IDRA NEWSLETTER

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Focus: Student Leadership in Education

Discipline Disparities Push Black Girls Out of Classrooms

IDRA Youth-Led Study Examines Discipline in Atlanta-area Schools

By Makiah Lyons, J.D.

Four youth researchers came together recently with IDRA researchers to study the school discipline experiences of Black girls in Atlanta-area schools. In their resulting report released this month, they wrote: "Schools should be a place where all students feel safe and supported, no matter what. But unfortunately, this is not the case for all students."

IDRA's Safety, Dignity and Belonging Project was a pioneering legal youth participatory action research project co-led by the four youth: Eden Frazier, Nickell Brown, Natiyaa Carswell and Betzayda Domingo. I had the pleasure of supporting and advising their work in my role then as IDRA's Equal Justice Works legal fellow.

Youth participatory action research is a research method that situates young people as researchers and experts in the research project (Ozer, 2016). Traditional research frameworks study issues impacting young people but rarely include young people in the research process.

IDRA's project also deeply considered issues of discrimination and civil rights in our research. For this reason, we describe this project as a legal youth participatory action project.

"We are the future."

"As young people, research helps us understand the world around us and discover solutions to the problems we face," wrote the team. "When we know more, we can speak up for ourselves and others… We are the future, and our voices and perspectives matter."

In the summer of 2024, the student research team began by building connections and understanding as a team, engaging in team-building activities and educational workshops together. They learned about various forms of discrimination, including sexism, racism and adultism, civil rights frameworks and the school-to-prison pipeline. IDRA researcher Christina Quintanilla Munoz, Ph.D., trained the team in research methodology.

We also studied discipline disparities by race and gender nationally using the Black Girls' *(cont. on Page 2)*

> *"I'm very passionate about getting these circumstances of Black girls out to the public so people see their true struggles."*
>
> *– Student researcher Nickell Brown*

(Discipline Disparities Push Black Girls Out of Classrooms, continued from Page 1)

Pushout and Criminalization in Schools Data Hub (Bonsu-Love & Mickens, 2025). We studied these same disparities in our backyard using the K-12 Student Discipline Dashboard published by the Governor's Office of Student Achievement (2021).

We found that, in 2017, Black girls accounted for 15% of girls enrolled in public schools but received 45% of the out-of-school suspensions, 37% of the in-school suspensions and 43% of expulsions (GAO, 2024).

Through our research using these tools, we found that Black girls experience considerable disparities in school discipline assignments nationally, in our state, and in the schools in our communities (Brown & Lyons, 2025).

"I want to bring light to the things girls of color suffer with."

Dedicated to learning more, the team developed a research plan. After considering several research methods, the team decided to collect data via a focus group, enabling them to hear directly from girls about their experiences firsthand. The team recruited Black girls in Atlanta-area public schools to share their experiences.

Some described being removed from class or punished for behaviors that for white students went unpunished or disregarded.

Collectively, we heard stories highlighting a hostile school climate in which many girls feel unsupported, judged and silenced by the very adults responsible for their care.

From the focus groups, the team collected findings across three themes:

See the students' report **https://idra.news/ListenToUs**

- **School staff and administrators are often biased in their approaches to resolve behavioral concerns.**
- **Exclusionary discipline practices erode students' social and emotional well-being and put students behind academically.**
- **The use of exclusionary and punitive discipline policies make schools feel hostile and unsafe.**

Our research reveals that we have a long way to go to ensure that Black girls are safe, have dignity, and feel that they belong in schools in our community. Schools must change their discipline policies and make sure all students have a fair chance to challenge unfair treatment.

Team member Nickell Brown wrote: "As a Black young girl, I want to bring light to the things Black girls and other girls of color suffer with while just trying to get an education. I want to bring light to the severe consequences of adultification, stereotyping and racial bias. One small encounter with any of these challenges could cause girls to derail for the rest of their lives. I'm very passionate about getting these circumstances of Black girls out to the public so people see their true struggles, along with other girls of color."

In our report, we proposed an array of solutions to ensure that Black girls do not continue to be unfairly disciplined and are supported in their school environment.

