IDRA Education CAFE Start-Up Packet

INTERCULTURAL DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH ASSOCIATION

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Mission: The Intercultural Development Research Association is an independent, non-profit organization. Our mission is to achieve equal educational opportunity for every child through strong public schools that prepare all students to access and succeed in college.

Functions:

Policy and Leadership Development – IDRA policy and leadership development promotes accountability and responsibility. Using inclusive, cutting-edge and broad-based strategies, we develop leadership within communities, schools and policy-making bodies to create collaborative and enlightened educational policies that work for **all children.**

Research and Evaluation – IDRA research and evaluation advance educational policies, programs and practices. Using collaborative and innovative methods, we investigate important questions and provide insights into compelling educational issues. As a national resource, we set standards in the design, analysis, and synthesis of timely and useful research involving diverse populations.

Professional Development – IDRA professional development causes people across the country to take action that empowers others. We assist people to create educational solutions through innovative, participatory, and hands-on presentations, workshops, and technical assistance that promotes sustained growth and development.

Our assistance values the needs and cultures of our participants and acknowledges their experiences. We carefully craft training designs that include reflection and application. IDRA professional development causes participants to take a new look at persistent problems and equips them to take action that produces positive outcomes for all children.

Programs and Materials Development – IDRA programs and materials cause people across the country to improve education for all children. Our programs produce results. Our materials are useful and timely; attractive, cost-effective and intuitive; linguistically, culturally and developmentally appropriate.
IDRA pro-actively disseminates cutting-edge information to educators, administrators, decision- and policymakers, parents and community leaders.

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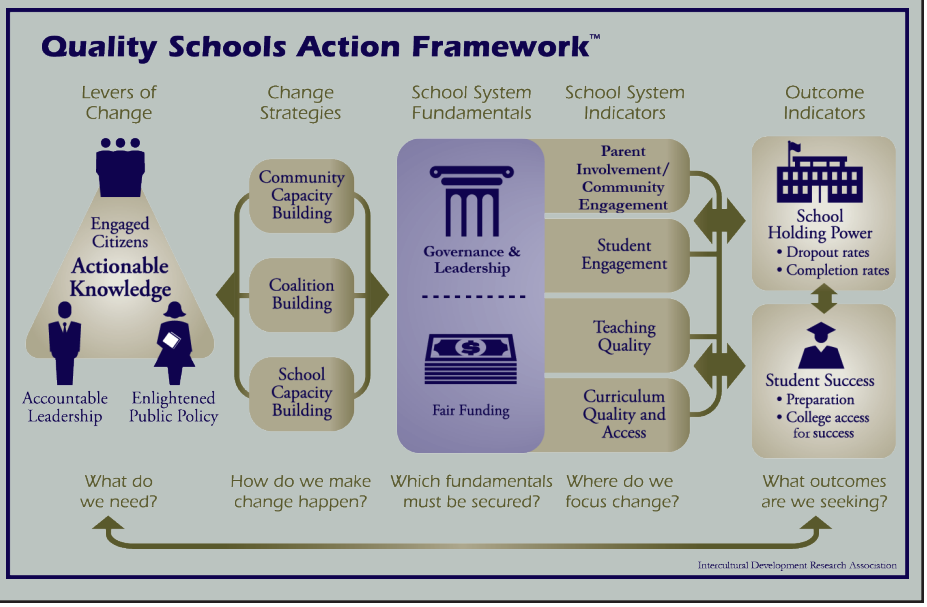
Built on a Model for Success

IDRA's Quality Schools Action Framework is a comprehensive action model for graduating and preparing all students for college. The framework (1) outlines the elements that must be in place to create schools that work for all children, (2) describes strategies that most often lead to change, and (3) shows how people can work together across sectors and around key information to leverage change.

Learn more at:
www.idra.org/change-model



IDRA Education CAFE Description

IDRA's Education CAFE (Community Action Forums for Excellence) demonstrates the power of families taking leadership to transform their community public schools.

An Education CAFE is a parent group that is rooted in a community-based organization or in a community-school partnership with the sole purpose of collaborating with schools to improve student success and opportunities for an equitable and excellent education. Education CAFEs are comprised of a parent group and a school (or school feeder pattern) where they identify areas of concern in their community schools by analyzing data and policies. The group in turn collaborates with schools to develop a project designed to address the issues they identified.

The untapped power of families' gifts and burgeoning leadership abilities is harnessed by Education CAFEs to improve educational opportunities for all students. Because Education CAFEs are rooted in the community, they bank on the cultural and linguistic identities of our diverse schools. Education CAFEs are multi-lingual, multicultural, inclusive and dynamically linked to the social justice issues that affect our schools.

