IDRA NEWSLETTER

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Focus: The Promise of Public Schooling

Families Transforming Public Schools 3
Bilingual Parent Institute April 2017 5
IDRA Priority Policy Issues for Texas for 2017 6

America Does Not Have to Stay Stuck at Losing One in Four High Schoolers

by María "Cuca" Robledo Montecel, Ph.D.

"Look to your left... Look to your right... Look behind you. One of you won't be here in four years." Do you remember hearing that speech during high school orientation? It's an old standby because speechmakers can count on it. One in four freshmen in Texas disappears from school by their senior year (Johnson, 2016a). Nationally, that figure is almost one in five (Johnson, 2016b).

When the new letter grades for Texas schools were released in January, one predictable thing we heard was that certain schools are having a more difficult time because of the student population they serve. The underlying message of "We would do better if we had better kids" is that some kids – minority, poor, English learner – are, by their very being, difficult.

But children are not the problem. Children are not the reason U.S. schools have been losing between 21 percent and 16 percent of high school students annually for the last five years (Johnson, 2014, 2015, 2016b).

Some kids fare worse than others. While the rates for White students are five percentage points higher than the national average, the rates for Hispanic students are six points below the national average, and rates for African American students are 10 points below.

In today's economy, America cannot afford to fully educate some students and not others. We just can't.

For Texas, IDRA's forecasting models tell us that by the time today's kindergartners are 18, the state still will not have universal high school education, leaving many Texans without careers, college and choices in life. This will have a dramatic impact. Federal Reserve Chair Janet Yellen reports that college graduates have 70 percent higher annual earnings than those with only a high school diploma (CEB, 2016).

So the question is, are we serious about getting results for every child?

We need to be honest about the fact that we plan for high attrition, and we budget for a two-tiered system. We assume that fewer students will graduate than started in kindergarten. This assumption is built into teacher hiring practices and into curriculum decisions about which courses will be offered and to whom. Student attrition is built into facilities planning and funding decisions.

But it doesn't have to be this way. We can refuse to compromise our expectations for graduating all students. All students enrolled in our schools should be expected – and must be supported – to graduate from high school with a strong high school diploma.

The characteristics of the children are absolutely not what leads schools to fail to graduate all students. And by extension it is not due to the characteristics of their families or our community. Our diverse community brings much strength and

(cont. on Page 2)

"We can refuse to compromise our expectations for graduating all students. All students enrolled in our schools should be expected – and must be supported – to graduate from high school with a strong high school diploma."

– Dr. María "Cuca" Robledo Montecel, IDRA President and CEO

(America Does Not Have to Stay Stuck at Losing One in Four High Schoolers, continued from Page 1)

commitment. And families have made it clear that they expect our students to not just graduate but be prepared for college and career.

So we cannot pretend some schools get a pass because they have a population of students who are "harder to teach."

But we do know that being poor or minority means you are more likely to be in an underfunded school with teachers who are not well prepared.

Also, as IDRA's latest report shows, if you are poor or minority or speak another language, you are more likely to be affected by policies and practices that don't work effectively to keep students in school through graduation (Johnson, 2016a).

One such policy is in-grade retention. Retained students have a 14 percent to 50 percent higher risk of dropping out, and the risk increases to 90 percent for those retained twice. While the highest numbers of students retained are in high school, roughly the same number of first graders are retained as are tenth graders (Warren, et al., 2014). Accelerated instruction in regular and summer programs has been shown to produce better results than in-grade retention.

Another practice that doesn't work is insufficient support and low funding for English learner education. IDRA reported in 2015 that English learners are among the fastest growing segments of the Texas student population, but they are one of the lowest academically performing groups. And Texas is significantly underfunding ELL education.

Similarly across the country, the achievement gap between eighth grade ELLs and their native English speaking peers was 45 points, and the gap was not measurably different from the gap in 1998 (NCES, 2016). The achievement gap widens considerably as students progress through school (Kim & García, 2014).