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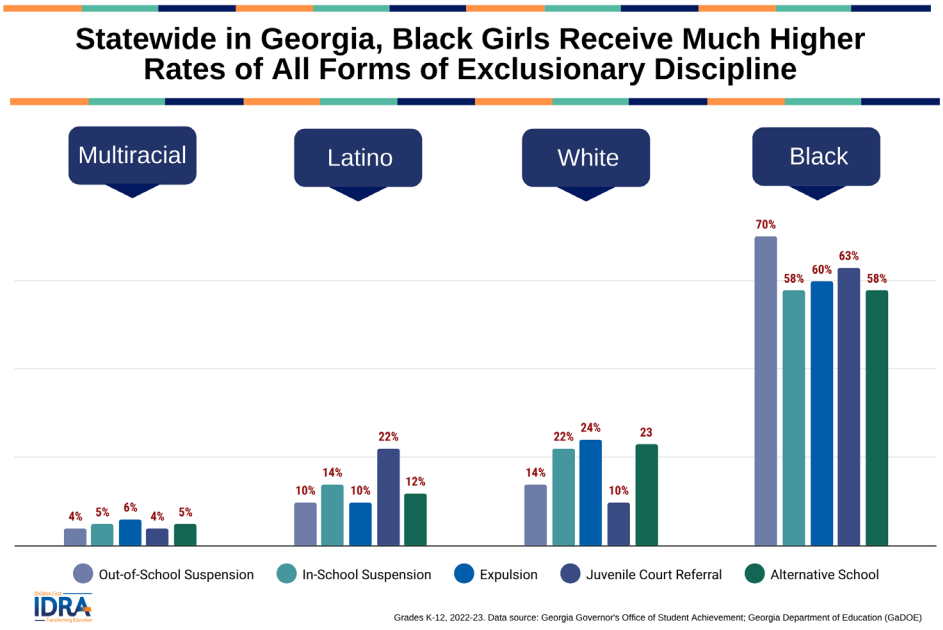

The Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA) is a non-profit organization with a 501(c)(3) tax exempt status. Our mission is to achieve equal educational opportunity for every child through strong public schools that prepare all students to access and succeed in college.

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Publication offices:
5815 Callaghan Road, Suite 101
San Antonio, Texas 78228
210-444-1710; Fax 210-444-1714
www.idra.org | www.idraseen.org | contact@idra.org

Celina Moreno, J.D.
IDRA President and CEO
Newsletter Executive Editor

Christie L. Goodman, APR, Fellow PRSA
IDRA Director of Communications
Newsletter Production Editor

Students Claim Their Place in Education Policy

IDRA Civic Changemakers Equips Students to Speak Their Truth to Power

By Mikayla Arciaga, M.A.Ed.

Students can experience education policy not as an abstract set of decisions, but as forces that shape their classrooms, their opportunities and their daily lives. The new IDRA Civic Changemakers program grew out of our recognition of the unique value young people bring to civic spaces.

IDRA Civic Changemakers is a civic leadership initiative for high school students. Students meet after school to learn about education policy and advocacy. They then have a small-group shadowing experience at the Georgia State Capitol, where students apply their policy skills in a real-world context.

Participating students have had little prior exposure to the state capitol or to reading legislation. Yet they are uniquely well-positioned to speak to the real impacts of education policy and identify gaps between intent and outcome.

After the 2025 Georgia session, we sat down with two of our Civic Changemakers students to chat about their experience. Their stories illustrate how young people with different backgrounds, interests and starting points can engage with civic processes in ways that are deeply personal and profoundly impactful.

"Every student's voice is essential."

John, a junior at the time of his interview, entered IDRA Civic Changemakers as an outspoken student who nevertheless questioned whether student voices truly mattered in systems that felt distant and immovable.

John explained that IDRA Civic Changemakers helped dismantle the idea that civic participation is out of reach. Instead, it revealed policy engagement as something tangible and learnable, something students can step into with the right support.

John said the program is about "breaking past a lot of the myths about how participation is complicated or too bureaucratic to get involved in" and showing students that "it actually is relatively simple to be involved directly in policy change instead of it just being this intimidating process."

Beyond skill-building, John emphasized the emotional stakes of being included in civic spaces. In a climate where many students feel isolated, unheard or overwhelmed by the issues affecting their schools and communities, IDRA Civic Changemakers offered something foundational: a sense of belonging.

"The most powerful thing I learned," John shared, "is that there is always a safe space for me… that there are always people who do support me… and that regardless of how bleak certain things can seem… there is a place where you can feel represented and have belonging." That sense of safety and recognition, he explained, made it possible to engage difficult topics without feeling alone.

This shift also reshaped how John understands student power. Before participating in the program, he described feeling as though harmful conditions in schools were simply things that happened and that they were beyond students' control.

Afterward, student power took on a collective meaning for him: "It's not only that every student has a voice, but that every student's voice is essential… It's not just me speaking for myself, it's being able to influence people around me so that we can be heard as a collective."