IDRA has transformed traditional parent involvement into an effective vehicle for parents who have been previously excluded or underserved through a mutual school-home partnership in support of children's academic and social success.

Proven Success

This family organization model has directly influenced policies in South Texas through a four-year implementation project that resulted in hundreds of families becoming a region-wide network. This network of underserved families rapidly became a change-agent in the area and affected how school districts implemented graduation requirement policies that were excluding low-income, Latino students from college-going courses.

Today, there are hundreds of Education CAFE families in multiple areas working with school leaders to monitor the academic success of their children and other neighborhood children.

Texas Education CAFE Network

With support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, IDRA is establishing a Texas Education CAFE Network of community-based family and educator groups that help inform public education policies and practices related to implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act. This is an expansion of the Education CAFE model (developed by IDRA in South Texas), to Dallas, Houston, El Paso and the Coastal Bend region. As ESSA allows for greater state and local flexibility with community input, Education CAFEs will collaborate with districts, educators and school leaders to inform policy and practices. Education CAFEs will inform policy and practice targets by playing a key role in (1) ESSA-mandated early childhood education implementation plans; (2) Planning for equitable resource distribution in schools; and (3) Promoting college success as the primary focus of the ESSA provision for broader accountability measures for public schools.

"If a group of parents can raise $5,000 for this campus, OK. But if a group of parents can join together to make sure the math scores go up, this school will benefit much more. They might not know how to do algebra but they know it's important."

– Lourdes Flores, President, ARISE Support Center and co-founder, Education CAFE (PTA Comunitario)

Three components are central to the Education CAFE model

• **Community-based, Distributive Leadership** – Education CAFEs are born in their communities. They must be connected to a local organization that commits to focus on education (among its other mission areas). Meetings are attended by parents, grandparents, students' older siblings, neighbors and all who consider themselves custodians of children's academic success and future. By rotating leadership roles, the Education CAFE is not dependent on a central, charismatic leader and instead is based on input and action from all.

• **School Partnerships** – Education CAFE members come together and partner with schools in their neighborhood to ensure student success. Collaboration includes co-planning and sharing responsibility for outreach and ongoing activities that improve education in their neighborhood public schools.

• **Education Projects** – Education CAFEs carry out education projects based on actionable data. For example, they have brought families together to examine education policies and their implications for children's access to advanced placement, dual credit and pre-algebra courses; the state's education budget; and college readiness strategies. They also have met with school administrators to talk about shared concerns. Some group projects have included campus visitations to introduce the new organization, participating in open hearings with school board candidates, convening large public events to protest cuts to the state education budget, and conducting surveys about how new graduation plans are being implemented and their impact on poor and minority students.

Family Leadership in Education Principles

IDRA's Family Leadership in Education Principles – while evolving over time – have been basis of IDRA's work with families, schools and community groups. Following are these six principles, which are embodied in the Education CAFE practices.

Families can be their children's strongest advocates.

The Education CAFE model is based on the understanding that families from the most underserved, least connected communities can be their children's strongest advocates for an excellent and efficacious education.

Families of different race, ethnicity, language and class are equally valuable.

For example, Education CAFEs in south Texas primarily are made up of poor, recent immigrant Latino families who speak little English and live in resource-limited unincorporated communities located on the fringes of small towns. In other areas of the country, the ethnic and class make-up will vary with the populations served.

Families care about their children's education and are to be treated with respect, dignity and value.

The Education CAFE process has had several years of great success in part because of the intense dedication the families held for student academic success, graduation requirements, equitable school funding, etc. Every monthly meeting includes an information and training session on some critical educational K-12 issue they raise.

Within families, many individuals play a role in the children's education.

The Education CAFE meetings are attended by parents, grandparents, older siblings, neighbors and extended family members who consider themselves custodians of the children's academic success and future education.

Family leadership is most powerful at improving education for all children when collective efforts create solutions for the common good.

The Education CAFEs work diligently to create group projects, from campus visitations to introduce the new organization, to open hearings with school board member candidates to large public events to protest draconian cuts to the state education budget. There is constant rotating leadership, and many opportunities are created for all to participate fully in organizing and carrying out education-related projects. None of the projects focus on local fundraising.

Families, schools and communities, when drawn together, become a strong, sustainable voice to protect the rights of all children.

Education CAFE members take on issues for improved curriculum and instruction, college preparation, access and success for all children.

Asset-Based Practices in Family Engagement and Leadership in Education

The philosophy of asset-based practices is the most important and defining element underlying the Education CAFE model. Asset-based practices value the inherent intelligence, strength and knowledge within all families and students.

