



Focus: High School to College Pathways

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4.3 Million Texas Students Lost Across 40 Years of IDRA’s Attrition Studies

IDRA President & CEO Reflects on Unrealized Potential, Renewed Urgency

by Celina Moreno, J.D.

I remember being shuffled onto squeaky risers with the rest of the roughly 1,000, mostly Latino, freshmen in my high school class for our panoramic class photo. Four years later, I was stunned to learn I was graduating in a class of only 500. Out of 1,000 students, 500 of my classmates were not graduating with the rest of us – an attrition rate of about 50%. A few years later, my high school became low-key infamous when newspapers quoted the *Building a Grad Nation* report that labeled my school as a “dropout factory” (Balfanz et al., 2010).

The 500 lost students from my class are among the over 4.3 million students that Texas public schools have lost in the last four decades – more people than live in Los Angeles. This year marks the 40th year IDRA has tracked Texas high school attrition rates, which are an indicator of a school’s ability to keep high school freshmen enrolled through graduation. The attrition rates for the four years I was in high school (1995-1999) were the highest on record: Texas lost more than half of their Latino students and Black students during that time.

So many students paid the price in lost college opportunities and hampered career options. That lost potential motivated me in college to cover the education beat as a student journalist, study education policy as a graduate student, and pursue a career as an education policy and legal advocate. It is what made me want to lead

IDRA, which has worked for over 50 years to ensure public schools prepare all students to access and succeed in college.

IDRA’s inaugural attrition study, commissioned by the state and led by IDRA’s late President Emerita Dr. María “Cuca” Robledo Montecel, answered three questions (2004).

The first question: *How many students are dropping out?* The answer was over 86,000 students that year. The attrition rate for Latino students was 45%, by far the highest percentage of any racial/ethnic group at the time.

The second question: *Why are students leaving?* Students left for many reasons, but feeling a lack of connection to school was an underlying theme of the study’s findings.

And lastly: *What is it costing Texas?* The answer was: \$17.2 billion over the lifetime of those students in foregone income, lost tax base, increased unemployment costs, increased criminal justice costs, and increased public assistance spending. On the other hand, IDRA found that for every \$1 invested in keeping students in school, \$9 would be returned.

That was 1986. Before that time, no one knew exactly how many students in Texas were leaving school without a high school diploma. IDRA’s study put on paper what families could
(cont. on Page 2)

This year’s findings show a troubling disruption in the progress Texas schools have made to keep students on track to graduate. By not graduating one in five high school students, Texas pushes a fifth of our students away from college.

(4.3 Million Texas Students Lost Across 40 Years of IDRA's Attrition Studies, continued from Page 1)

sense and what businesses complained of when they lamented not having a big enough talent pool from which to hire. Those without a high school diploma have the highest unemployment rates (BLS, 2025a). They are twice as likely to be unemployed (NCES, 2026). And, over a lifetime, they will earn \$200,000 to \$250,000 less than high school graduates and \$1 million less than those with a bachelor's degree (BLS, 2025b; SSA, 2023; CEW, 2011).

When IDRA's attrition study first came out, it ruffled feathers and drew media attention and an onslaught of mail. One school board member claimed to a reporter that the researchers had "manipulated" the attrition rates and, in the same breath, suggested IDRA should have altered the results to avoid embarrassing the district (Cárdenas, 1995).

But policymakers took it seriously and passed Texas House Bill 1010 almost unanimously in 1987. The legislation contained all of IDRA's recommendations to create an official dropout identification, policies for counting and reporting dropout data, requirements for the state agency and school districts, and procedures for interventions at the district level, such as the requirement to have a dropout coordinator. Importantly, the bill came with funding.

For four decades, IDRA has conducted a dropout study every year using the same vanguard methodology that is now used by researchers nationwide. We are the only organization to have consistently examined Texas attrition rates for 40 years.