John's experience underscores a core truth at the heart of IDRA Civic Changemakers: when

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> *"In the next year and during college, I really want to make my main priorities being involved in advocacy, talking with the legislators, making sure other students know what's going on… because a lot of the issues are very, very personal to me."*
>
> *– John, IDRA Civic Changemakers student*

(Students Claim Their Place in Education Policy, continued from Page 3)

students are treated as legitimate participants in civic life, when their lived experiences are recognized as expertise, they begin to see themselves not as passive recipients of policy, but as active contributors to shaping it.

This understanding is foundational to sustained civic engagement and to building systems that are responsive to the people most affected by them.

"We're the ones being affected."

Elisabeth ("Liz") participated in testimony and legislative hearings and described how she learned to navigate civic spaces that are often crowded, fast-moving and intimidating.

When she testified in a hearing at the Georgia capitol, she described feeling nervous despite careful preparation, unsure of how her words would be received. What stood out most afterward was the affirmation she felt.

"Because I was a student," she reflected, "that was an important perspective that was valued during that hearing."

Rather than being symbolic, her presence carried weight, reinforcing the idea that students belong in decision-making spaces not as observers, but as contributors.

"We're the ones being affected," she said. "It all comes back to us and what our education looks like, so our values and input should be appreciated and talked about more."

At the same time, Liz was clear that meaningful participation requires more than access alone. She emphasized the importance of concrete skills: preparing questions, speaking confidently with legislators, and recognizing when conversations are redirected or deflected. Learning how to navigate those dynamics, she explained, helped her understand advocacy not as a performance, but as a strategic practice. These skills, she noted, are rarely taught in classrooms, yet they are critical for students who want to engage beyond surface-level civics.

For Liz, IDRA Civic Changemakers clarified not only why student voice matters, but how it can be exercised effectively. Through direct engagement, preparation and reflection, she came to see advocacy as something students can do effectively.

Her experience illustrates how empowering young people is not simply about inviting them into civic spaces; it is about equipping them to lead.

Looking Forward

When we launched the program in 2024, our primary goal was to introduce students to what state-level advocacy looks like in practice. The experience was informal and largely centered on the real-time policy work underway during students' visits to the state capitol.

Even with minimal preparation, students engaged in thoughtful, transformative conversations with legislators about policies that had direct and significant implications for their lives.

In response to student feedback, we grew the program in 2025 into a more structured, skill-based curriculum focused on the concepts and competencies students said mattered most to them. This shift brought Civic Changemakers directly to schools, expanding access to civic learning while maintaining opportunities for students to engage with policymakers.

Together, John's and Liz's reflections make clear that IDRA Civic Changemakers is about honoring students' lived experiences by providing access, building skills and creating spaces where student perspectives are taken seriously.

> *"I feel like my voice matters because I'm a part of a lot of minority groups, and those are underrepresented. And I feel like sometimes people don't know that you can go to these legislators and just talk to them like a person and maybe find out their values and try to change stuff about these bills."*
>
> *– Liz, IDRA Civic Changemakers student*

When young people are trusted as experts of their own experiences and equipped to engage with systems of power, they do more than participate. They reshape what civic engagement looks like. IDRA Civic Changemakers affirms a simple but often overlooked truth: the students most affected by education policy are not just impacted by it; they are essential to getting it right.

A new cohort of students is participating in IDRA Civic Changemakers for the 2026 Georgia legislative session, and we hope to secure funding to support the program in Georgia and bring it to Texas in the future.

Learn more and see videos of students testifying and their reflection interviews at https://www.idra.org/services/idra-civic-changemakers.

Mikayla Arciaga, M.A.Ed., is IDRA's Georgia advocacy director and coordinates the IDRA Education Policy Fellows and the IDRA Civic Changemakers programs (mikayla.arciaga@idra.org).

(Discipline Disparities Push Black Girls Out of Classrooms, continued from Page 2)

We are excited about the release of our research, shedding light on the school discipline experiences of Black girls in Atlanta-area schools. It is our hope that this report and its findings can inspire students, parents, community advocates and policymakers to create school communities that support Black girls in Atlanta and far beyond.

See the team's report: "Listen to Us! A Legal Youth Participatory Action Research Project on the Discipline Experiences of Black Girls in Atlanta Area Schools" (https://idra.news/ListenToUs).

Citations available online.

Makiah Lyons, J.D., is a staff attorney at IDRA (makiah.lyons@idra.org).