Asset-based practices understand that…

- Families and students are integral parts of any solution to educational challenges;
- Traditionally underserved families have deep pockets of knowledge, experience and skills;
- Poverty is not the cause of educational underachievement;
- Schools must actively treat all students as college-going students;
- Families are to be treated with respect;
- Our linguistic and cultural differences are strengths; and
- Students and families are not labels, like "at-risk" or "impoverished."

Action Steps

Conduct Authentic Outreach

Outreach and connection with families is critical to the success of an Education CAFE. While many school activities that involve parents tend to focus on getting as many people as possible to an event, the Education CAFE outreach approach focuses on engaging families as leaders and for collective action to improve schools over time. The modes of communication and invitation must be personal. Since the model depends on building meaningful relationships among peers, home visits and home-meetings are key.

Listen to IDRA's Classnotes Podcast episode on "Effective Parent Outreach." http://budurl.com/IDRApod38

Education CAFE authentic outreach means:

- Home visits and home meetings for establishing strong peer connections;
- The *promotora* (promoter) approach is transformed to an *animadora* (animator), one who invites and encourages families to become active participants and contributors to working together in transforming their neighborhood public schools; and
- Information and services provided are a means for families to come together, examine actionable knowledge and carry-out family leadership in education projects.

Hold Monthly Meetings

Set dates for monthly meetings. These meetings should initially comprise of the following components:

- Affirmation of family vision and educational goals for students;
- Presentations on educational data and policies;
- Deep listening and discussions on the impact of data and policies on educational goals;
- Begin identifying educational issues that concern parents; and
- Identify IDRA capacity development assistance needed.

As the group identifies the education issues members are most concerned about (usually after two to three meetings), the meetings can comprise of the following:

- Review implications of the data;
- Identify possible projects for the Education CAFE to focus on;
- Identify and build relationships with the school or the schools in a feeder pattern (elementary-middle-high school); and
- Include IDRA presentations, facilitation and assistance as needed.

IDRA can attend a meeting – in person or virtually – and provide guidance about forming groups, data analysis and deep listening skills. We also can provide training on specific data points and leadership practices.

Each meeting and event must be participatory. The agenda must be designed to ensure that each person has ample opportunity to speak, share opinions and participate in critical dialogue. Integrate small group

discussions with report-outs to offer opportunities for individuals who have limited experience talking in public to gain self-confidence and lose fear and timidity.

Examine Actionable Knowledge

See video on "Communities Using Data"
http://budurl.com/IDRAvidCUDyt

For families to act and be engaged with their schools on a meaningful level, they need to examine data and learn about educational policies that are affecting their children. This is a crucial component of the Education CAFE model and one that is often challenging to understand for many education professionals who may worry that parents will not understand statistical complexities.

The key to presenting data in the form of actionable knowledge to families is to present the following kind of information in a comprehensible manner:

- School funding
- Student outcomes in schools
- Dropout rates
- College-going rates
- College success rates
- Teaching quality rates
- College preparation course availability and success
- Exclusionary discipline practices

The data should be broken down by race, ethnicity, English language learner status, low-economic status and gender. Also, data should be in graph format rather than tables or lists. In the years that IDRA has done this, there have been no instance of families not understanding the data presented to them. The key is to provide the data in a format that is appropriate for any group setting. And, of course, it must be in the language of the families present.

As the participants are exploring the data, look for opportunities for families to make connections across data points and in their children's experiences at the school. Talk about whether or not the data reflects families' dreams for their children's education.

Just as data is important for parents to act, educational policies are very relevant. This means that state education policies concerning funding inequities, testing, graduation, college course availability, discipline practices, and gender and LGBTQ discrimination must be presented and critically analyzed by parents as to how they affect students' educational opportunities. IDRA recommends deep listening, probing and clarifying questions that value parents' opinions and experiences to guide these discussions.

Carry Out an Education Project

An Education CAFE's group project is the real-life application of the leadership tasks: it is an experiential learning laboratory with real-life results in transforming educational policy and practice.

See a bilingual infographic of the Equal Voice - Rio Grande Valley Community Survey Results on graduation requirements
http://budurl.com/EVRGVigPDF

Each project flows from actionable data but also is firmly based in the dreams, desires and wishes of the families for the education of all children. Projects must have specific, measurable objectives and provide opportunities for a group of families to work together to achieve the stated results. The experience brings families closer together, offers deeper experiences in learning to work in groups, and has visible and tangible results in the education of their children.

A project, for example, can have a local committee that informs families about graduation requirements and monitors the increase and maintenance of secondary students on a college track or, it can have a group of parents meet with central office administration to assess the quality of the education for English learners and monitors the quality of dual language programs K-12 while encouraging families to support the education of their children in dual language programs.