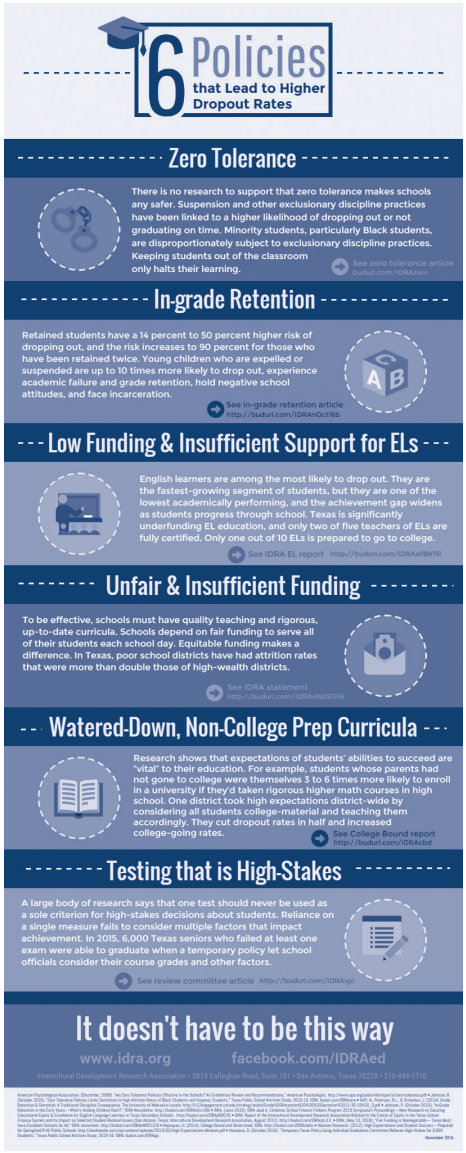
Third, despite what some would have us believe, fair and sufficient funding of public schooling is critical. Schools must have quality teaching and rigorous, up-to-date curricula. Schools depend on fair funding to serve all of their students each school day. Equitable funding makes a difference. In Texas, poor school districts have attrition rates that are more than double those of high-wealth districts.

Fourth, research shows that expectations of students' abilities are vital to their education. Some school districts are taking high expectations district-wide by considering all students college-material and teaching them accordingly. One district in South Texas, for example, cut dropout rates in half and dramatically increased college-going rates (Bojorquez, 2014).

A fifth type of detrimental policy is testing that is high-stakes. Student assessment is essential to informing good teaching and helping communities hold schools accountable, but children must not be hurt in the process. State and school policies have often gone too far by misusing testing data to hold students back. This neglects to take into account multiple factors that affect student achievement, including inequitable school resources and teaching quality.

One positive policy change by the Texas Legislature recently unlocked diplomas for 6,000 qualified students. IDRA's analysis found that students who are poor, Latino or African American benefited most from the alternative graduation policy that let school officials consider students' course grades and other factors rather than just a single test score.

(cont. on Page 7)



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Families Transforming Public Schools – Gathering Data, Informing Policy and Practice

by Aurelio M. Montemayor, M.Ed.

Given the current challenges in public education and the critical need that our public schools survive and grow, it is crucial that those closest to their schools propose the solutions. Parents across the country are coming together to ensure equitable and excellent public schools for all children. In contrast to traditional parent participation through volunteering and fundraising, these families are collecting data, surveying their communities and informing public education policy and practice.

In the states served by the IDRA EAC-*South* (one of four national equity assistance centers), from Texas to Florida and Washington, D.C., communities and schools are working toward improvement. Following are examples of parents and communities in Louisiana, Georgia, Arkansas, Mississippi and Texas who are taking action.

Louisiana – Community-Schools Approach

The Louisiana Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools promotes the idea of community schools over the more drastic step of turning over underperforming schools to charter operators that are privately run. The community-schools approach involves getting parents and other community members more involved in schoolhouse decision making, as well as bulking up services like mental health care and tutoring (Vanacore, 2016). They are ensuring that their public schools stay public and that the community voice is heard. They also are part of the national Reclaim Our Schools effort. (Follow them on Twitter @ReclaimOurSchls or online at http://www.reclaimourschools.org/.)

Georgia – Dismantling the School-to-Prison Pipeline

In Gwinnett, Georgia, Marlyn Tillman's 15-year-old son was suspended from school for what turned out to be minor infractions. She challenged the school for its harsh punishment. After some persistence, they determined her son's behavior was due to his attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). With appropriate support, he became an honor student in high school excelling in International Baccalaureate classes.