We knew it would be vital to keep pressure on the state and school leaders. Unfortunately, in the proceeding years, state leaders often seemed more concerned with being embarrassed by the latest dropout data than with

the data itself. TEA even changed procedures to reduce dropout numbers without actually reducing the number of dropouts (Robledo Montecel, 2000).

IDRA did successfully pressure the state to improve its counting procedures to, for example, count as dropouts students who dropped out to earn a GED (Robledo Montecel, 2003). But as the years went by, dropouts in Texas were again systematically under-reported, creating a false sense of security. By minimizing the problem, the state promoted inaction.

There also have been efforts by researchers, educators and policymakers to blame students' characteristics – like race, class or language – for their lack of success. That is unacceptable. It leads to self-destructive results, particularly in a state like Texas where two in three students are poor, half are Latino, and one in four is an emergent bilingual student (TEA, 2025).

Contradicting the deficit framework are schools serving predominantly poor, Latino emergent bilingual students that do provide their students with a quality education. Around the country, educators have identified variables they have control over and pioneered ways to transform schools from places that cannot hold onto their students into places that graduate them.

IDRA's Valued Youth Partnership (VYP), a school-based dropout prevention program, has demonstrated for 40 years how putting young people deemed at risk of dropping out into positions of leadership can completely redirect their trajectory toward graduation and a better future. VYP continues to keep 98% of students in school, expose them to college life and make a visible difference in the lives of over 795,000 children, families and educators.

In 2026, when the world is changing faster than ever before, when we face unrecognizable challenges, and when many future careers have not even been invented yet – especially in STEM fields – students need all the tools they can get. They cannot just rely on a particular trade or skill set.

IDRA has also identified policies linked to higher dropout rates, including exclusionary discipline, in-grade retention, inequitable school funding, lack of support for emergent bilingual students, non-college preparatory curricula, and standardized testing that is high-stakes. At the most fundamental level, students stay in school and perform better when they are supported academically and feel welcome, safe and secure.

In 2026, when the world is changing faster than ever before, when we face unrecognizable challenges, and when many future careers have not even been invented yet – especially in STEM fields – students need all the tools they can get. They cannot just rely on a particular trade or skill set. They must be able to think critically and problem solve. They must have the knowledge and capacity to adapt over and over again in order to thrive and support their families
(cont. on Page 7)

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

Community-based College Access Tools to Bridge Barriers to College

by Chloe Latham Sikes, Ph.D.

College-bound high school students in Texas face new state and federal policy changes in college admissions, academic programs and campus life. New restrictions on race-conscious admissions and diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives have altered college life for thousands of students.

IDRA conducted a two-year study on the impact of these changes on college access opportunities for Texas high school students.

IDRA held roundtables and focus groups with 92 participants, including high school students, college students, K-12 educators and counselors, parents and higher education professionals.

The study posed two research questions: (1) How have recent changes to college diversity policies (*i.e.*, Texas Senate Bill 17 and the U.S. Supreme Court rulings in the *Harvard* and *UNC* cases in 2023) impacted the college access pipeline for Texas high school students from marginalized backgrounds? and (2) How are programs that support marginalized Texas students' college readiness, access and success affected by the changes to these policies?

IDRA used the findings to develop college access toolkits for counselors and families to help students to access college. The findings will be published in a forthcoming report.

To center the communities affected by the policy changes, IDRA employed a community-based research design (Strand et al., 2003). In this way, community members are active participants in identifying research problems and can develop solutions for their local communities.

Research has consistently demonstrated that college access is shaped by early exposure to academic preparation, college planning, and

advising that begins as early as middle school and continues through high school and into college (Feygin et al., 2022; Giani et al., 2023).

For decades, college offices and initiatives on diversity, equity and inclusion offered targeted support to prospective and enrolled students, faculty and staff to address academic inequities and help orient historically marginalized students to college life (Harper et al., 2024; Latham Sikes & Chowdhury, 2026).

This type of targeted support is especially critical for students – including first-generation college-bound students, students with historically marginalized racial backgrounds, and students from low-income households – who may lack access to other college knowledge networks (Carter et al., 2013). For these students, schools often serve as pivotal sites for information about college pathways.