Students Weigh the Promise and Challenges of Big College Readiness Initiative

By Hector Bojorquez

Seven high school students from seven school districts came together to evaluate elements of Future Ready Bexar County, an initiative to significantly increase the number of students in the San Antonio area who are prepared for, apply to and successfully enroll in college.

Future Ready Bexar County is coordinated by UP Partnership and involves school districts, youth development organizations, including IDRA, local colleges, civic entities and corporate partners. UP Partnership contracted with IDRA to facilitate a group of students to conduct their youth-led evaluation.

Their role is not symbolic. These students have spent months studying Future Ready Bexar County goals, institutional agreements, school district commitments, and action plans. They paid close attention to how districts are approaching the three pillars of the initiative: healing, college access and student voice.

During the summer of 2025, the students met weekly to study their school districts' efforts. IDRA trained them in evaluation methods as the students created sophisticated surveys. These students were not asked to promote the school districts' work. They were asked to examine it and reflect honestly on what they observed. They are now collecting data that will be shared with Future Ready Bexar County partners once the students analyze and write up their results.

In late 2025, I asked them to pause and reflect on their work to date by responding to three questions about their dreams for after graduation, what they understood about the Future Ready Bexar County initiative and their biggest concerns moving forward. (Note: Their names are not shared here for confidentiality.)

When asked about their post-high-school dreams, the students' responses made something immediately clear: students already understand what opportunity looks like, and they want it to be shared.

Their aspirations include college degrees, military service, entrepreneurship and stable careers that provide both financial security and personal fulfillment. One student described their hope as having the opportunity "to not just succeed but excel" and wanting the same for their peers.

The students emphasized that postsecondary success should not be narrowly defined but should include multiple pathways that enable young people to pursue futures aligned with their interests and strengths.

As students examined the work within Future Ready Bexar County, they demonstrated a strong understanding of its key goal: increasing postsecondary enrollment of high school graduates in degree or credential programs from 52% in 2022 to 70% by 2030. They recognize that the 70% enrollment goal requires building systems that prepare students academically, socially and emotionally for life after high school.

Students discussed the role of school district action plans and their alignment around the three Future Ready Bexar County pillars.

They described *healing* as foundational, not supplemental. Students connected mental health supports and developmental relationships directly to college readiness. They noted that when schools prioritize student well-being, students are better positioned to think about college and long-term goals.

They framed *access* as equitable exposure to college and career opportunities, including advising, early college coursework and partnerships with colleges. Several students referenced experiences, such as campus visits and interactions with college representatives, as important

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Students viewed leadership opportunities and student representation as essential to ensuring that policies and programs reflect the realities of student experiences rather than assumptions made about them.

How Schools Should Support Children Impacted by ICE Raids

When U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) conducts raids in a community, students are deeply affected. Even the threat of a raid or news of one in another part of the country can have painful lasting effects. These 10 strategies help educators serving students affected by ICE raids.

1. Provide trauma-informed care

Provide trauma-informed care and services for students who experience or may experience trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Ensure educators and staff are appropriately trained to recognize and respond to students' needs.

2. Provide counseling support

Have counselors, social workers and other professionals available to assist students, families, educators and staff. These professionals can respond directly to individual needs and can help to create a safe and positive school climate for everyone in a campus community.

3 Provide waiting space

Create a safe space, like a school gym or nurse's office, where students and families can wait if a parent is detained so that students do not, for example, ride the bus home where no parent will be there to supervise them.

4 Identify bilingual liaison

Identify a bilingual parent liaison or family liaison to support students and families.

5. Connect with community

Connect with local community-based organizations that have expertise and resources. Distribute and post IDRA's alert on immigrant student rights "Welcoming Immigrant Students in School" (https://idra.news/igfWelcome).

6. Obstruct the school-to-deportation pipeline

Obstruct – do not facilitate – the school-to-deportation pipeline. Ensure police officers are not present on campuses unnecessarily as this can re-traumatize students and discourage families from being on campus. Do not involve law enforcement needlessly or enforce criminal penalties against students that might trigger ICE intervention. Review codes of conduct to ensure they do not contain penalties or discipline procedures related to immigration status or English proficiency.

7. Affirm safe spaces

Affirmatively issue and post a statement that makes it clear that the district is a safe space for families. Many school districts have reaffirmed their policies to protect students' rights in light of uncertainty regarding federal immigration enforcement activities in their schools. Some districts have issued statements affirming the districts' mission to ensure all students have a safe and positive learning environment and outlining guidance to school personnel on how to, for example, respond to requests from ICE agents for data or access to their campus.

