Community Conversations about Math Learning and Teaching

by Kristin Grayson, M.Ed., and Aurelio M. Montemayor, M.Ed.

We all continue to hear critiques about the state of mathematics learning and teaching:

- “Math Crisis? Students Don’t Get It. If improving science and math education is a national priority, someone apparently forgot to tell the parents and the students” (Associated Press, 2006).
- “In our K-12 we were doing okay at the fourth-grade level, we were doing middle-of-the-road in the eighth grade, and by 12th grade we were hovering near the bottom in international tests related to math,” says Tracy Koon, Intel’s Director of Corporate Affairs (Friedman, 2005).

Schools are under immense pressure to improve student math achievement scores. Many schools and teachers are under the added pressure of district, state and federal scrutiny because of their adequate yearly progress (AYP) status for math under the No Child Left Behind Act.

So, how can parents and students be brought into this conversation?

There are ways that schools can use the support of their parents to make a difference in student math achievement. Parents are a critical piece to the solution. This article describes several specific activities that schools and parents have done together to address this challenge.

School Data Math Conversations

Alan H. Schoenfeld, of the University of California, Berkeley states, “To fail children in mathematics, or to let mathematics fail them, is to close off an important means of access to society’s resources” (2002).

One of the essential features of parent involvement is to have meaningful conversations about the knowledge that schools and parents possess. Schools have data from many sources that they can share with parents, such as past and current math achievement scores on district
benchmark tests, mandated state test results, percentage of students enrolled in higher level math, percentage of students taking advanced placement and college entrance tests, percentage of students repeating required algebra (known as the gate-keeper course for graduation), and how the district or school compares with others.

IDRA has just launched an interactive School Holding Power Portal that the public can access that puts these types of data and other data together in a coherent way for the state of Texas (see article on Page 3).

This sharing of information can be the springboard to the posing of the question: “What does the data mean?” This can generate lots of fruitful conversation.

In several school districts, IDRA trainers have done just this. And parents critically examined the data, pointed out where the numbers of an ethnic group were not adequate to make generalizations, and asked for clarification about the many types of data that were reported (“What test was this?” “What was this test compared to in order to get that ranking?” etc.).

Parent Conversations About Everyday Math

Brainstorming a list of ways that parents use math in everyday life is another way that deep conversations about math can be initiated. In sessions with IDRA, parents listed keeping a budget, calculating needs for food and gas and tracking cell phone minutes. Talking about these specific examples acknowledges that we all use math every day and are capable of doing advanced calculations even without formal education or the language of the school.

This also models how parents can encourage their children to think about mathematical concepts just by having

Community Conversations – continued on Page 6

On Shortchanging Children

“Mathematics education is a civil rights issue,” says civil rights leader Robert Moses, who argues that children who are not quantitatively literate may be doomed to second-class economic status in our increasingly technological society. The data have been clear for decades: poor children and children of color are consistently shortchanged when it comes to mathematics. More broadly, the type of mathematical sophistication championed in recent reform documents, such as the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics’ (2000) Principles and Standards for School Mathematics, can be seen as a core component of intelligent decision making in everyday life, in the workplace and in our democratic society. To fail children in mathematics, or to let mathematics fail them, is to close off an important means of access to society’s resources.

Families and communities can offer extraordinary human capital to school reform. But good information is key to meaningful engagement.

Without accessible data on school success, parents and communities often remain disengaged or rely on solutions driven by supposition and anecdote. Schools are mandated to send accountability report cards to parents. Yet there are few mechanisms for helping parents interpret data on school performance. There are even fewer resources to guide authentic parent-school collaboration and engagement resulting from analysis of the data. This article encourages these joint efforts and introduces a dynamic web-based tool – IDRA’s School Holding Power Portal (www.idra.org/portal) – to support them.

A Gateway to Action

IDRA’s School Holding Power Portal is structured around IDRA’s Quality Schools Action Framework. Grounded in research and years of experience in the field, the framework proposes that because schools (like other public organizations) are complex, multi-faceted entities, they rarely benefit from patchwork, silver bullet or short-term solutions.