New Resources to Assist High Schools

Study participants overwhelmingly expressed that the policy changes compromised their sense of belonging on Texas college campuses, diminished their access to services for academic, social and health support, and exacerbated challenges to college information and affordability.

IDRA worked with study participants and other stakeholders to develop three community-based toolkits that address major barriers to accessing college information and opportunities. Each toolkit contains easy-to-use, downloadable resources that are available in both English and Spanish. The resources focus on building student-to-student networks, encouraging student leadership to transition to college, and developing parent knowledge-sharing networks about college.

(cont. on Page 4)

Changes in college diversity policies have had an immediate impact on the college access opportunities for historically-marginalized high school students.

(From Higher Ed to High School, continued from Page 3)

Examples of the resources include:

- a guide for a counselor to start a college ambassador program to connect college students who are recent alumni to high school students to expand counselors' capacity;
- a student self-advocacy starter pack of prompts to help students identify their strengths as they work on college applications and speak to college admissions officers; and
- a parent engagement guide with tips for creating a parent or guardian ambassador networks.

This enables families who have navigated the college process already to connect with other families who are new to the process. IDRA launched the toolkits during a webinar that featured three panelists – a high school senior, a college professor, and a high school college counselor – who had reviewed and used the toolkits in their schools.

Conclusion

Changes in college diversity policies have had an immediate impact on the college access opportunities for historically-marginalized high school students. The impact on Texas high school students threatens years-long efforts to bolster college-going rates and opportunities for students who are Black, Latino, first-generation and from households with low incomes.

Importantly, IDRA's study offers an example of how to conduct community-based research on policy impacts by prioritizing students, who are the most impacted by these policy changes.

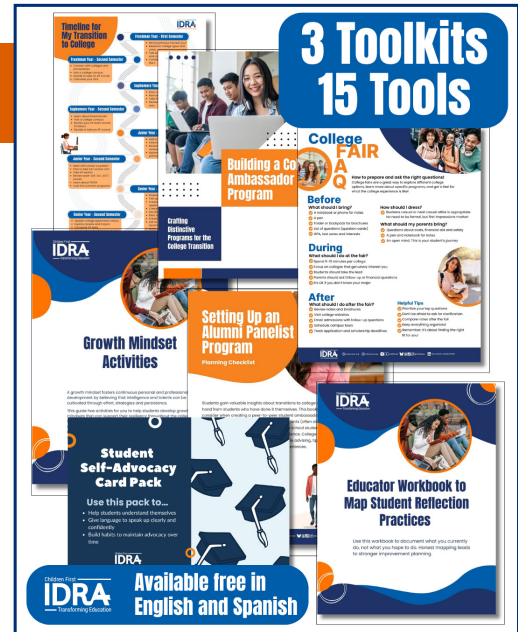
Resources

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Free Online!

IDRA Community-Based College Access – Online Technical Assistance Toolkit

Informed by focus groups and roundtable conversations with students, families and school counselors, our new bilingual toolkits provide practical tools schools can use now to help students transition to college.



See the Toolkits at <https://idra.news/CollegeAccessToolkit>

Watch the launch webinar "Building Support for Student Access to College" at <https://idra.news/CollegeAccessWebinar>

- Latham Sikes, C., & Chowdhury, A. (2026). *Beyond the Bans: How Legal and Policy Changes Limiting Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Practices Compromise Student Opportunity – IDRA Research Brief*. IDRA.
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Chloe Latham Sikes, Ph.D., is IDRA's deputy director of policy (chloe.sikes@idra.org).

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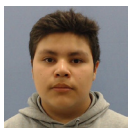
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“I used to not want to go to college, but now I want to go.” Reflections by Students in IDRA Programs Point to Life-Changing Futures

Students in four IDRA in-school programs received awards this month in our annual reflection contest. Through essays, poems, videos and artwork, students shared how their experience changed how they see themselves and their futures in college and career paths.