Ms. Tillman organized a group of parents who were having similar problems with their schools' discipline practices. When she first started investigating the issue, anecdotal data pointed to punitive and excessive punishments, especially of students who were Black males and those who had special needs. Over time, the families collected enough data to document a pattern of excessive punishment of students of color. Black boys with special needs were the most vulnerable to disciplinary actions that were sending them to alternative schools and eventually pushing them out of the school system. White students with special needs were affected as well.

The families focused on the alternative disciplinary campuses. They discovered that instruction was minimal and that students were encouraged to do as they pleased as long as they did not cause problems. Some schools had not even been serving breakfast. The parents knew this was not the education their children needed and deserved. They succeeded in making sure that the minimum Georgia facility requirements for a school were being met. Today, the families continue to review the data of the juvenile justice system to track the flow of students into the justice system.

Ms. Tillman is the co-founder and executive director of Gwinnett Parent Coalition to Dismantle the School-to-Prison Pipeline (Gwinnett SToPP). She stated: "Parent organizing is ensuring that those who are impacted are at the table. It is bringing parents to the table to do what we do best, which is to guide the instruction of our children, to guide the environment of our children, and ensure that they, our children, get the best possible educational outcomes."

Gwinnett SToPP seeks to build and strengthen relationships within the community through public awareness, empowerment and advocacy. Its first goal is to increase public awareness of the injustice that many children face within the educational system as it relates to the school-to-prison pipeline and the judicial process. Members also document family stories – "100 Stories in

(cont. on Page 4)

[l-r] Toyasha Vaughn, Marlyn Tillman and Hope Darden-Swift. Ms. Tillman is co-founder and executive director of Gwinnett SToPP. Ms. Vaughn and Ms. Darden-Swift are graduates of its parent leadership institute.

(Families Transforming Public Schools, continued from Page 3)

100 Days" – about the challenges their children face in schools. A third major effort is the Parent Leadership Institute (PLI), an innovative project with a parent focus, pairing grassroots leadership training with school advocacy training. More information is online at http://www.gwinnettstopp.org/).

Arkansas – Putting the Public Back into Public Policy

The Arkansas Public Policy Panel (APPP) continues a long history of advocacy begun in 1963. Its current executive director, Bill Kopsky, says, "Leadership means leadership with other people. We reject a single leader model... One of the strengths of our organization is that we bring people together across the races, across the geography and across a lot of issue barriers, and [we] develop a common agenda for what moves Arkansas forward" (2014).

APPP is a statewide organization dedicated to achieving social and economic justice by organizing citizen groups around the state, educating and supporting them to be more effective and powerful, and linking them with one another. Its newsletter, *Public Policy Watch*, highlights one recent advocacy effort: "The stories of families in Arkansas' special education programs are often heartbreaking, but they are also playing a part in improving the system... The parents' testimony highlighted the disconnect between the policies in place and what's actually being implemented. On paper, the state is complying with federal regulations for special education, but student outcomes say otherwise. 'The taskforce really needed parents' perspectives,' said the Panel's Education Organizer Ana Phakhin. Phakhin said the testimony heavily influenced the taskforce recommendations." (APPP, 2016)

These dedicated parents and communities have had a direct impact on local and state education policies and practices in Arkansas. Special education, for example, has become much more sensitive to serve children with special needs.

Mississippi – Bringing Together Families in the Lowest Wealth Communities

The Citizens for a Better Greenville (CBG) was formed in the Delta's largest city, Greenville, which sits on the edge of the Mississippi River and with a population of 46,000 that is almost 70 percent Black. CBG focuses its organizing work in the lowest wealth communities in the city. "You get them engaged by going to those impacted by the problem," said Joyce Parker. CBG has successfully engaged the community to elect accountable officials to the city council. They have, in turn, appointed members to the city school board. In addition, CBG works with youth and school administrators to set up an innovative conflict resolution program that is run by students in the high school.

CBG is part of the Mississippi Delta Catalyst Roundtable, a group of 10 "Black-based, Black-led community organizations working in the Delta that have formed a partnership of parents, students, educators and public officials to create a quality public education accessible to all children." Learn more at http://southernecho.org.

