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"The work ahead—to assure that each child graduates from high school, well prepared for the future—could not be more urgent. The well-being of our children and communities hangs in the balance. Fortunately, from the classroom to the boardroom to the capitol to the kitchen table, we have the capacity to make sure that all our children succeed." - Dr. María Robledo Montecel, IDRA President & CEO, *The Future of Education: Lessons Learned from the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program*, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 2009

The 2011-12 school year marks the 28th year of the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program. The Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program is a dropout prevention program with a twist: middle and high school students who are considered at risk of dropping out are engaged as tutors of younger children. Youth are valued and supported as they take up this challenge, and, in turn, their leadership shines through. Since 1984, the program has been implemented in 550 schools and has impacted 160,390 students (32,078 tutors and 128,312 tutees) in Brazil, the United Kingdom, the United States and Puerto Rico. Extensively tested, using a longitudinal, quasi-experimental design, and rigorously evaluated since its inception, this award-winning program has kept 98 percent of its participating tutors in school.

But those are just the numbers. The tutors tell it best in their own way.

Each year, IDRA holds a national essay contest, inviting students to share their experiences as tutors. In this issue of Graduation for All, we've tried to pack in as many excerpts from the 2012 award-winning essays as we could.

[To see this issue in Spanish.](#)

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Schools and Communities in Action

What Students Say

"Like a glass slowly cracking, I was starting to get the concept of school. I was starting to think of what would happen if I didn't get my high school diploma or if I didn't get enough credits. Would I have to work at a fast food place all my life? The more I went to Alex's school, the more I thought about this kind of stuff. I started trying harder in school, striving for A's and B's, and my teachers took notice." - **Lanala Hayes, High School First Place, Phillis Wheatley High School, Houston**



"Being part of this program has also helped me develop leadership skills. I have learned that these younger students depend on me to be a good example for them. This helps me follow the correct path, because if I make a mistake it will not only affect me but will affect those that look up to me." - **Rashaard Sheats, Middle School, Honorable Mention, John F. Kennedy Middle School, Atlanta**

"I put myself in their shoes and witnessed how it was a struggle to be a teacher...The hardest thing is to make sure they are learning and capturing what you are talking about. That's the hardest obstacle in tutoring. But with time and patience, the students will understand. This program has also helped me stay on track with my education. I see all the little children eager to learn and that shows me that I shouldn't let go of opportunities that easily." - **Omar Galvan, High School Third Place, E.L. Furr High School, Houston**

"I was very nervous to start school because my English was not fluent. I felt like I was going to fail all my classes. And we didn't have the money to buy me new clothes like some of the other kids had. I often held my head down, almost ashamed of being myself or having others know where I came from. [Then] I was assigned to a teacher where I would have three kids [to tutor] who were impatient, stubborn and easily distracted – sort of like me in my regular classes. I soon began to comprehend that my behavior in school was something that needed to change because I was affecting not only my classmates and teachers, but also myself. I noticed that my behavior started improving, my patience level went up, and my grades soon started climbing. But best of all, my English language skills started improving simply by being a tutor for someone." - **Pedro Sanchez, Middle School Third Place, Dr. Javier Saenz Middle School, La Joya, Texas**

"I have had the opportunity to experience, first hand, what it is like to be a teacher, to be in control without having to lose your temper, and how it feels to be the person helping someone to prepare them for their future. As the oldest of four younger siblings and cousins, I definitely needed this experience to learn to become a better role model/sister to younger kids." - **Brittney Solomon, High School Honorable Mention, James Madison High School, Houston**

"Since I became a tutor I've been treated differently by elders. They treat me like I'm one of them which is pretty cool. Being a tutor gives me clues of what I'm going to be when I grow up." - **Emily Duran, Middle School Honorable Mention, Memorial Middle School, La Joya, Texas**

"Since I've become a tutor I've been very proud of myself. While I tutor I have fun. I feel happy about being in this program...I love helping these kids because I feel [as if] they are actually learning." - **Juanita Flores, Middle School Honorable Mention, J.D. Salinas Middle School, La Joya, Texas**