All leadership projects involve

- identifying a problem or key question from school data analysis;
- developing objectives and steps to carry it out; and
- assessing the final outcome: leadership in practice.

Projects require input and critical analyses by the team, allow for different aspects of leadership to be experienced, and are carried out in a reasonable amount of time so that impact can be assessed and individuals can measure their growth as leaders.

Reflect and Evaluate

See bilingual "Our Mesa Comunitaria – One Year Later"
http://budurl.com/IDRAyr2MC

Education CAFE groups are self-reflective, self-assessing and self-renewing. At the end of each school year or organizational cycle, the group should re-visit the goals and objectives it set for the year, the project(s) it carried out, the impact it had, what worked and what needs change or improvement. Then group members can establish their goals and projects for the next semester or cycle.

The selected or appointed group leaders should facilitate the process so that all members participate. For example, if the project was to inform families about graduation requirements and what courses the students need to be enrolled in middle and high school to be prepared for college or to have the families monitor to what degree their children were on a college track, reflection questions could be:

1. How effective was the information campaign? How was it carried out and approximately how many families became informed?
2. How many students from the target communities are on a college track and how well are they doing?
3. Should this project continue next year and what modifications should be made?

The reflection should include a look at how the Education CAFE conducted authentic outreach and shared leadership as well.

Roles

Role of IDRA

IDRA will provide assistance to Education CAFEs as they form, initiate data analysis, define and evaluate their projects. To ensure success, IDRA can…

- Facilitate monthly meetings;
- Provide training on data analysis, educational policies and outreach methods;
- Provide assistance on defining projects and self-assessment; and
- Initiate and facilitate contacts between school leadership and family groups.

Role of the Education CAFE

For an Education CAFE to ensure the success of the group's endeavors, it must…

- Engage in community outreach;
- Ensure that outreach to community families is authentic and builds on mutual trust and respect;
- Host monthly meetings;
- Set monthly agendas;
- Collaborate with IDRA in identifying any training topics that arise from monthly meetings;
- Collaborate with schools as the group identifies issues; and
- Design and carry out projects that address educational issues.

Role of the School

Successful school collaboration is key to the Education CAFE model. Schools can…

- Provide a respectful environment for families as they collaborate with schools;
- Provide access to campus and district leadership;
- Relate to family groups and organizations as peers and partners;
- Collaborate with families during the project development;
- Provide access to campus and district data; and
- Listen and acknowledge community work.

Resources

IDRA Education CAFE Model Elements

The IDRA Education CAFE process is an innovation for parent organizations and for school-family-community collaborations. Key elements are below.

Comes from the Community Outside of the School

Community-based organizations sponsor and collaborate with schools to establish and maintain Education CAFEs. Collaboration includes co-planning, sharing in responsibilities for outreach and conducting ongoing activities to improve education in their neighborhood public schools.

Family Leadership in Education

Family leadership in education goes beyond traditional parent volunteerism and fundraising. Family leaders in marginalized neighborhoods examine data on how their own children, and children across the region, are doing and partner with their schools to expand educational opportunity.

Families' Home Language is the Language of the Meeting

Meetings and activities are conducted primarily in Spanish. The meetings must be linguistically appropriate and culturally competent. Educational information is clear, jargon-free and translated – but not dumbed-down. Families are addressed as intelligent, capable and wanting the very best education for their children.

Bare-Bones Structure

The organization follows the essential elements of establishing a formal group, and it elects officers who hold monthly membership meetings. Leaders are elected from the participating families regardless of formal education, class or language capabilities.

Actionable Educational Data

Meetings include public school educational information and actionable data that leads to projects carried out by the membership. IDRA developed the OurSchool portal an online bilingual data website, http://www.idra.org/ourschool/ that has served as a source for school transformation projects.

Direct Peer Outreach and Family Connections

Volunteer leaders from the community serve and engage families as leaders and for collective action to improve schools, centered on a *promotoras*, or peer outreach and organizing model. Transportation services are provided or organized to support attendance at events.

Independent of – but Collaborative with – Schools

Connections are established with schools attended by the children of the members although the Education CAFE keeps an independent and separate identity.

Ensuring Education CAFE Success

The IDRA Education CAFE process is an innovation for parent organizations and for school-family-community collaborations.