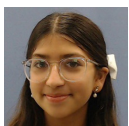
For decades, IDRA has upheld a belief that all students have intelligence, potential and power beyond what schools often expect. But it is not a mere attitude. It requires intentional strategies, like creating purposeful experiences in classrooms, recognizing student strengths and contributions, and maintaining positive relationships between teachers and students.

Designed for students who are in at-risk circumstances, each of these IDRA programs demonstrates what happens when schools use innovative, asset-based practices.



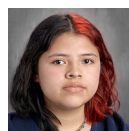
IDRA Youth TechXperts student, Victor Espinoza, said: “[IDRA Youth TechXperts] has helped change the way I think about my future. I used to not want to go to college, but now I want to go for tech so I can get my degree and get a good job.” Victor attends Vela Middle School in Brownsville ISD.

In IDRA Youth TechXperts, middle school students become technical support specialists for their schools. IDRA provides participating schools with dynamic, hands-on, and student-led project-based learning (PBL) modules and year-long technology support experiences in collaboration with the participating districts’ IT departments. The students also gain mentoring relationships with local STEM professionals, and IDRA facilitates workforce development-related paid summer internships.



Youth TechXperts student, Katia Ramírez, said: “IDRA has helped me notice how much I want to

make a difference and be among the few to persuade women into these male-dominated fields.” She attends Vela Middle School in Brownsville ISD.



IDRA VisionCoders student, Danna Rico Granados, said: “VisionCoders helped me believe in myself. I’ve realized that I can do hard things as long as I don’t give up. It’s inspired me to keep exploring technology, and I’m even thinking about a career in coding now.” Danna attends Robert C. Zamora Middle School in South San Antonio ISD.

IDRA VisionCoders is a high-quality, social-emotional learning and asset-based college prep program for students in at-risk situations. The program’s core is a middle school computer science and leadership course where students become software designers who create educational games for elementary students and use guided cutting-edge technology like generative AI. VisionCoders students are also mentored by high school students.



Robert Hernández, who attends Robert C. Zamora Middle School in South San Antonio ISD, said: “Being part of Vision-

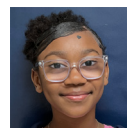
Coders by IDRA made me more aware of how important access to education really is. Not everyone gets the same opportunities, especially when it comes to technology. Some students don’t get exposed to coding or programs like this at all. Being in this program made me realize that what we were learning wasn’t just an extra activity; it was something that could actually open doors for people in the future. In a way, programs like these help narrow the academic achievement gap by giving more students access to skills that are becoming more important every day.”



Adopt a School!

IDRA is seeking funds for 2026-27 to enable more schools and students to participate in these highly-popular programs.

Learn more at www.idra.org or contact IDRA at contact@idra.org.



Fourth grader in the **IDRA Valued Youth Partnership**, Kaileah Evans, said: “Tutoring means a lot to me. When I see her [tutee’s]

face, it lights up and she comes and gives me a big hug. IDRA Valued Youth Partnership means so much to me because... I want to be a teacher because I love helping kids.” Kaileah attends Franz Leadership Academy, Judson ISD.

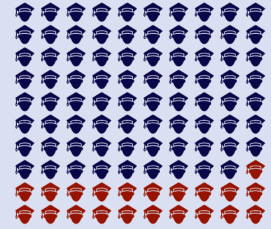
The IDRA Valued Youth Partnership is an award-winning leadership development and college pathways program that works by identifying late elementary and secondary students and enlisting them as tutors of elementary youngsters – their tutees – who are also struggling in school.