Instead, what is needed to strengthen schools is a systems-level approach that engages the commitment and leadership of school, family and community partners around high quality actionable data. Quality schools emerge, the framework suggests, through enlightened policymaking, accountable leadership, equitable funding and an engaged public. Quality schools reflect quality teaching, student engagement, parent and community engagement, and quality curricula. (Robledo Montecel, 2005)

By providing data on these key indicators of quality schooling, IDRA’s School Holding Power Portal helps schools and communities gather information as a backdrop to partnerships that can leverage their distinct roles and shared strengths. In this way, this online portal has been developed around three premises: (1) that public schools can provide an excellent education for every student; (2) that school-community-family partnerships are fundamental to this success; and (3) that quality data about schools is indispensable in identifying areas of strength and need, leading change in the right direction and assessing whether or not changes are making a difference.

Although the portal is intended to help school-community partners work together on complex challenges, it invites partners to begin this work around a shared vision that can be – though profound – quite straightforward and simple. One school district in South Texas described its shared vision this way: that each and every student, bar none, achieves academic success.

Value of Partnerships

It is clear from research, direct experience and common sense that parent and community engagement in public education matters. In their meta-analysis of 51 studies, Henderson and Mapp found a “positive and convincing relationship between family involvement and benefits for students, including improved academic achievement” (2002).

Payne and Kaba also found that recognizing parents and community members as assets to the process of raising student achievement can predict the quality of a school (2001).

IDRA’s Texas Parent Information

Knowledge for Action – continued on Page 4
Parent Involvement Often Stymied

While community and parent involvement is pivotal to school success, significant barriers prevent meaningful engagement. These obstacles often have included language, cultural, and logistical barriers, as well as “deficit-based” interactions that suggest to parents that they are either irrelevant to school reform or the principal cause of student failure.

Parents naturally are not compelled to engage an institution that does not value their contributions or that simply sees them as part of the problem. Where logistical and language barriers are addressed, many schools still struggle to create meaningful relationships among schools, families and communities or to provide access to the kind of information that spurs joint action to strengthen schools.

Dearth of Data for Engagement

Newer, user-friendly education databases, produced by the independent sector, have substantially improved public information about school performance. However, these databases typically resemble a consumer’s guide (“buyer beware”) approach to education as opposed to facilitating collaboration among parents and schools. Much of the school accountability data available tends to rely solely on *No Child Left Behind Act* testing measures to rate schools.

For many parents and communities, this is simply not enough to gauge success beyond school halls. College access and success rates are rarely part of any state agency databases. By design, NCLB does not hold schools accountable for how well they prepare students for higher education. Yet, parents and communities hold college going rates at a higher premium than just scoring well on a state-mandated test that does not guarantee success beyond high school.

Families and communities can offer extraordinary human capital to school reform. But good information is key to meaningful engagement.

A Place for Collaboration and Transparency

IDRA’s School Holding Power Portal is a web-based resource designed to provide school, community, family, student and business leaders in Texas with key information to assess school holding power and student preparation and, where needed, to develop a school-community action plan to improve outcomes.

In conjunction with a school district’s internal use of the School Holding Power Portal and other research tools and products for professional development, school leaders can use the portal as part of an effort to engage families and communities in:

- Analyzing school data, conducting needs assessments and targeting the most effective approaches to reducing dropout rates and increasing college readiness.
- Convening solution-oriented community-school forums that bring various stakeholders together around a shared vision of student success and quality data.
- Designing a plan that is informed by research-based best practices, builds on school-community strengths, is aligned with the current school improvement plan and engages stakeholders in ownership, accountability and success.
- Identifying and implementing
models with proven success and providing tailored professional development and training.

The portal provides easy-to-access data and helps school-community partners explore questions like:

• How well does the school keep and graduate students? The portal provides data on how many students are lost from school enrollment before they graduate (student disappearance rates) and how this compares to Texas as a whole and to other schools.

• How well does the school prepare students to achieve academically? The portal provides data on how students are doing on Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills tests and if they are college-ready.