Texas – Family Leadership for Excellent Education

Some years ago when the Texas legislature dramatically reduced the funding of schools, many communities united in protest and in the next legislative round, a portion of the money was replaced. Then, in the spring of 2015, a network of community organizations and Comunitarios that IDRA had been working with conducted a community survey of 1,600 families across two counties and 10 school districts to find out what they knew about changes in graduation requirements. The resulting report was shared with community members in a Mesa Comunitaria event (community roundtable) (IDRA, 2016). This was followed up by various local projects to assure that communities were informed and their children were on college tracks, as they wanted and hoped for. (Cortez, 2015)

The community collected its own information, made sense of it and took clear action. Now, most of the school districts involved have improved their communication with their families, and local family leadership in education projects – which include youth leadership – are ongoing.

In Alamo, Texas, in March of 2017, families will hold a session at a middle school to inform other families through the presentation by students of the benefits of dual credit courses, K-12 biliteracy, dropout recovery to complete high school and begin college, and adult education. This is replicating a similar event held by families last year in Pharr, Texas, to close to 200 participants. This year they expect to have at least 300.

Their impact in South Texas has included:

- The school districts are acknowledging that families want their children prepared for college and taking steps in that direction.
- School districts have improved their com-

(cont. on Page 5)

Resources Online

- Classnotes podcasts about school transformation
- Excerpt from *Courage to Connect – A Quality Schools Action Framework*™
- Infographic: Six Policies that Lead to Higher Dropout Rates
- Videos: 2015 Annual IDRA *La Semana del Niño* Parent Institute
- Texas school policy resources: factsheets, testimony, reports, infographics
- Classnotes podcasts about community engagement

www.idra.org/IDRA_NL_current

(Families Transforming Public Schools, continued from Page 4)

munication with *colonia* parents about graduation requirements and have improved how they are informing families about the college track for their children.

- All the targeted districts now accept representatives from the Comunitarios as peers and partners in co-planning for excellent schools for all children.

As in South Texas, San Antonio families are forming new groups whose process is family leadership in education, and their mission is to transform schools. They partner with their schools to improve policy and practice and to apply the research they conduct on the status and conditions of their schools.

Education CAFÉ (Community Action Forums for Excellence)

The next generation of IDRA's family leadership in education model is the Education CAFÉ. Formerly known as PTA Comunitario, the Education CAFÉ approach is still designed to transform the traditional model of parent school organizations into a more effective vehicle for parents who have previously been excluded or underserved to participate and influence their schools. The new name emphasizes the diversity of communities who are engaged in impacting their public schools. This parent-led approach creates a partnership between families and schools in support of children's academic and social success.

The key activity of Education CAFÉ members is to lead education projects designed to improve their schools. These projects are based on and flow from actionable knowledge. IDRA's Quality Schools Action Framework highlights actionable knowledge as central to the levers of change for equitable and excellent schools. Eight groups exist in the lower Rio Grande Valley in south Texas and have had significant impacts (such as those described above), and more are in development. The Education CAFÉ network is currently expanding and is scaling up from south Texas Comunitarios to other parts of the state and eventually to the IDRA EAC-*South* region and across the country.

Whether its guaranteeing students are prepared for college, changing oppressive discipline practices, stopping bullying, or keeping public schools public, communities and schools face big challenges. Engaged citizens, holding educational leadership accountable and informing enlightened public policy, are transforming their public schools.

Annual IDRA La Semana del Niño Parent Institute™

Bilingual Parent Institute • April 27, 2017

Special event for families, community groups and educators

This annual institute offers families, school district personnel and community groups from across the country the opportunity to network, obtain resources and information, and receive training and bilingual materials on IDRA's nationally-recognized research based model for parent leadership in education. This institute is interactive and participatory. All presentations are bilingual (English-Spanish).

Highlights coming in 2017

- Bilingual presentations on successful family engagement
- Roundtable educational presentations
- Parent interviews
- Breakout sessions on education topics
- Refreshments and lunch
- Exhibitors, including service providers, college and universities and non-profit agencies

"The fact that everybody was engaged, was participating; this is something I don't see in any other conference. [In other conferences], people just go and listen. Here people come to participate to be engaged – that was impressive!"

