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Focus: College Preparedness

Ready Texas: Gathering Stakeholder Input to Guide Research on New Texas High School Graduation Plans

by Laurie Posner, M.P.A.

On a bright and mild February morning in the Texas state capital, researchers, K-12 educators, policymakers, family and community leaders, higher education faculty, and students gathered with IDRA at the University of Texas at Austin to discuss the future of post-secondary education in Texas and the status of high school curricula under House Bill (HB) 5. At the core of the discussion were several key questions: What does Texas need to do to prepare all students for post-secondary success? Will changes in Texas graduation plan requirements under HB5 impact college and career readiness for high school students? If so, how?

IDRA’s Ready Texas: Stakeholder Convening, made possible through a grant from Greater Texas Foundation and carried out in partnership with the UTeach Program at University of Texas at Austin, afforded an opportunity to hear about and discuss these questions in person with diverse, cross-sector stakeholders.

Education Stakeholders: Will Students be College-Ready?

Through Ready Texas, we learned that education stakeholders share a number of questions about the future of college and career readiness in Texas under House Bill 5. In relation to new high school endorsements and curriculum changes, stakeholders are concerned about student supports (such as counseling and advising), school district capacity (to offer a full range of rigorous path-

ways, including STEM paths, equitably), college and career readiness (whether Texas students and student subgroups will graduate college-ready, without remediation); and data and monitoring (whether adequate systems are in place to assess progress and impact and correct course if needed) (Bahena, 2016).

Stakeholders seek to know whether counselors, families and students have the information they need to navigate new requirements and opportunities; whether or not curriculum tracking is occurring; and what we can learn from challenges and best practices.

Stakeholders emphasize that they want to know whether Texas graduates will have the preparation they need for the college and career dreams to which they aspire. As one Ready Texas stakeholder emphasized, “We need to assure that all endorsement pathways are offered with a level of rigor that will still keep all kids on track for post-secondary education.”

A Different Policy Trajectory

House Bill (HB) 5, passed in 2013, marked one of the most substantial changes in Texas’ approach to high school graduation plans in more than a decade. Since 1997-98, when lawmakers adopted the Recommended High School Program and Distinguished Achievement Plan as core graduation pathways, the state had been moving toward

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“We must make sure that every student has access to high quality teaching and a quality curriculum that prepares them for post-secondary education. The future is in our hands.”

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

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more rigorous high school curricula. In 2007-08, this culminated in Texas' adoption of the "4x4" plan (requiring four credits each in science, social studies, English language arts and math), the plan that most aligned high school course-taking to college readiness, without remediation.

In 2011-12, most high school students were enrolled in Texas "4x4." And, based on multiple measures, the approach was netting positive results. More students were meeting college-ready standards in 2011 than they had in 2006. High school students overall, and minority and low-income subgroups of students, were more likely to meet career readiness standards in mathematics in 2013 than they had been in 2005 (Marder, 2015).

This also lined up with research that shows a clear link between the access, rigor, and intensity of high school coursework and success in college (Robledo Montecel & Goodman, 2010; Adelman, 2006). The association is particularly evident in STEM preparation. The E3 Alliance has found that "43 percent of 2009 ninth graders with Algebra II as their highest level of math were college and career ready compared to 70 percent for pre-calculus, 88 percent for AP statistics, 92 percent and 95 percent for Calculus AB and BC, respectively" (Wiseman, et al., 2015). But in 2013, the Texas Legislative passed HB5, removing the "4x4" requirements and setting up multiple pathways (or "endorsements").

Given the importance of curriculum quality in college access and success, Ready Texas Stakeholders seek to know: "How is student participation in the different endorsements dependent on [student characteristics] and the school that they attend? And how has success and moving toward college and career readiness changed in general as

HB5 provisions have come into effect?" (Marder, 2016).

What is at Stake?

Stakeholders also are concerned that state graduation plan changes might deepen educational disparities at a time when the value of a post-secondary education has multiplied. "The disparity in economic outcomes between college graduates and those with a high school diploma or less formal schooling has never been greater in the modern era" according to the Pew Research Center (2014).

And as the nature of work changes, stakeholders are concerned that to the extent Texas students are underprepared, communities and states miss out on new ideas, know-how, and innovation. "Higher education improves the lives of Texans [to] find cures for life-threatening diseases, develop technologies, enrich us through the arts and new ideas [and to] inspire, educate, and equip our students to be their best" (THECB, 2015).

As Pharr-San Juan-Alamo ISD graduate, Thomas Ray García, recently put it, "Experiencing college... is crucial to growth and development" (IDRA, 2015).

What Research is Already Underway?