• How well does the school prepare students for college? The portal provides data on how well a school prepares students for SAT and ACT tests.

• How well does the school perform in getting students into college? The portal provides data on how many high school seniors are attending college and how many are attending two- vs. four-year institutions.

### Getting Started

When embarking on community-school partnerships, schools and educators can use the IDRA School Holding Power Portal to guide them through a three-step process.

1. **Disseminate comprehensible data**—Create opportunities for parents to use the portal in groups to galvanize discussions about strengths and weaknesses. This portal can be used by anyone at any time. It is an easy-to-use tool that is available at no cost. The power of the tool, however, can best be harnessed by groups. Educational institutions can create opportunities for using the portal with parents and community members.

   A lone parent viewing a school’s AYP status, or ACT/SAT scores, or college-going rates may feel discouraged. A group of parents viewing the same scores in a school lab, surrounded by the instructors or administrators are more likely to feel empowered. Why? A by-product of transparency is trust. When a school opens its doors and welcomes parents regardless of poor or mediocre test results or less-than-stellar college preparation rates, the message is clear: “This is our responsibility, and we welcome your help.”

   Having schools create opportunities for data dissemination and discussion does not have to be difficult. School leaders can plan a schedule of gatherings throughout the year with parent teacher organizations, local community-based organizations and faith-based communities. They can use Title I funds designated for parent education and leverage all resources, such as parent volunteers and parent liaisons.

2. **Facilitate community and parent networks**—The portal facilitates information dissemination to informal networks through simple tools. The IDRA portal gives users the ability to navigate to any high school and receive simple graphs about a school’s general performance and capacity to produce satisfactory results for children. Users can go a step further and take notes online about their own ideas, observations and recommendations about the school. These notes can be saved for later use, printed out and shared with other parents or e-mailed directly to other community members.

   Parents are empowered by this simple ability to receive information and disseminate it to all parties concerned with educational institutions. This simple, easy-to-use feature can help bring more parents and community members into a school. The results lead to schools and communities working in partnership.

3. **Set shared goals**—As groups gather and grow, weaknesses and strengths can be identified with input by the community stakeholders that a school serves. Educational data generally have been used in two ways: (1) as diagnostic tools to help institutions inform their decisions, and (2) as a means to increase accountability through public dissemination to communities. Unfortunately, either through inadequate standards or narrow focus, school achievement remains stagnant regardless of data-driven decision making or public awareness.

   The IDRA School Holding Power Portal can serve both of those ends but through purposeful community-school use. The data can help institutions and parents identify problems and seek solutions not previously seen through the narrow lens of single measure standards.

   Simply, when schools and communities look at the data together and have frank discussions, they can set shared goals that address a range of issues from inadequate funding and classroom size to pedagogy and school-home ties.

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**Resources**

Henderson, A.T., and K.L. Mapp. _A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement_ (Austin, Texas: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2002).

Intercultural Development Research

Knowledge for Action – continued on Page 9
Parent and Community Engagement
IDRA’s Quality Schools Action Framework is designed to help identify where the systems change needs to occur for any particular school system. In determining how to make the change happen, one of the three strategies outlined is community capacity building. “Community oversight is a critical missing ingredient in effective and accountable dropout prevention efforts at the local level,” states IDRA executive director, Dr. María “Cuca” Robledo Montecel. “Schools and communities working together have the capacity to craft and carry out effective solutions that will make a difference for students.”

A Snapshot of What IDRA is Doing
Developing leaders – IDRA’s Family Leaders Engaged in Children’s Academic Success (FLEChAS) project is a comprehensive, multicultural, bilingual project that is strengthening school-family partnerships in a San Antonio school district. IDRA is working with schools, families and community-based organizations to promote academic success for students through an array of capacity-building activities, technology and technical assistance, information dissemination and model development. FLEChAS is strengthening the voice and leadership role of families by working with parents, students, school personnel and community-based organizations to recognize, honor and value family, culture and community as assets to teaching and learning from pre-k through higher education.

conducting research – Through IDRA’s highly successful dropout prevention program, the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program, tutors in one south Texas school district recently participated in a college awareness day at the University of Texas at Pan American. The students participated in hands-on activities that explored college options and aspects of college, such as what courses are needed in high school to prepare for college, names of colleges (both local and outside of their community), and cost of college tuition. Students also participated in a college tour. A former tutor from the same school district who is now attending the university spoke to the students and encouraged them to consider college in their future.