Tutors’ grades improve, and they have fewer disciplinary referrals and fewer absences because someone is not only looking forward to them being at school, someone is counting on them. The program has a 40-year track record

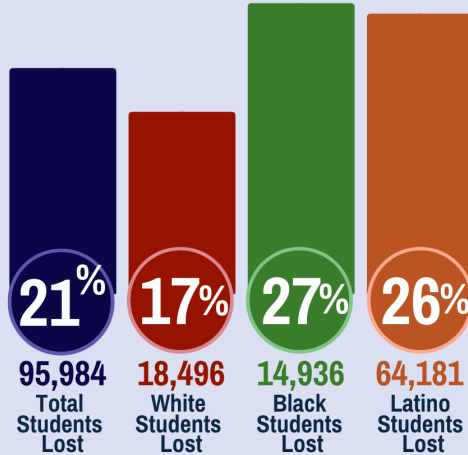
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Texas high schools are losing 1 out of 5 students.

In four decades, Texas has only improved attrition 12 points from 33% to 21%.



Schools are 1.5 times as likely to lose Latino students and Black students as white students before they graduate.



An attrition rate measures how many ninth graders are still in school in 12th grade.

Biggest jump in 40 years

The attrition rate rose 3 points in 2024-25 to 21%, up from a historic low of 18% last year.

Boys were nearly 1.2 times as likely as girls to leave school before graduation.

Texas schools have lost a cumulative total of over

4.3 million students

from public high school enrollment since 1985-86.

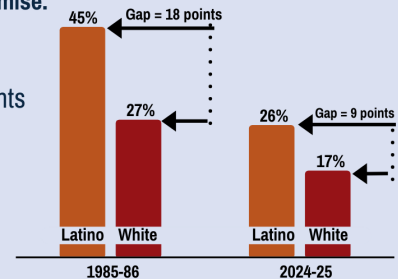
That's like losing a city larger than Los Angeles.



Good News!

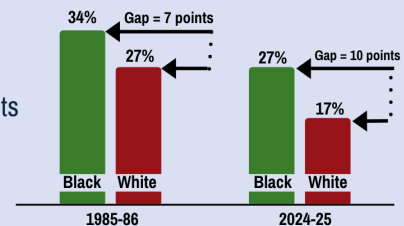
Schools' attention to dropout prevention has been showing promise.

The attrition gap between Latino students and their white peers has been cut in half.



However:

The attrition gap between Black students and their white peers has grown 43%.



Of the 95,984 students lost in 2024-25,

66% were Latino.

even though Latino students comprise **47%** of the student population.

It doesn't have to be this way

The strongest school predictor of dropping out is poor academic performance. Students are far more likely to succeed and graduate:

- ✓ when they can work with highly qualified, committed teachers
- ✓ when they have effective, accessible rigorous curricula
- ✓ when they attend well-funded schools
- ✓ when their parents and communities are engaged in their schools
- ✓ when the students themselves feel engaged

Learn more and see IDRA's 40th anniversary attrition study: <https://idra.news/AttritionStudy>

(4.3 Million Texas Students Lost Across 40 Years of IDRA's Attrition Studies, continued from Page 2)

and communities. Certainly, we must ensure students are not pushed out before they even earn a high school diploma.

IDRA's most recent study found that Texas experienced the largest single-year increase in attrition rates in four decades and lost more than one in five students before graduation (Quintanilla-Muñoz & Sánchez, 2026). This year's findings show a troubling disruption in the progress Texas schools have made to keep students on track to graduate.

By not graduating one in five high school students, Texas pushes a fifth of our students away from college.

While there have been major strides for the attrition rates of Latino students in the last 40 years – the rate dropped from 45% in 1985 to 26% today – we are still losing one in four Latino students. We are still losing one in four Black students. And the gap between Black students and white students has actually *widened* over time.

I think back to those squeaky risers and wonder how different life would be for half of my fellow freshman class if our school had been better-funded, had smaller class sizes, and had enough counselors to advise all students. What if our school had IDRA's VYP program for our classmates most at-risk of dropping out, or had an early college high school program?

I wanted for my high school classmates then what I now want for my own children. IDRA will not stop pushing until all students are prepared for college and can determine their own lives, contribute meaningfully to their communities, and engage critically in the world around them.