Through Ready Texas, IDRA conducted a scan of research already underway on HB5. For example, commissioned by the Texas Education Agency, AIR is conducting the state's HB5 evaluation and has already published findings on early implementation (Mellor, et al., 2015). The E3 Alliance is carrying out statewide research on math course-taking and post-secondary outcomes (Wiseman, et al., 2015). The Texas Grantmakers Advocacy

Consortium is conducting qualitative research. The Ray Marshall Center is studying counseling capacity. The Charles A. Dana Center aims to examine alternative math pathways and student outcomes. The Rio Grande Valley Equal Voice Network is examining the role of families and school-home information. And the Austin Chamber of Commerce is studying course navigation and supports. Combined with stakeholder questions, this information is critical to shaping further research that builds on what is already known (Bahena, 2016; IDRA 2016).

Preliminary HB5 evaluation findings suggest that most Texas school districts are patterning new endorsement offerings on capacity that was in place prior to HB5 (Mellor, et al., 2015). As HB5 was passed without new funding allocation for districts, this raises an important question for equity research: Does pre-existing inter- and intra-district inequity impact course offerings and course-taking patterns under HB5? Is tracking an issue?

One Ready Texas stakeholder stated: "While more pathways are available, including more vocational and CTE courses, there is still a concern regarding tracking of particular students to certain routes. Some schools may be limited in the number of pathways and certifications they can offer because of insufficient faculty and staff to teach such courses [or] funds and facilities."

As another example, while the Equal Voice Network's Community Survey (1,600 families in 30 cities) finds that parents overwhelmingly report not having enough information about HB5 to help their children navigate new pathways, TEA's evaluation finds that most school districts report sharing information directly with families. (cont. on Page 4)

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Beyond the College T-shirt Days – Transition Counseling to Ensure College Success

by Aurelio M. Montemayor, M.Ed.

Editor's Note: The superintendent of Pharr-San Juan-Alamo ISD, Dr. Daniel King, saw that many of the district's students were registering for college, but they weren't actually staying and completing their studies. So seven years ago, he brought in "college transition counselors." I interviewed two of PSJA's counselors: Vera Boda, PSJA college transition lead, and Cynthia Martínez, PSJA college transition specialist. Following is a synopsis of their conversation.

Dr. King wanted to make sure that the school district's responsibilities didn't end when students graduated from high school and that there would be counselors who would follow them throughout their time in college. Transition counselors are both in the district to work with all the high schools and at the college campuses. We work with all seniors from day one. We have five comprehensive high schools and three special purpose campuses. All of them are early college campuses.

Transition counselors are critical because it is so important to work with students one-on-one. We must establish trust and build relationships. We have activities with students that include the parents so they understand that college is possible. It's irrelevant what the home conditions are.

College is life changing. It opens doors and gives new possibilities. It changes everything about opportunities that are offered to the student. It changes the family, siblings and neighbors. The increased earning power affects everyone. Having a more educated population will attract industry to the area. It impacts us in so many ways, we don't have to convince the families in the benefits of a college education.

We've outlined a set of effective counseling practices for a college-going culture:

- Provide academic plans for college readiness early on.

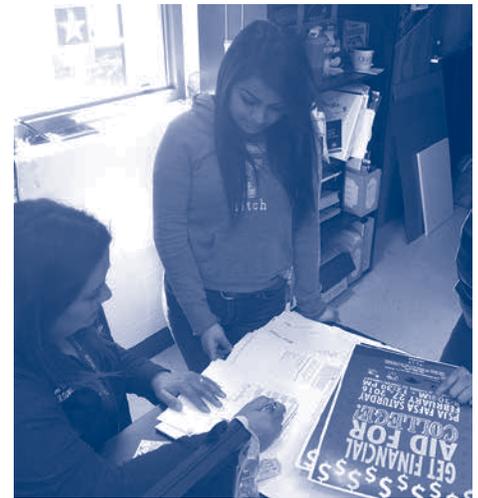
- Provide information necessary for future aspirations.
- Engage and assist students in completing critical steps for college entry.
- Provide academic support.
- Facilitate applying for financial aid.
- Provide social and emotional support for academic success.

Our critical task is having the students trust us and helping them make the best decisions possible. We let them know what they need to do to apply to college. We guide them through all the forms they have to fill out, all the requirements, including the common application that must be filled to apply to the college of their choice.

We also work closely with students and their families to fill out financial aid forms, both the generic and the Texas-specific forms. We have Go Centers at all of our high schools that are run by our students and supervised by financial aid officers. Even in outreach projects, our students are best able to reach other students at their level.