8. Help students who become homeless

Have the district's "McKinney-Vento" liaison ensure that any students who become homeless as a result of a raid are given supports and legal protections afforded by the federal *McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act*.

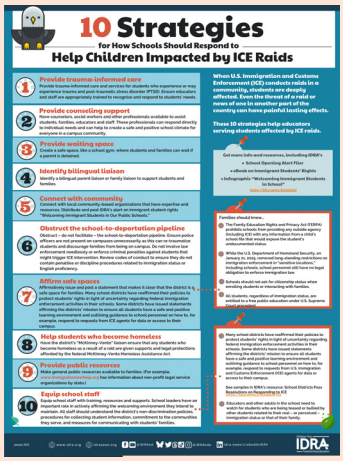
9. Provide public resources

Make general public resources available to families. (For example, www.immigrationlawhelp.org has information about non-profit legal service organizations by state.)

10. Equip school staff

Equip school staff with training, resources and supports. School leaders have an important role in actively affirming the welcoming environment they intend to maintain. All staff should understand the district's non-discrimination policies, procedures for collecting student information, commitment to the communities they serve, and measures for communicating with students' families.

Educators and other adults in the school need to watch for students who are being teased or bullied by other students related to their real – or perceived – citizenship or immigration status or that of their family.



This text is from IDRA's infographic, "10 Strategies for How Schools Should Support Children Impacted by ICE Raids."

Get the infographic to share. Available in English, Spanish, Mandarin, Korean and Vietnamese.
https://idra.news/igHelp

Schools should reassure families about the following…

- The *Family Education Rights and Privacy Act* (FERPA) prohibits schools from providing any outside agency (including ICE) with any information from a child's school file that would expose the student's undocumented status.
- While the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, on January 21, 2025, removed long-standing restrictions on immigration enforcement in "sensitive locations," including schools, school personnel still have no legal obligation to enforce immigration law.
- Schools should not ask for citizenship or immigration status when enrolling students or interacting with families.
- All students, regardless of immigration status, are entitled to a free public education under the U.S. Constitution precedent.

Get more resources, including the Texas K-12 Educators' Toolkit and sample school district resolutions at https://www.idra.org/education_policy/immigrant-children-education.

Federal Civil Rights Protections for Students are Unraveling

Major News Outlets Cite IDRA Experts and Families as Racism Complaints Remain Unresolved

Once a key tool for accountability, the Office for Civil Rights now leaves families and students with little avenues for justice. A stream of major news stories features families IDRA has been working with.

With identity-based bullying on the rise in our schools, one in four students experiences bullying related to their race, national origin, religion, disability, gender or sexual orientation (Duggins-Clay & Lyons, 2025).

This has been fueled in part by misinformation spread as a result of recent efforts to attack and undermine diversity, equity and inclusion efforts in education.

When schools struggle to respond appropriately or even exacerbate the problem, the Office for Civil Rights has the responsibility to protect students. But the massive cuts at the U.S. Department of Education and its Office for Civil Rights in 2025 have stymied its role.

As reported in The Washington Post and Hechinger Report, IDRA Chief Legal Analyst Paige Duggins-Clay, J.D., said: "In many of our communities where people feel isolated and like they didn't have anyone to turn to, OCR mattered and gave people a sense of hope. And it matters that [the Administration] essentially destroyed it." (Links to the news stories referenced here are available here: https://idra.news/OCRstories.)

See stories:

- "Epithets and accusations: Probes into racism in schools stall under Trump," by Meredith Kolodner, The Washington Post, December 19, 2025
- "Probes into racism in schools stall under Trump," by Meredith Kolodner, Hechinger Report, December 19, 2025 (A version also ran in other outlets, including the Texas Tribune on December 23)

She also informed ProPublica reporters: "The message that it sends is that the people impacted by racial discrimination and harassment don't matter."

See story:

- "Monkey Sounds, 'White Power' and the N-Word: Racial Harassment Against Black Students Ignored Under Trump," by Jennifer Smith Richards, Megan O'Matz and Jodi S. Cohen, ProPublica, December 19, 2025

ProPublica's investigation found: "More than 1,000 racial harassment investigations initiated in previous administrations still are open. Most of those complaints involve harassment of Black students."