– previous participant

Event Registration

The fee is $60 per person (includes presentations, materials, exhibits, refreshments and lunch). For more information, contact Ms. Jocellyn Rivera (e-mail contact@idra.org; phone 210-444-1710).

Details

Date: April 27, 2017
Time: 9:00 am - 2:00 pm
Place: Whitley Theological Center, 285 Oblate Drive, San Antonio

Register Online Today!

Or print the registration form (PDF) or the Microsoft Word form.

http://budurl.com/IDRAlaSemPI

Also see photos, videos and articles to find out why IDRA's parent institute is so powerful!

Resources

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IDRA Priority Policy Issues for Texas for 2017

The issues identified below highlight priorities for the current session, but readers should know that IDRA works with its partners in many other important areas, including early childhood, school discipline, bullying, multicultural education, school integration, teacher and teaching quality, and sex/gender equity. For more questions, please contact IDRA's National Director of Policy, David Hinojosa, J.D., at david.hinojosa@idra.org.

Fair Funding Means Equity and Excellence for All Students

IDRA Stands

- All state and local aid made available for public schools should be funded through equalized formulas.
- All hold-harmless revenue, including Target Revenue, must be terminated and those funds should be redistributed through the formulae to help all school districts.
- Efforts to reduce recapture must be done in an equitable manner, and the state must provide additional aid for all districts to make up the difference.
- State aid for underserved students, such as low-income and English learner students, must reflect actual costs.

Why?

The quality of children's education should not be determined by their family income or the neighborhood where they happen to live. In the new context of global competition, excellent schools are needed for all students – not good schools for a few and mediocre ones for the rest. The research is clear: educational resources matter and the state must invest in all children's education. This especially rings true for underserved students, like low-income and English learner (EL) students. Over 30 years ago, the state set their funding four times below the recommended level and it remains unchanged. Forcing schools to play shell games with their funds is a Texas culture that must end now.

Keep the Public in Public Education

IDRA Stands

- Public money must have public oversight and must not be diverted to private interests.
- There must be no further expansion of charter schools, and limited public funds for facilities should not be siphoned off for charter schools.

Why?

The best way to strengthen public schools is to strengthen public schools. Diverting public money for private schools and subsidies for the rich takes money away from our communities resulting in higher taxes for homeowners and businesses. More importantly, private school vouchers, education savings accounts (ESAs), charter schools and related schemes are based on life-raft thinking: "saving" a few students while harming the children left behind. They also tend to further segregate students and do not result in improved learning.

Effective Accountability that Supports Schools and Puts Children First

IDRA Stands

- The state's accountability system should be supportive, moving away from the *No Child Left Behind Act*'s rigid, punitive structure.
- The state should collect some valid testing data and other performance measures to enable it to hold schools accountable for student achievement with data disaggregated by sub-groups.
- School accountability should be achieved by sample testing, saving millions of state tax dollars and simultaneously eliminating the misuse of tests for such high-stakes, dysfunctional practices as in-grade retention or denial of diplomas.
- The state accountability system must include "opportunity-to-learn metrics," including resource allocation, college preparation and teacher quality.

Why?

We must make sure our schools are doing a good job with all of our students, and disaggregated data helps us know where to focus improvement efforts. But it is not necessary to test all students to ensure schools are producing good results. Sample testing achieves this and can also prevent misuse of testing. In addition, Congress' passage of the *Every Student Succeeds Act* gives Texas the opportunity to focus its accountability system on improving struggling schools through asset-based approaches rather than punishing them. Texas can be a leader in this area by dropping its A-F accountability grading system and avoiding the creation of a state- or privately-controlled "opportunity school district" that strips local control from communities. Instead, the state should add opportunity-to-learn metrics as part of its accountability system, which will allow the state to focus its resources on areas of need, thereby increasing the efficiency of the system.

Testing that Doesn't Hurt Children

IDRA Stands

- No single measure should be used to make high-stakes decisions for promotion or graduation.
- The state should continue to graduate students who prove their well-rounded academic qualifications to independent graduation committees.

Why?

Reliance on a single measure fails to consider multiple factors that impact student achievement, including the fact that students have no control over inequitable school resources or the quality of teaching they receive. More importantly, the use of a single test score ignores several other academic achievements, including grades, projects, college readiness measures and teacher recommendations. The independent graduation committees remain a viable option for qualified students and should be continued.