We particularly need to help those who are undocumented students, which this year is about 13 percent of the graduating seniors, with their applications. It is more challenging for undocumented students to receive financial aid because only about 10 percent of the funds are allocated for them. We counsel them to take one or two courses so that they can afford the cost but not give up on college. The irony is that, if the college doesn't give out its financial aid money, it loses it. The more the college gives out, the more it'll get the next year.

The challenges for our students who are first-time college attendees in their families are many. It might be something as simple as receiving an email from the college and not knowing how to respond. Guiding them through the process has been very helpful because, without that support, (cont. on Page 4)



Cynthia Martínez, PSJA college transition specialist, counsels a student on financial aid.



Vera Boda, PSJA college transition lead, counsels students on the college application process.

IDRA South Central Collaborative for Equity

For more information about the IDRA South Central Collaborative for Equity or to request technical assistance, contact us at 210-444-1710 or contact@idra.org.

Additional resources are available online at www.idra.org/South_Central_Collaborative_for_Equity
funded by the U.S. Department of Education

(Beyond the College T-shirt Days – Transition Counseling to Ensure College for Everyone, continued from Page 3)

they would have been stopped right there and dropped their studies. Colleges don't personalize their support for students, so many get lost in the system's requirements. They can easily fall through the cracks.

Typically colleges don't reach out to the students. The students must seek them out. So as transition counselors we are actually on campus. We monitor their data. We're able to get in touch with those who are on borderline with their GPA. We follow them throughout their college career not just their first year.

Some students go off on their own and only touch base with us once in a while. Those usually do well, but others require our ongoing support throughout their college stay. It's the ones who are shy and don't contact us and are having problems who we have to seek out. Having access to the data to identify students who need help is very important. Sometimes the first couple of emails aren't responded to, but when they see we're not going away, they contact us.

Our goal is for all of our high school graduates to have a minimum of 12 college credit hours. It is possible.

We know it's possible to bring back students who left without completing high school because we see it happening in our school district. We offer many options for our students so that if they are unable to complete an associate's degree, they might be able to complete a certificate program, and that is huge.

Our district's "college for all" policies are working very well. The technical certificates some of our graduates are completing carry college credit. In each high school, a significant number of students are graduating with an associate of arts degree across all high schools. The high school

located in what was once considered the poorest part of the district had students scoring very high on their SAT exams. Our goal is for all of our high school graduates to have a minimum of 12 college credit hours. It is possible.

The confidence that is instilled in a student when he or she completes even one college course is huge. It is life-changing.

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College Bound and Determined report
<http://budurl.com/IDRAcbdw>



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What accounts for the mismatch?

The Call for Comprehensive Research

Ready Texas stakeholders emphasize that if we are to prepare students for the future, further research is needed to understand what graduation plan changes under HB5 imply for students, communities and the state. Stakeholders seek to understand the implications of HB5 implementation for the state as a whole, for school districts, and for various student subgroups.

“We expect all our children to be prepared”

Stakeholders also want to assure that families of all backgrounds have a place at the table and can help their children fulfill their aspirations. Ready Texas roundtable leader, Dr. Jesse McNeil said, “Parents care about their children... so we need two-way communication.”

ARISE South Texas president and family leader, Lourdes Flores underscored this point at a recent South Texas convening about HB5 (Bojorquez & Montemayor, 2014): “We expect all our children to be prepared for college. We have not struggled

this hard for our children to have less than that.”

Resources

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Ready Texas: Stakeholder Proceedings Report
<http://budurl.com/IDRArTXi>

Leaders Turn Around Schools – Transformational Equity Focus Makes College Readiness a Priority

by Nilka Avilés, Ed.D.

Turning around challenged schools requires exceptional, effective leadership and practical guidance on what works for successful student outcomes (Theoharis, 2009; de la Torre, et al., 2013). Transformational leaders are agents of change directly responsible for leading, encouraging, empowering and overseeing the school-turnaround efforts regardless of their students' circumstances. They are directly responsible for the preparation of students for college and career. It was this kind of transformational leadership that made a concrete difference for students at one middle school in San Antonio.

Critical Transformation Principles

The literature supports the need for equity-driven transformational leaders particularly for schools with English learners and with a majority of ethnically diverse students. These leaders embody the following six critical transformation principles:

- Creating transformative educational experiences for students and their families;
- Refocusing day-to-day leadership through a lens of educational equity and academic excellence;
- Strategically solving campus educational problems and concerns that block academic success for all;
- Fostering collaborative problem-solving, ongoing evaluations that inform decision-making, and continuous improvement and accountability for equity and excellence for all students;
- Engaging parents and community as partners in the educational process and decision-making; and
- Fostering quality leadership, teaching, learning and engagement for all stakeholders to build student school success and a college-going culture.