Resources

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Six Policies and Practices that Lead to Higher Dropout Rates

In-grade Retention



Students who are held back are **11 times more likely** to drop out. The risk increases to 90% for those retained twice. Students who are retained do not receive long-term benefits and usually perform more poorly than low-achieving peers who were not retained. In Texas, the highest in-grade retention rates, by far, are in high school.

Exclusionary Discipline



Children who have been expelled or suspended are up to **10 times more likely** to drop out of high school. Suspension and other exclusionary discipline practices cause students to lose class time and the instruction they need to succeed academically.

Unfair & Insufficient Funding



In Texas, poor school districts have had attrition rates that were **more than double** those of high-wealth districts. Schools depend on fair funding to serve all of their students each school day. Equitable funding makes a difference.

Testing that is High-Stakes



One test should never be used as a sole criterion for **high-stakes decisions** about students, such as in-grade retention, diploma denials or state takeovers. Testing is a piece of a larger pie to ensure schools are educating all students. It should guide instruction, inform school improvement and identify student support needs.

Watered-Down, Non-College Prep Curricula



Students whose parents did not attend college are themselves **three to six times more likely** to enroll in college if they have taken rigorous, higher-level math courses in high school. Support and expectations of students' abilities to succeed are vital to their education.

Low Funding & Insufficient Support for English Learners



English learner students are **among the most likely** to drop out and be unprepared for college. They are the fastest-growing segment of students, but they are one of the lowest academically performing. The achievement gap widens as students progress through school. Bilingual education is significantly underfunded and consistently has a shortage of fully certified teachers.

Learn more: <https://idra.news/6Policies>

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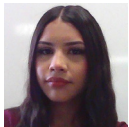
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Celina Moreno, J.D., is President & CEO of IDRA (contact@idra.org).

Focus: High School to College Pathways

(“I used to not want to go to college, but now I want to go,” continued from Page 5)

of success, keeping 98% of tutors in school. Community First supports the program in Judson ISD.



Eighth grader Carisma Vasquez said: **“Youth Leadership Now** has helped me find my voice...

YLN has taught me to not see obstacles as dead ends but to see them as puzzles to be solved.” Carisma attends East Montana Middle School in Clint ISD in the El Paso area.

IDRA Youth Leadership Now is an in-school program for eighth-grade students that combines three winning strategies: the IDRA Valued Youth Partnership with middle schoolers deemed high-need becoming tutors of elementary students; teacher mentoring to prepare students for high school; and our family leadership model, IDRA Education CAFE™, by engaging families and tutors in youth action research projects for their school community. The teacher mentors also participate in a professional learning community to impact the wider campus.



Reyna Trujillo-Jimenez, who attends Fabens Middle School in Fabens ISD in the El Paso area, said: “I used to think no one no-

ticed me, as if I didn’t have a purpose... Everyone in my class makes me feel so special and cared for. I finally have a purpose for school. These kids mean so much to me.”

Reflection Contest Winners

IDRA VisionCoders

- First Place: Sofia Gover, Robert C. Zamora Middle School, South San Antonio ISD
- Second Place: Danna Rico Granados, Robert C. Zamora Middle School, South San Antonio ISD
- Third Place: Robert Hernández, Robert C. Zamora Middle School, South San Antonio ISD

IDRA Youth TechXperts

- First Place: Diony Ahumada, Faulk Middle School, Brownsville ISD
- Second Place: Katia Ramírez, Vela Middle School, Brownsville ISD
- Third Place: Bryana Martínez García, Vela Middle School, Brownsville ISD

IDRA Youth Leadership Now

- First Place: Emeline Pendleton, Robert C. Zamora Middle School, South San Antonio ISD
- Second Place: Israel Flores, Horizon Middle School, Clint ISD, El Paso area
- Third Place: Reyna Trujillo-Jimenez, Fabens Middle School, Fabens ISD, El Paso area

IDRA Valued Youth Partnership at Franz Leadership Academy, Judson ISD, San Antonio

- First Place: Kaileah Evans
- Second Place: Jorge Marin Deler
- Third Place: Brysin Ricard

**See all winning reflections at:
www.idra.org**