Informing policy – The IDRA South Central Collaborative for Equity recently hosted its annual focus group and work session on educational equity. The regional focus group supports parents’ options under the No Child Left Behind Act. This meeting specifically focused on services to magnet and charter schools. One of the charter schools represented at the meeting provides a rich alternative setting for African American and Latino students. Representatives

Community Conversations – continued from Page 2

As the conversations about math scores and daily math activities continue, parents can be encouraged to engage their children in discussions about mathematical concepts. Even if they have never taken a particular math course, parents can ask their children to explain a concept or relate it to something in real life.

Math Survey – Parent Initiated
At a school district in West Texas, a group of parents decided to create a student math survey. They distributed it through the schools’ math departments to all math students. The survey was short, bilingual and included several items that students were to rate on a Likert Scale from 1 to 5.

Statements included: “I usually get good grades in mathematics” and “When I don’t understand a concept, I am encouraged to ask questions in class.”

Open-ended statements also were included on the survey, such as “The most important thing that school can do to help a student learn math is…” and “The biggest block in school for a student to learn math is…”

At an urban school district, after collecting the student feedback from the same survey, parents first predicted how they thought their teenagers had responded to the questions. Then they compared their predictions to the actual survey results.

This generated deep conversation about the comments. (See sample facilitator questions on Page 8.) From the discussion, it was apparent that there were things teachers, families and communities could do to improve math achievement.

There is an equivalent survey that parents can complete about their children’s math education that can then be used for meaningful conversation.

Community Conversations – continued on Page 7
from magnet schools in Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma and Texas participated. New Mexico sent a district representative who oversees the implementation of charter schools for the state.

**Engaging communities** – Through a new project, *Cartitas* (*Valorizando el Compromiso entre la Familia y la Escuela/Valuing the Family-School Connection and Commitment: Letters Home Series*), IDRA is developing early childhood education materials that strengthen family-school connections for early literacy. The goal of *Cartitas* is to address the need for authentic, bilingual materials that value the diverse, cultural and linguistic traditions of families and strengthen the family-school learning partnership. Participants include teachers and families in San Antonio school districts, early childhood Head Start centers, non-profit agencies from the predominantly Latino, Westside San Antonio neighborhoods, and 150 families and teachers participating in the Annual IDRA *La Semana del Niño* Early Childhood Educators Institute.

**What You Can Do**

**Get informed.** The Annie E. Casey Foundation has released a Kids Count working paper, *States Ranked on the Basis of Child Well-Being for Children in Low-Income Families*, that ranks all 50 states in terms of the condition of children living in low-income families. This new information is an important look at a target population that is often the focus of public policies to improve the lives of children. For a copy of the working paper, visit [http://www.aecf.org/upload/PublicationFiles/lowincomewellbeing.pdf](http://www.aecf.org/upload/PublicationFiles/lowincomewellbeing.pdf).

**Get involved.** In San Antonio, a group of parents gathered to learn how to read their school’s data through the newly released Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) report, which provides comprehensive data on each Texas school district and campus. These reports provide vast information on the performance of students in each school district in Texas annually. To view the 2006-07 report, visit [http://www.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/aeis/2007/index.html](http://www.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/aeis/2007/index.html).

**Get results.** The Education Trust in Washington, D.C., has developed an easy guide to collecting and analyzing school data in order to improve student achievement. *Making Data Work: A Parent and Community Guide* is designed to help parents and community members learn how to understand and use data to improve their community schools. Community advocates, school counselors, parents, policymakers and educators can use this guide to focus their efforts to change their schools for the better. To get your guide, visit [http://www2.edtrust.org/edtrust/images/dataguidefinal.pdf](http://www2.edtrust.org/edtrust/images/dataguidefinal.pdf).