Strong leaders not only promote but require targeted and differentiated instruction for a diverse student population. They communicate a clear and strong shared vision and mission of success that permeates the whole school organization and the community it serves. The vision and mission call for bringing out the best in others, and documenting responsibility and commitment to ensure all students are successful and are prepared academically, socially and emotionally.

The vision must persist in the face of adversity, rooted in asset-based principles and an achievement-oriented culture committed to student learning. College requirements must be understood through stakeholder interaction and advocacy. Building a college-going culture involves the school, parents and community defining support systems.

Concurrent with nurturing the intra-school commitment to college preparation, the transformational leader builds relationships with personnel at post-secondary institutions to create linkages between the university, the high school, parents, and students with college knowledge, activities and experiences that bridge the post-secondary transition.

Transformation of a Middle School

As an example, the campus leadership team at a middle school in west San Antonio exuded confidence among the faculty and staff by demonstrating solutions to challenges for the academic success of all learners. They established non-negotiables, such as “failure is not an option.” The administration fostered a high level of respect, trust and collaboration. The school's vision was transformed into reality through rigorous attention to school data resulting in environments conducive to learning.

All students were determined to reach excellence: faculty and parents expected it. The leadership team took a clear and public stand to ensure high
(cont. on Page 6)

The experience of staff at a middle school in west San Antonio demonstrates how transformational leadership made a concrete difference for their students.

(Leaders Turn Around Schools – Transformational Equity Focus Makes College Readiness a Priority, continued from Page 5)

quality teaching and effective learning by establishing accountability measures consistent with continuous improvement.

The team set up a powerful campus improvement and evaluation plan to track their progress. Leaders monitored, assessed, analyzed and took action holding all stakeholders accountable.

They developed a professional development plan with teacher input. All staff collaborated on the data analysis and reflected on instructional practices and strategies necessary to teach, reteach and improve teaching and accelerate learning. Intelligent and pervasive use of data informed teacher practice, improved student performance and ultimately increased teacher job satisfaction.

The school principal applied the SMART process (Haughey, 2014): Goals are Specific; Measurable; Attainable; Relevant and Time-framed to manage the campus. All faculty and staff became advocates in the pursuit of equity and excellence, designed lessons with a purpose, and articulated an urgency to address critical issues that lead to the successful outcomes outlined in the campus improvement plan.

Critical issues included: addressing benchmark results, having the leadership team visible in all classrooms, researching and initiating appropriate interventions, supporting teachers through coaching, and providing resources and removing barriers to learning.

Teachers provided a syllabus to every student each six-week period, wrote the agenda on the board including the lesson objective, class activities and assessment of the lesson. Students who needed additional enrichment were required to attend afterschool activities for meeting learning needs.

Gifted and talented and ESL strategies embedded in lessons addressed varied learning needs. Extra materials and resources needed by the teachers were acquired through fundraising and appeals to central administration.

A study hall for students provided extra time to complete work or receive tutoring. Afterschool detention was transformed from punishment to positive instructional time. Students were provided targeted assignments for reading, writing and math. The goal for success was set at 80 percent mastery, and students were allowed to leave after attaining the goal as an incentive.

Every student received positive messages at school. Administrators and teachers readily shook students' hands while issuing a positive message that also was encouraged among all adults in the school.

A family-oriented approach created the climate and culture. Teaching teams met daily during the planning period and mostly addressed curriculum and academic practices that were proven to be successful. The school increased sections offering Pre-AP courses and instituted the AVID program in which eventually all grades were enrolled. The 21st Century after-school program provided outside school activities, which included cosmetology, art and karate among others.

The school supported self-efficacy, persistence, social and cultural capital through family and peer support, critical elements to the success of all students, especially the underserved.

A balance between curricular and non-curricular activities bonded the school, the students and the broader community. Faculty and staff constantly reflected, and researched the literature to carry out innovative practices leading to academic improvement. Student achievement drove all the decisions and operational practices of the school.

Outcomes of this work included high student achievement and an increase in the number of students prepared for high school and the college track. The school also saw improved teacher morale and retention, an increase in family engagement, an increase in student and teacher attendance, an increase in teacher and student efficacy, and a sense of pride and commitment to reaching excellence. The school received a rating of recognized by the state, missing the exemplary rating by just 0.04 percent.

Transformational leaders engender equity-focused practices using all available assets to turn around low performing schools ensuring all students become college ready.