"I need to be the best student I can be, so my fifth period teacher can trust me to go where I'm telling her I'm going and so I won't miss any instructions and fall behind. I also have to be on my best behavior so I can show my tutees the right path to go down. Not only am I helping them to do better in school, I'm helping them to develop the skills they need to succeed and learn the characteristics of a great leader." - **Sade Harnsberry, High School Second Place, E.L. Furr High School, Houston**

"I was slacking on school work. I didn't care about my grades which were F's, C's and D's. I have better grades now, I picked them up to A's, B's and a couple of C's, but still working on those C's." - **Aylin Kovar, Middle School Honorable Mention, Alan B. Shepard Middle School, San Antonio**

"Some didn't know how to read and I helped them. They helped me too." - **Flor Rivera, Middle School, Honorable Mention, Irene M. García Middle School, La Joya, Texas**

"Starting the school year was not motivating for me. I figured I would be the same student as previous years...always in the principal's office, and always getting in trouble with my mom at home for not doing what she instructed me to do. However, I can honestly say that the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program served as an intervention between my life and my education. Pre-kinder kids calling me "Ms. María" isn't something I thought I would ever hear. For once in a long time, I felt important, wanted and needed by someone in a positive way." - **María Armendariz, Middle School First Place, Dr. Javier Saenz Middle School, La Joya, Texas**

"I was afraid my friends would laugh at me and that at VYP they would make me do things that I didn't want to. The next day I reported to the VYP classroom with butterflies in my stomach. At that time, I didn't like little kids, and they never liked me either. My fears were quickly put to rest." - **Josue Reyes, Middle School Honorable Mention, Ann Richards Middle School, La Joya, Texas**

"There was one little boy that I adored...he had barely started school and he didn't know how to hold a pencil, or talk, or be a student. I started working with him. It was crumbly at first but we worked and worked really hard. Soon enough, he knew how to hold a pencil and write. I used to hate coming to school. Now I wake up early and do not want to miss the bus." - **Atzhiry Gutierrez, Middle School Honorable Mention, César E. Chávez Middle School, La Joya, Texas**

"I see a lot of myself in my tutees because I also used to struggle with math and reading. I notice that many times they look sad or frustrated with what they are trying to learn, so I jump in to put a smile on their faces...By seeing them smile, I too have come to forget a lot of my problems I have at home sometimes. They make me realize that I am needed and I am wanted by someone. I come to realize that problems are going to be everywhere, such as school and at home. It's just a matter of how I learn to deal with them and overcome them so I won't find myself in the same place I was at before." - **Yamileth Gonzalez, Middle School Second Place, Dr. Javier Saenz Middle School, La Joya, Texas**

"I used to be a student who didn't like school. Tutoring has helped me...When one of my students needs help, I can have the skills and the knowledge to help them. Since I have been in this program, I have become more responsible, focused and more open to learning. I see life differently now; it's not just to have fun and go out and do what you want. It's about doing something you love and you're good at—who knows maybe as a graduate and go into college I might want to study to be a teacher." - **Jacqueline Davis, High School Honorable Mention, South San Antonio High School, San Antonio**

Toolbox

Learn more [about Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program and how you can implement the program](#) in your school district.

Hear [interviews on the program](#) via the award-winning IDRA Classnotes podcast series on the program

Visit *Continuities - Lessons for the Future of Education from the IDRA Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program*, for [seven key lessons from IDRA's implementation experience](#) for improving the quality of education for all students.



Youth Voices

"After a month of them greeting me at the door with hugs and shouting my name when I walked in, I felt a change in me that I just couldn't figure out. What was wrong with me, or rather, what was right with me? I figured it out. My kids made me feel loved again. I could feel myself coming back." - **Julie Alderete, Middle School Honorable Mention, Lorenzo De Zavala Middle School, La Joya, Texas**



Congratulations to the winners and to all the valued youth tutors, their families, teachers and schools. Your leadership inspires us.

Special thanks to Daniela Paz, a student in Trinity University's Mexico, the Americas, and Spain (MAS) Program, for assisting with the translation of this issue.

Thanks for reading!

Laurie Posner

Graduation for All Coordinator
Intercultural Development Research Association
5815 Callaghan Road, Suite 101
San Antonio, Texas 78228
210.444.1710

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Contact

Intercultural Development Research Association
5815 Callaghan Rd., Suite 101
San Antonio, Texas 78228
(210) 444-1710



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