**Using What is Learned**

The final step of the parent conversations involved creating a graphic organizer that illustrated the ideas parents had shared about the specific suggestions for improving math achievement. Some of the ideas generated by one school district in Texas included finding ways for more men to serve as role models in the community, placing a suggestion box in each math classroom, and having more conversations related to math in families. A sample of this parent-generated organizer is available online at www.idra.org.

The parent organizer was shared with the math teaching staff at a school departmental meeting, which generated another fruitful conversation.

Having meaningful communication among the three critical groups of parents, students and teachers is one of the beneficial outcomes of parent involvement in math discussions. Other benefits include increasing parent awareness of campus data and accountability issues and awareness of specific things parents can do on a daily basis.

These are all critical components for supporting students and their proficiency and achievement in mathematics.

**Get more online at IDRA Newsletter Plus**

- Math activities for families, students and educators.
- Sample surveys for parents and students.
- Sample parent-generated graphic organizer

*See Page 8 for details*
Resources

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Math Survey – Facilitator Questions
As parents review responses to their survey, facilitators guided the conversation with the questions below in brown.

1. My children have high grades in math. How do you know this? With whom, other than your children, have you had a conversation about your children’s academic achievement in mathematics?

2. Students are encouraged to ask questions. Why is this important information? What are other students’ responses beyond what your own children say?

3. When students don’t understand a concept, different ways are used to teach it. Why is it important that math be taught in a variety of ways? What happens when only one way of teaching is used?

4. The supplementary educational services, such as tutoring, help the students to succeed in their classes. How should tutoring differ from regular class instruction? What is most helpful to students in afterschool tutoring? What are some things about tutoring that are not helpful or motivating to students?

5. The most important thing that school can do to help a student learn math is… Why is it important to ask this question of students? What should we do about the answers students give?

6. The biggest block in school for a student to learn math is… Why is it important to ask this question of students? What should we do about the answers students give?
IDRA has a new address

Please note our new address:
5815 Callaghan Road, Suite 101
San Antonio, Texas 78228

Our phone, e-mails and web site addresses remain the same:
210-444-1710
contact@idra.org
www.idra.org

Highlights of Recent IDRA Activities

In October, IDRA worked with 5,219 teachers, administrators, parents, and higher education personnel through 43 training and technical assistance activities and 71 program sites in 11 states plus Brazil. Topics included:
- Family Dialogues: Understanding U.S. Schools
- From Excellent Parent to Excellent Parent Leader
- Professional Learning Communities: Using Language Implication and Objectives
- Reading Strategies for Teacher Assistants

Participating agencies and school districts included:
- Atlanta Public Schools, Georgia
- Denton Independent School District (ISD), Texas
- Lake Hamilton Schools, Arkansas
- Raymondville ISD, Texas

Activity Snapshot

After being found in violation of the law related to racial harassment, one district faced having $250,000 in federal funds withheld from it. The IDRA South Central Collaborative for Equity provided technical assistance to the district in board policy development and training in prejudice reduction for the board, staff, students and parents. A model was developed and refined for use with other districts experiencing similar problems. The South Central Collaborative for Equity is the equity assistance center funded by the U.S. Department of Education to help schools in Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, New Mexico and Texas to provide equitable school settings that ensure full inclusion and participation by all students and their parents regardless of race, sex or national origin.

For information on IDRA services for your school district or other group, contact IDRA at 210-444-1710.
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There are several ways you can receive news from IDRA. Complete the form below or online at www.idra.org. Send this form to IDRA by fax (210-444-1714) or mail (5815 Callaghan Road, Suite 101, San Antonio, Texas 78228).

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The IDRA Newsletter is published 10 times a year. Each edition focuses on issues in education, striving to provide many different perspectives on the topics covered and to define its significance in the state and national dialogue.

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This podcast series explores issues facing education today and strategies for teachers and administrators to better serve every student.

☐ Yes. All we need is your e-mail address below.

