in their senior year.

Under the superintendent's leadership and with the support of community, the district undertook a plan to bring students back, to knock on doors, to talk to parents (that's become rather usual everywhere). But before doing so, though, the district created the College, Career and Technology Academy. They partnered with South Texas College. They brought the best teachers to that public school academy.

The students were then encouraged to come back – not to the same schools and conditions that had them drop out in the first place – but rather to finish high school and at the same time begin college coursework. Many did.

The district has reduced its dropout rate by 75 percent in two years, and PSJA has 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.

Pharr-San Juan-Alamo is on the U.S.-Mexico border. It is 99 percent Latino. And it is extraordinarily poor, serving colonias in Texas.

You notice that there is no deficit thinking and no excuses in this approach. No students-cannot-learn or parents-don't-care or they-do-not-speak-English or we-can't-do-it,-we-have-too-many-minorities, or they're-not-college-material.

I don't know about you, but I always get suspicious when someone says that college is not for everyone. Have you noticed that when someone says college is not for everyone, they are never talking about their own children?

Our experience with the Quality Schools Action Framework so far is that it is a useful tool in many ways. As I conclude, let me give you a few examples.

Schools and districts can use the framework to conceive, design and manage change strategies;

- or to encourage thoughtful and coherent selection of best practices that are grounded in the reality of their own schools and their communities;
- or to focus on particular strategies or instructional approaches (bilingual education, for example) without losing track of the contexts that matter (like teaching quality, school and district leadership, fair funding);
- or to inform evidence-based community collaboration and oversight by the community in productive ways;
- or to inform meaningful comparisons across campuses and districts;
- or to design technical assistance initiatives;
- or to provide coherent and comprehensive contexts for monitoring excellence and equity.

We live in difficult times. And the times call us – each of us and all of us – to work to create a better world for young people.

During the memorial to the victims killed in the horrible tragedy in Tucson, President Obama talked about the death of 9-year-old Christina Green and said:

“I want us to live up to her expectations. I want our democracy to be as good as Christina imagined it. I want America to be as good as she imagined it. All of us – we should do everything we can to make sure this country lives up to our children's expectations.” Indeed.

Let's you and I do everything we can to live up to all of our children's expectations for a great education and a good life. Our children deserve no less and we sure as hell can't wait for another generation.

IDRA is an independent, private non-profit organization, directed by María Robledo Montecel, Ph.D., dedicated to strengthening public schools to work for all children. As a vanguard leadership development and research team for more than three decades, IDRA has worked with people to create self-renewing schools that value and empower all children, families and communities. IDRA conducts research and development activities, creates, implements and administers innovative education programs and provides teacher, administrator, and parent training and technical assistance.