Key Element	Potential Challenges
Family leadership in education takes the place of traditional parent volunteerism and fundraising in order to focus on academic success.	The temptation could arise to conduct activities and presentations on topics such as "how to be a better parent" and how to help children with their lessons at home. We do not intend to convert the parents in to teachers at home.
Meetings and activities are conducted primarily in the language of the community being served so that they are linguistically appropriate and culturally competent.	When meetings are conducted in a language other than English, the presenter's language may seem imperfect and participants may want to correct the speaker's translation. Accept all feedback graciously and validate their own language skills.
The organization may be formal or informal. Officers may be elected. No dues are required nor necessary.	Do not get caught up in the details of requirements and role descriptions. As long as an agenda is set, minutes are taken, organizational tasks are carried out and the theme is public education, the Education CAFE is functioning well.
Meetings include public school educational information and actionable data that leads to projects carried out by the membership.	The training and technical assistance IDRA brings should keep stressing the policy priorities we have set. Make sure all information is bilingual. Make all presentations participatory and problem solving in nature. Visuals and handouts should enhance but not be central to the work and the meetings.
Outreach and connection with families is critical to family participation and transportation.	The modes of communication and invitation used must be personal. If mailings and phone are the modes used it won't work. Soon those who are responsible for the invitations will begin to say what campuses already say "We invite them but they won't come."
Outreach approach: *Promotora/ Animadora para liderazgo de familias en la educación* focuses on engaging families in education as leaders and for collective action to improve schools.	The home-visit is key for establishing and maintaining a meaningful relationship. The goal is not the delivery of service and information but the engagement of families in education and active participation in the Education CAFE. School personnel being trained in this approach must change their traditional ways of relating to families.
Connections are established with schools attended by the children of the members.	Soon after being organized within a community organization, parent teams form and schedule visits to the campuses where their children attend school. School personnel, administrators and teachers, have to see in person how serious the Education CAFE members are about children's education and success in school.
Community-based organizations, places of worship, etc., sponsor and collaborate with schools to establish and maintain Education CAFEs.	Sponsors must have family leadership for education on the front burner even as they have other critical issues to deal with.

5 Steps To Start an IDRA Education CAFE

An IDRA Education CAFE (Community Action Forums for Excellence) is a parent group that is rooted in a community-based organization, rather than in a single school. Its sole purpose is to collaborate with schools to improve the success of students in the community.

1

Contact IDRA to get a start-up packet.

Any parent, school official or interested person can take the first steps toward organizing an Education CAFE.

2

Identify individuals interested in forming an Education CAFE.

This group should include families with children in public schools at any grade level. Set a time and place for a planning meeting.

3

Hold a planning meeting.

Form a planning committee from among the attendees at the meeting. Select a temporary chairperson and secretary (until the tasks are volunteered for at the next meeting).

4

Hold an organizational meeting.

- Explain the purpose of the meeting and policies and purposes of Education CAFE.
- Have participants share individually what their hopes and dreams are for the education of all children in your community.
- Create a name for the working group.
- Set up a meeting calendar, including time and place (The place doesn't have to be at a school. It can be at a community center or other central location.)
- Create a list of volunteers for individual tasks, including who will set the agenda for the next meeting; who will conduct the meeting; and what the outreach and invitation goals for each person are between now and the next meeting.

Everyone present becomes the organizing group for the Education CAFE!

5

Contact IDRA for follow-up assistance.

It's time to build relationships in your school community and see what issues your members are concerned about by exploring school data. Then you can identify your Education CAFE's project to focus on.

Learn more about IDRA's Education CAFE model

http://budurl.com/IDRAedCAFE

The Intercultural Development Research Association is an independent, non-profit organization. Our mission is to achieve equal educational opportunity for every child through strong public schools that prepare all students to access and succeed in college.

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Reference Article

Hosting Superintendents, Quizzing Candidates and Marking Maps – A Fully Engaged Education CAFE

Adapted from "Hosting Superintendents, Quizzing Candidates and Marking Maps – A Fully Engaged PTA Comunitario," by Aurelio M. Montemayor, M.Ed., IDRA Newsletter, March 2012

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 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.

Comunitario 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 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 Comunitario 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 Comunitario that is based in the community and whose leaders come from neighborhoods experiencing severe economic distress.

This same 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. 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 Comunitario is planning a light breakfast with a team of parents to present to and interact with the administrators who will visit.

Comunitario 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 Comunitario meetings on substantive issues being faced by schools. Because the Comunitario 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.

Comunitario 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 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 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 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.

Aurelio M. Montemayor, M.Ed., is a senior education associate in IDRA Field Services. Comments and questions may be directed to him via e-mail at feedback@idra.org.