Also see related story:

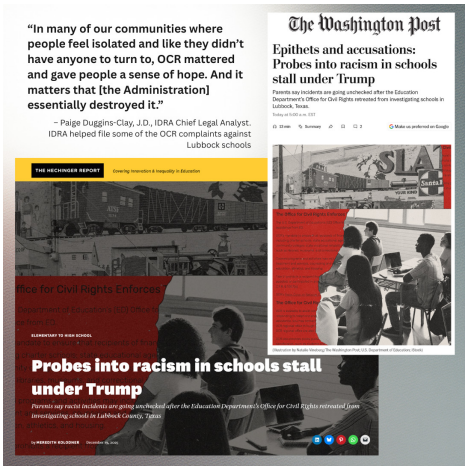
- "Black Students Face Racism in Texas Schools With No Support," by Joe Jurado, News One, December 19, 2025

The closure of regional OCR offices has further stalled progress and left complaints without investigation or closure. This dismantles their capacity and strips families of recourse. Without federal follow-through, identity-based bullying and discrimination persist without consequence in schools, reinforcing harmful environments for Black students.

See IDRA's issue brief, *Bullying and Harassment in Texas Schools Policy Recommendations – IDRA Issue Brief* (https://idra.news/IBTxBullyingW).

School Districts Can Take Steps to Protect Students

IDRA works with families to advocate for their children and help to stop identity-based bullying in their school community. To learn more or seek assistance advocating for other school communities to adopt policies to address identity-based bullying, visit the IDRA SEEN Model Policy Shop (https://idraseen.org/model-policy-shop).



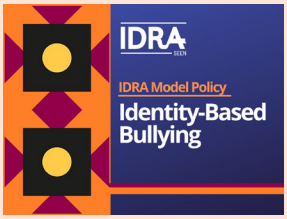
Additional resources, including a comprehensive literature review and strategies for schools, educators, and students to identify, address, and prevent bullying and harassment, are available in IDRA's *Interrupting Bullying and Harassment in Schools – Online Technical Assistance Toolkit* (https://idra.news/IBTxBullyingW).

IDRA is available for any questions or further resources that we can provide. For more information, contact Paige Duggins-Clay, J.D., at paige.duggins-clay@idra.org.

Resource

Duggins-Clay, P., & Lyons, M. (April 2025). *Bullying and Harassment in Texas Schools – Policy Recommendations – IDRA Issue Brief.* IDRA.

See IDRA's model policy on identity-based bullying. The package includes a policy brief, model policy for state-level legislation, school board policy and an advocacy guide.



https://idraseen.org/identity-based-bullying

Children First
IDRA
Transforming Education
Intercultural Development Research Association
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San Antonio, Texas 78228

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San Antonio, TX 78228

Focus: Student Leadership in Education

(Students Weigh the Promise and Challenges of Big College Readiness Initiatives, continued from Page 5)

moments that help demystify college and make it feel attainable.

Student voice emerged as the pillar students felt most strongly about. For them, voice means more than representation on paper. It means being heard early and taken seriously.

One student stated that students want "their voices to be heard before they are ready to leave high school." Students viewed leadership opportunities and student representation as essential to ensuring that policies and programs reflect the realities of student experiences rather than assumptions made about them.

At the same time, the students raised concerns that deserve careful attention. A central worry was whether school district action plans would genuinely include students in decision making or whether student voice would be acknowledged without meaningful influence.

They also questioned whether district equity commitments will reach those who have historically been pushed aside, including first generation students, students in low-income families, justice involved youth and students with disciplinary histories.

One student reflected that these students are "almost always told that they shouldn't aim high," a message that limits both confidence and opportunity.

The student team also expressed concerns about implementation and sustainability. They recognize that schools are already managing significant demands and that initiatives related to healing, youth engagement and college access require staffing, coordination and long-term investment.

One student cautioned, "Even if staff increased… the scale of need in some schools still heavily outweighs it."

Others raised questions about whether resources will be equitably distributed across communities and whether differences in school district funding could shape who ultimately benefits from Future Ready Bexar County efforts.

What these reflections reveal is a deeper understanding than students are usually given credit for. They understand that improving college outcomes requires systems that match high expectations with real support. They understand that opportunity for all cannot be achieved without addressing the needs of those who have been most marginalized.

Their insights reinforce a central truth: Future Ready Bexar County will succeed if healing, access and voice are treated as interconnected conditions for student success. If the goal is truly to prepare students for what comes next, students themselves must remain at the center of the work as co-creators, shaping the path forward.

Learn more about the Future Ready Bexar County initiative at https://uppartnership.org/future-ready.

Hector Bojorquez is IDRA's director of operations and educational practice (hector.bojorquez@idra.org).