Resources

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Immigrant Students' Rights to Attend Public Schools

Alert for Registering Students for School

As schools are registering students for the next school year, this alert is a reminder that public schools, by law, must serve all children. The education of undocumented students is guaranteed by the *Plyler vs. Doe* decision, and certain procedures must be followed when registering immigrant children in school to avoid violation of their civil rights.

As a result of the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Plyler vs. Doe*, public schools may not:

- deny admission to a student during initial enrollment or at any other time on the basis of undocumented status;
- treat a student differently to determine residency;
- engage in any practices to “chill” the right of access to school;
- require students or parents to disclose or document their immigration status;
- make inquiries of students or parents intended to expose their undocumented status; or
- require Social Security numbers from all students, as this may expose undocumented status.

Yet a number of schools are posting notices like these pictured (right) and on school websites that indicate Social Security cards and birth certificates are required before a family can register their child for school. Such practices are in direct violation of *Plyler vs. Doe*.

Rather, it should be clear from the beginning that students without a Social Security number should be assigned a number generated by the school. For example, some school districts are including language in their enrollment notices, like:

- The XYZ Independent School District does not prevent students from enrolling if a Social Security card is not presented. The Social Security number is used for identification purposes when reporting student information to the Texas Education Agency. The campus



will assign a computer generated number when a card is not presented.

- Providing a Social Security card or number is optional. The XYZ Independent School District will not refuse enrollment of any student opting not to provide a social security card/number. In lieu, a state identification number will be provided for educational purposes only.
- If the student does not have a Social Security number, XYZ ISD will assign a Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) number. No student may be denied enrollment solely because of failure to meet the documentation requirements. Enrollment is provisional, however, pending receipt of the required documentation and verification of eligibility.

Not only should undocumented students not be discouraged from attending, they are required to attend school under the state's compulsory education laws. And parents should be assured that the *Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act* restricts schools from sharing information with the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency.

At IDRA, we are working to assure educational opportunity for every child. Help us make this goal a reality for every child; we simply cannot afford the alternatives. Denying or discouraging children of undocumented workers access to an education is unconstitutional and against the law.

For more information, see our School Opening Alert (in English and Spanish) online (www.idra.org).



org). And listen to IDRA's Classnotes Podcast episode on “Immigrant Children's Rights to Attend Public Schools.”

For help in ensuring that your programs comply with federal law, contact the Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, Educational Opportunities Section at 877-292-3804 or education@usdoj.gov, or the Department of Education Office for Civil Rights at 800-421-3481 or ocr@ed.gov. You also can contact the OCR enforcement office that serves your area.

For more information or to report incidents of school exclusion or delay, call:

- META (Nationwide) 617- 628-2226
- MALDEF (Los Angeles) 213-629-2512
- MALDEF (San Antonio) 210-224-5476
- NY Immigration Hotline (Nationwide) 212-419-3737
- MALDEF (Chicago) 312-427-0701
- MALDEF (Washington, D.C.) 202-293-2828



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Focus: College Preparedness

Meet Aurelio M. Montemayor, M.Ed. IDRA Senior Education Associate

This year, the IDRA Newsletter is highlighting our staff's varied and diverse talents and backgrounds. Aurelio Manuel Montemayor, M.Ed., is an IDRA senior education associate and lead trainer. He grew up on the border in Laredo, Texas, and began his teaching career in 1964, also on the border in the San Felipe High School as an English teacher in the San Felipe neighborhood of Del Rio. His original plans to become a published writer were sidetracked by his immediate and permanent love of teaching. His pedagogic skills and development were central to his journey through becoming a VISTA trainer, a co-founder of an independent Chicano college and, during the early 1970s, proud to meet with Paolo Freire, who had been an inspiration for his education work in the community. Aurelio came to IDRA in 1975 as a teacher trainer and developed key training-of-trainer tools for educators and others as exemplified in the *WOW! Workshop on Workshops*. As point person for family engagement in education, especially poor, minority, English learners and recent immigrant families, he has led IDRA's Family Leadership in Education model that is currently embodied in "Comunitarios" and the current 13 PTA Comunitario

project, funded by the U.S. Department of Education. In the last 20 years, Aurelio has become a persistent planter of Texas wildflowers in his yard, which has led to somewhat difficult relationship with the code enforcement division of the City of San Antonio. A late advocate of Lady Bird Johnson's campaign in support of the natural growths in Texas, and more probably in line with his decision to be a vegetarian almost 20 years ago ("not from any deep health or ethical reasons but to be a thorn in the side of a very carnivorous environment"), he has shown an aversion for neatly cut lawns and the grasses cultivated in most middle class neighborhoods. In the online story, "The Thorny Path of the Non-compliant Xeriscapist," you can read a fuller description and more passionate expression of his campaign and crusade.