Reference Article

Treating All Students as College Material – Family Leadership in Action

Adapted from "Treating All Students as College Material – Family Leadership in Action," by Aurelio M. Montemayor, M.Ed., IDRA Newsletter, March 2014

Family leadership is most powerful at improving education for all children when collective efforts create solutions for the common good. This is one of the principles of IDRA's Family Leadership in Education process. Families are concerned about the quality of education their children are receiving. They are suspicious of any attempts to track their children in non-college paths. Rather than lower standards under the rubric of "college is not for everyone" they want their children supported and successfully taught to have the skills and courses necessary for college acceptance and eventually degree completion.

In Texas, graduation standards are returning to various tracks, many of which will not lead to college-acceptable transcripts when students receive their high school diploma. The forces that be and the actions of the elected officials have created an array of "choices" that, given institutional biases and inertia, will result in large numbers of economically disadvantaged students and children of color being pushed into tracks that will not lead to college.

Parents in south Texas who are participating in Comunitarios and are part of a larger network of community organizations, Equal Voice, have been requesting information, receiving training and informing their neighbors about the dangers in the recently passed regressive policies.

They have created checklists for families to evaluate the schools their children attend. Their questions begin with: "Is preparation for college and college success the principal goal of the school? Is the school promoting the college track endorsement for all students?" And they proceed to much more specific items that give families evidence of the support and motivation students receive for college preparation.

These same families requested and got specific information on what kinds of careers are available with a bachelor's degree and the average salaries for the different professions. They reviewed more than 180 professional titles in nine discipline areas. All were amazed at the information. A common sentiment was the lack of such information provided by schools to students and parents.

The energy coming from communities that are poor and Spanish speaking flies in the face of the common prejudices and institutional assessments made of those families and their neighborhoods. As the State Board of Education was deliberating about weakening course requirements these parents developed the following statement.

Comunitarios Call for Algebra II Requirement

- "The Comunitarios in Alamo, Pharr and Brownsville, Texas, do not agree with the petitions to exclude Algebra II as a required subject in high school.
- The Comunitarios support all students being prepared for college as modeled by the Pharr-San Juan-Alamo school district.
- We support the 4×4 requirements that were in place before the new guidelines (4×4 refers to the previous requirements for Texas students to take four courses each in math, science, English and social studies).
- We are concerned that our children who come from the colonias will be counseled into tracks that are not of college-preparation quality.
- We think all of our children should be considered college-material and should be taught accordingly."

This is just one example of many where a collective effort is presenting a solution to the under-education and mis-education of children.

Aurelio M. Montemayor, Ed.D., is a senior education associate in IDRA Field Services. Comments and questions may be directed to him via email at comment@idra.org.

Reference Article

Families and Curriculum – Supporting Preparation of Students for College and Post-secondary Education

Adapted from "Families and Curriculum – Supporting Preparation of Students for College and Post-secondary Education," by Aurelio M. Montemayor, M.Ed., IDRA Newsletter, April 2014

Parent educators and liaisons have been part of public school outreach for many decades. The Title I federal support to public schools funds parent involvement. The challenge has always been to have authentic and meaningful connections with families especially those who are economically disadvantaged, of color, recent immigrants…or all of the above. A strong alliance between schools and community organizations is a means of maintaining excellent public schools, and incidentally, meeting the spirit of the law in federal parent involvement requirements.

The education system is complex and not easy for laypersons to navigate. It would seem to be more so for poor, Spanish-speaking recent immigrants from unincorporated communities on the fringes of towns. Yet groups of these families have been able to understand basic graduation requirements, the value of dual credit courses and the pitfalls of minimal, non-college preparatory tracks. They understand that pre-Algebra in the eighth grade is an advantage for all students and that even without understanding the content of the math curriculum, it is critical for entering college.

The Comunitarios, derived from IDRA's Family Leadership in Education model, has been a context for families to learn about and take action on educational topics that are critical for understanding their children's education. Some curricular issues for parents include:

- Graduation requirements,
- Sequences of courses in core content areas,
- Distinctions among regular, advanced/honors and dual credit courses, and
- Key ideas about standards, curriculum and instruction.

Some of the major challenges parents face are patronizing or deficit views of families both by schools and traditional parent organizations and often their ideas that family leadership in education requires money and formal education. We've seen educators operating under the assumption that poor, less educated parents and those whose first language is not English are challenged to understand educational issues. There is also a critical need for participatory, dialogical meetings in the language of the participants, and adaptation educational jargon for lay person groups.

These families aren't looking for a watered-down curriculum. They expect schools to use appropriate and effective ways of teaching their children so that they learn the content and are prepared for post-secondary education. Families can ask critical questions about what is being taught and the degree to which students are learning what is required and necessary. Families can survey their own children and others in their community about a series of issues that directly connect to the curriculum and instruction.