Instruction for English Learners Must be Bolstered

IDRA Stands

- Laws requiring bilingual education programs in elementary schools must remain, and exceptions must be strongly discouraged.
- Secondary programs for ELs should be revised

(cont. on Page 7)

(IDRA Priority Policy Issues for Texas for 2017, continued from Page 6)

to require sheltered English instruction in the content areas and training for content area teachers to enable them to adapt their instruction.

- The state should modify its procedures for monitoring EL performance by disaggregating EL performance data for each level of schooling.
- New immigrant students, including refugees, equally deserve a high quality education.

Why?

EL students, with their potential for bilingualism, are a great asset that should be nurtured. Research shows that bilingual and dual language education programs are highly effective in helping EL students learn English while also learning their core subjects. Texas must ensure these programs are properly supported and implemented. But secondary EL students, many of whom only get 45-minute ESL classes each day, do poorly on several metrics. This middle and high school EL under-achievement is masked by the current practice of data reporting that lumps EL student performance across all grade levels. The state must monitor EL performance by school-level data instead, and it must vastly improve its efforts to support schools identified for intervention. Additionally, the state must ensure access to a strong public education for students, including new immigrant and refugee students, who may require more intensive, comprehensive services.

Higher Education Access for Success

IDRA Stands

- Texas' high school curriculum should prepare all students for college with high quality, rigorous courses.
- In-state tuition rates for all Texas students, including undocumented immigrant students, must remain.
- Funding for need-based financial aid, including the Texas Grant Program, must be increased.
- College tuition must be re-regulated but state aid also must increase to help fill the void.
- No changes should be made to the Texas Top Ten Percent Plan.

Why?

Today's workforce needs many more people to have college degrees. In order to increase access, retention and college completion rates, we need expanded access, improved student financial aid, and strengthened support programs. High schools must ensure that all students receive a rigorous course of study that prepares them for college. Re-regulation of high tuition rates is desperately needed, but the state must ensure that it adequately supports the state's colleges and students needing assistance. This includes in-state tuition rates for undocumented immigrant students who are a vital part of our future. The Top Ten Percent Plan is helping to increase the number and diversity of students applying for and enrolling in Texas colleges and universities. It has increased the number of high schools that are sending their students to the state's top institutions and remains one of the state's most successful policies.

WEBSITE

See resources for each of these issues

http://budurl.com/IDRApol17

(America Does Not Have to Stay Stuck at Losing One in Four High Schoolers, continued from Page 2)

Sixth, IDRA found that zero tolerance policies contribute to high attrition rates of Black students and Hispanic students. While practices vary, the general approach is the same: removing students who are deemed disruptive. However, there is no research to support that zero tolerance makes schools any safer.

The U.S. Office for Civil Rights shows that Black public preschool children are suspended at high rates – these children are 19 percent of enrollment, but 47 percent of those who received one or more out-of-school suspensions (2016). Students in special education and poor students had higher rates as well. And students as young as 6 years old were removed from their kindergarten classes and sent to alternative schools for "discipline" problems.

This has huge consequences as the data show that children are up to 10 times more likely to drop out of high school if they've been expelled or suspended (HHS & DOE, 2014).

We can change this. It's time that we get ourselves unstuck.

Getting unstuck does not mean giving up on public education. Public schooling is the cornerstone of freedom, democracy and economic opportunity. A handful of special interest groups have tried to shift the country away from this promise. But distributing public money for private schools takes away money from our communities and puts it in the pockets of private interests that are not accountable to the public. This is not a workable solution.

Instead, the best way to strengthen public schools is to strengthen public schools – schools that are accountable to us all.

We can change policies and practices that push students out of school and that have the effect of favoring some children over others. We can make sure students have highly-qualified teachers using rigorous curricula. And we can make sure their parents and communities are engaged with their schools and the state provides fair funding to prepare students for 21st century opportunities.

Our country has the capacity, ingenuity and resourcefulness to get the results we want and that our children deserve.

Resources

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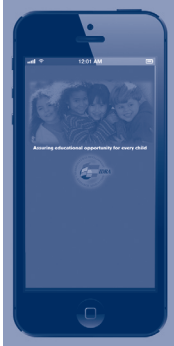

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