IDRA Graduation for All e-Letter
(English or Spanish)
Graduation for All is a new bilingual (Spanish/English) IDRA e-letter for people who are concerned about the dropout issue and want to take action.

Each month, Graduation for All will bring you up-to-date information that you can use in your school or community to strengthen school holding power – a school’s capacity to hold onto all students until they graduate. This solution-oriented e-letter is designed to help people poised to make a difference around the country to get informed, get connected and get results that turn the tide on high school attrition.

☐ Yes. All we need is your e-mail address below.
Please select: ☐ English version ☐ Spanish version
☐ I am a parent of a school-age child in Texas

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The IDRA Newsletter is published 10 times a year. Each edition focuses on issues in education, striving to provide many different perspectives on the topics covered and to define its significance in the state and national dialogue.

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15th Annual IDRA
La Semana del Niño
Early Childhood Educators Institute™
February 18-21, 2008 • San Antonio, Texas • Embassy Suites – International Airport

Designed for early childhood educators, administrators, parents and parent educators and liaisons to inspire children’s creativity and inquiry in science and mathematics. The Annual IDRA La Semana del Niño Early Childhood Educators Institute offers a valuable series of information-packed sessions by excellent presenters known for their expert knowledge and experience working with English language learners. Furthermore, these sessions are customized to value and respond appropriately to the linguistic and cultural assets of a diverse student population.

You will…
♦ Learn about federal and state regulations that govern effective early childhood education programs.
♦ Learn how to create dynamic learning environments that promote inquiry and literacy.
♦ Examine the importance of early literacy, mathematics and science for English language learners.
♦ Explore research-based effective practices in early childhood education.
♦ Visit effective bilingual preschool programs in San Antonio.

Early Bird Registration Fee – Before January 18, 2008
$75 Pre-conference Institute, February 18, 2008
$175 Three-day Institute, February 19-21, 2008

Registration Fee – After January 18, 2008
$100 Pre-conference Institute, February 18, 2008
$200 Three-day Institute, February 19-21, 2008

Hotel Accommodation
The institute will be held at the Embassy Suites – International Airport (7750 Briaridge) in San Antonio. The hotel is offering a special rate of $129 per night for a single and $139 per night for a double room (plus state and local taxes), based on availability. The hotel reservation deadline for the reduced rate is January 17, 2008. Call 1-800-362-2779 to make reservations. Be sure to reference the IDRA Early Childhood Institute in order to qualify for the special rate.

Pre-Conference Institute
Monday, February 18, 2008
This special pre-conference institute is a trainer of trainers session for early childhood trainers, lead early childhood teachers and program directors. The session will be built on IDRA’s unique training of trainers model, WOW (Workshop on Workshops). The model uses research about adult learners and defines the trainer’s role based on those assumptions. It includes principles of training, a process for planning a workshop including assessment needs, setting objectives, designing activities and structuring the workshop as a whole, and workshop evaluation. This pre-conference institute is designed to give you an extensive eight-hour training session in the skills to train others to build the foundation for preschool literacy.

Registration details are online at www.idra.org. Eight hours of CEU credit is available.

For more information visit www.idra.org or call Carol Chavez at 210-444-1710
This podcast series for teachers and administrators explores issues facing U.S. education today and strategies to better serve every student.

Online Now

**Episode 26: “Dropout Prevention for Students with Special Needs”** IDRA Classnotes Podcast – Josie Danini Cortez, M.A., and Lee Ramos talk about the impact of a pilot project that adapted the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program to serve students with special needs.


**Episode 24: “Coaching and Mentoring New Teachers”** IDRA Classnotes Podcast – Dr. Linda Cantu and Dr. Adela Solís, developers of IDRA’s coaching and mentoring model, discuss how coaching and mentoring programs can give new teachers the peer support and trusted advice they need to succeed from day one.

**Episode 23: “The Watch on Racism Cannot Stop”** IDRA Classnotes Podcast – Dr. Shirley Nash Weber, former chair of the Department of Africana Studies and Professor of Africana Studies at San Diego State University, presents a keynote on the challenge African American women face in balancing gender and equity.

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