A student may be asked: How are you doing in your math class? What is helping you learn and what is blocking you? When you have questions are they answered? When you don't grasp a concept, in what other ways is it being taught? These kinds of questions have been discussed, practiced and used for family community surveys and provide valuable insights to families, organizations and schools (Montemayor, 2007).

One school district and several grassroots community organizations are developing new and important collaborations and alliances in south Texas. The Pharr-San Juan-Alamo Independent School District in the lower Rio Grande Valley and organizations from the Equal Voice network, have established new and strong connections. Several events at the beginning of 2014 exemplify these evolving connections. A Saturday meeting, Mesa Comunitaria Educativa brought together families, community organizations, school district administrators and staff and college administrators (See Page 1). The conversations were about high school graduation requirements that were paths to college, and full and equitable funding of schools. Among the powerful elements of the meeting was the opportunity for people to work with their peers in roundtables and the multiple connections that participants were making from their vantage points and experiences.

Another event two weeks later further illustrates these new connections. A full-day staff development for all the parent educators of the PSJA schools was focused on community connections. Three organizations presented. Proyecto Azteca, which provides housing for the poorest residents of their communities; La Union del Pueblo Entero (LUPE), with its roots in the farmworker organizing of Cesar Chavez and that focuses on multiple issues, including recent immigrant advocacy and rights, college access and education; and ARISE, A Resource in Serving Equality, which works intensely in some of the poorest colonias in community and leadership development. Each organization presented its history and services with the intention of identifying where the families whose

children attend PSJA schools could connect with the services of those agencies.

The afternoon was hosted at a community center: ARISE Las Milpas south of Pharr, Texas, where the parent educators could experience the barrio environment and see the many displays of the community services and activities at that site – an enlarged simple wood-frame home to which a large room was added so that meetings of up to 50 people could be held. The center staff talked about their weekly work (an average of 50 home visits in a week), the early childhood and health classes held in the homes, and the larger community events in which they participated. The parent educators were deeply moved and shared their learnings and planned activities at the end of the day. Key ideas that emerged from the parent educators: we must connect with families directly as these community organizations do, and we must connect with the activities of these organizations to expand our reach and strengthen the family-school relations.

The Comunitario model supports and encourages parents to assess curriculum and instruction without attempting to convert them into teachers or curriculum specialists. Schools and teachers would be well served to ask families about these things and listen carefully to responses. A parent doesn't need to know English or algebra to be intimately aware that her child is not understanding the math lessons and is quickly losing interest in school and, even more critically, doubting his or her capacity to comprehend algebra. Families must be validated for understanding when curriculum and instruction is ineffective with their children and searching for ways to support their children's academic success. Community organizations have proven that they can provide valuable partnerships to improve education in schools.

Resources

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Aurelio M. Montemayor, M.Ed., is a senior education associate in IDRA Field Services. Comments and questions may be directed to him via e-mail at feedback@idra.org.

Reference Article

How to Use Actionable Education Data to Strengthen Your School

Adapted from "How to Use Actionable Education Data to Strengthen Your School," by Christie L. Goodman, APR, IDRA Newsletter, May 2017

We often hear that strong parent involvement makes schools better. But the perceptions of what "strong parent involvement" means vary widely from fundraising to volunteering in classrooms and serving on committees. IDRA's model emphasizes a different role that recognizes parents' ability to lead and partner with schools to improve the education they provide. This can best be seen in IDRA's Education CAFE model. An Education CAFE is a parent group that is rooted in a community-based organization rather than in a single school. And its sole purpose is to collaborate with schools to improve the success of students in the community (see story).

A key element of the model is that groups of parents and community members examine data and then take action on a specific project. Every community is different, and the concerns of one are not necessarily the top concerns of another. So, it is critical that each project be identified and carried out by the community it affects.

Questions Families are Asking

Whether or not you are part of an Education CAFE, you can work with other people to see what is happening in your schools and how you can help make change where it is needed. You may enter this task because of an issue you have already seen, or you may not be sure the root of a problem or how many people it is affecting. So, the first step is to make a list of your questions and cluster them. For example…

- Does our school have highly qualified teachers?
- Does this school have high expectations?
- Does it provide a rigorous curriculum?
- How often do teachers from this school communicate positively about our students?
- Are a lot of our kids dropping out? (This is important even if you know your own child will graduate. High dropout rates point to problems that affect the whole school.)
- Does the school actively support students with 504 or IEP accommodations? (These accommodations are required to eliminate barriers so that students with learning and/or physical disabilities can excel alongside their peers.)

The next step is to take the top issue you've identified and dig deeper. For example, schools must hold on to students from the beginning of their journey to their final destination: graduation. Here are some things to look for:

- How many students are not graduating with a high school diploma?
- Are there differences across racial-ethnic groups, English learners or other student groups?
- How does this compare with other schools in your area or in the state?
- What grade levels have higher numbers of dropouts?
- Are some students being subtly encouraged to drop out?

The public schools' responsibility does not end with ensuring student graduation but extends to providing a solid education and college preparation for all students. For example, when a large percentage of students are taking college entrance exams, this points to high expectations.

- Does the school offer college entrance exams (PSAT, SAT, ACT) to all students or to just the "top" students (e.g., the top 10 percent students, or gifted and talented students)?
- What percentage of students are taking those exams?
- What percentage of students are earning acceptable scores on these exams? (at least 1100 on the SAT or 24 on the ACT)
- For all of these questions, are there differences among racial-ethnic groups, English learners or other student groups?

Another area of college preparation and earning a strong high school diploma involves taking rigorous coursework.

- How many students are taking advanced courses and dual enrollment classes?
- Do students and families know about the state requirements for graduation? And are they aware of the courses colleges require?
- What percentage of each racial-ethnic group is enrolled in these courses? What about English learners?

Of course, teachers are central to the quality of education our students receive. Their's is an increasingly challenging job that must balance the standards they must cover, best practices for instruction, test preparation, and a diversity of students in their classrooms. So, it is critical that they have been prepared and receive continual professional development.

- How many teachers in our school are prepared to teach the subject they are teaching?
- How do they relate to students?
- Are they open to hearing from parents?
- Are the most qualified and experienced teachers distributed evenly across the school district?

Factors that most lead to students dropping out are in-grade retention (holding a student back a year) and exclusionary discipline. There are good alternatives to both. But trends are showing that students of color are more likely to experience these.

- What percentages of different student groups are held back?
- What percentages are expelled, suspended, or sent to disciplinary alternative campuses?
- Are students in certain grades more likely to be held back? What about younger students, such as first graders?

These are just a few samples to explore. They are structured around IDRA's Quality Schools Action Framework, which focuses change on what research and experience say matters: parents as partners involved in consistent and meaningful ways, engaged students who know they belong in schools and are supported by caring adults, competent caring educators who are well-paid and supported in their work, and high quality curriculum that prepares students for 21st century opportunities.

Places to Look for Data

The hard part it would seem then, is figuring out where to go for answers to the questions you have outlined. Often the first place to look is **your state's education agency** (see list). Most if not all state agencies release reports throughout the year, with some providing data at the school district and campus level.

The **U.S. Department of Education** has a data and statistics website with information by topic. Other federal sources are the **National Center for Education Statistic**s, which also produces the Nation's Report Card, and the **Office for Civil Rights database.**

A number of regional and national independent organizations issue reports and data as well.

- **Alliance for Excellent Education** – reports focus on middle and high school.
- **Child Trends Databank** – data on more than 125 indicators of the well-being of children and youth.
- **Education Law Center** – annual report card on school funding fairness.
- **Education Week** – reports on education news and also releases its annual Quality Counts report with state-level data.
- **Kids Count Data Center** funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation – state-level data to inform advocacy and policies that benefit children and families.
- **National Equity Atlas** by PolicyLink and the USC Program for Environmental and Regional Equity – data resource to track, measure and make the case for inclusive growth.

Others provide state level data, such as **IDRA's annual attrition study** and the **Center for Public Policy Priorities' Texas Education Scorecard**.

Collect Information Yourself

And if you cannot find another source, there are ways to collect it yourself. For example, families in the Texas Rio Grande Valley surveyed more than 1,600 parents about their knowledge of the state's new graduation requirements. They shared the surprising results with school leaders in multiple districts, who made changes in how they share information with families (Cortez, 2015).

Another group of families was concerned about math instruction at their children's school, despite having qualified math teachers. They surveyed parents and students and learned the issue was low expectations for most students and a climate that didn't respond to student questions. What resulted was parents, students and educators at this large, predominantly Hispanic and low-income school having fruitful conversations to improve math education there (Montemayor, 2007).

I, myself, recently emailed administrators at each of the high schools in my district to ask about PSAT offerings to high school freshmen, finding that while some offer the test to all ninth graders, many only offer it to gifted students, and some don't offer it at all. The information will help me and other parents urge our children's schools both to offer the test schoolwide and to communicate with parents about it.

Sometimes, the data will confirm your thoughts about the issue your group raised, and sometimes it will point to a larger problem that needs addressing. By having researched the data, your group of community members will have a foundation to talk with school leaders and work together for solutions.

Learn more about IDRA's Education CAFE model. And be sure to sign up for IDRA's email notices, which include our new Actionable Knowledge for Equity bulletin.

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