



ARISE South Tower PTA Comunitario3
 Benefits of Parent and Community Engagement.....5
 IDRA Rejects Appeals Court Conclusions7

Focus: Parent and Community Engagement

Principles of Family Leadership in Education – Putting Principles into Action

by Rogelio López del Bosque, Ed.D.

Since 1986, Texas schools have lost more than 2.9 million students. Dropout rates are growing, yet the state continues to water down school accountability. The new graduation plan guidelines for next year will sort students into graduation tracks, some of which will not prepare them for college. Parents and communities need to know about the new tracking system and how it may affect their children. We know that parents have high expectations for college and always want the best for their children, so this is one of the many important reasons we need them involved and engaged.

Within IDRA’s Quality Schools Action Framework (Robledo Montecel, 2005), parent and community engagement is a critical indicator for student success. I have observed in many schools that parent involvement is somewhat limited to PTO and PTA. Below are some ideas for successful parent and community engagement, based on IDRA’s principles of family leadership in education (Montemayor, 2007) and my experience as a former principal.

Principle 1: Families can be their children’s strongest advocates.

Parents will become the child’s strongest advocate when they are allowed to do so. But many feel inadequate because they do not know the system. Others fear retaliation against their child.

What Works – Building trust between parents and schools is critical. School staff must work together. Nobody works in isolation. When parents see the school staff working as a team to outreach to them, they respond positively. You can create a positive model with a goal of institutionalizing it. Expose staff to the latest research and show how it connects to student achievement through parent advocacy.

Principle 2: Families of different races, ethnicity, language and class are equally valuable.

Parents appreciate a school’s efforts to provide information in their language as well as having someone on staff who is able to communicate with them in that language. Their involvement is essential.

What Works – Create school projects that are content relevant. Students, teachers and parents can be involved from a project’s inception, and parents can take ownership and feel like equal partners. They often bring more parents and others from their community to be a part of the project. These projects validate their input, their culture and language. Showcasing these projects benefits the entire school. Training for staff on deep cultural elements creates better understanding and is important to the teaching and learning process.

(cont. on Page 2)

“Neighborhood public schools belong to their communities. The strength and vitality of any community is, in part, dependent upon the strength of its schools. And the reverse is true.”

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

(Principles of Family Leadership in Education, continued from Page 1)

Principle 3: Families care about their children's education and are to be treated with respect, dignity and value.

Do not assume that parents of "at-risk" students do not care or do not know anything about teaching their children. Many parents cannot be at the school, but they make sure their children are there every day, on time and with homework completed.

What Works – How about giving parents a chance to work with the school? They may not know about or understand programs in school, but this does not mean that they do not care. As you build trust, the front office is key. Do not send parents away without answers to their questions, as you do not know if they walked many blocks, or if they made several bus transfers to get there. Replace anyone in the front office who is not willing to receive parents with respect. Set up a resource center just for parents.

Principle 4: Within families, many individuals play a role in the children's education.

Many different family members play major roles in the lives of children. They know the influence they have on these children, so they too should be part of the engaged team. They should receive support and validation for what they are doing.

What Works – Parents and educators can work together to solve issues in the school. Poll all your parents for specific training topics and provide them through your Title I program.

Principle 5: Family leadership is most powerful at improving education for all children, and their efforts create solutions for the common good.

Family leadership is as powerful as you make it. If you are only working with the PTA/PTO group and raising funds, consider making these parents equal partners in education. With training, they can certainly make major contributions and provide solutions to school issues. We must learn to value their experiences and knowledge that can contribute to the school and its students.

What Works – Include parents in all of your site-based management meetings. Create a community advisory board. Parents and community people can be on the advisory board or participate in some way. Hold these meetings at least twice per year and inform them of your progress and issues needing to be solved. Designate someone on staff to assist parents on how to become volunteers. After clearance from the district, invite parents to assist with field trips and other school events. Parents appreciate being asked to volunteer for school activities. In my experience, parents volunteered to work with after school programs, such as soccer and baseball. (One parent volunteered to help other school families prepare their income tax forms.) Empower parents, recognize and acknowledge their skills and they will become great leaders and advocates for your school.

Principle 6: Families, schools and communities, when drawn together, become a strong, sustainable voice to protect the rights of all children.

Parent involvement and community engagement as per IDRA's Quality Schools Action Framework

is not limited to the parents of the school. Don't leave out other community members who do not have children in your school yet want to get involved because the school is in their community.



What Works – A sincere and true effort by all staff must be made to invite parents and community members. In our school, we were able to provide a variety of evening classes, such as technology, ESL and literacy in the first language. We kept the library open until 7:00 p.m. for everyone in the community. This made computers and the Internet accessible to our students, parents and community.

Implementation of your parent involvement plan must be a true and sincere effort. Start with a committee of students, teachers, parents and others in the community. Maintain an open and standing invitation by keeping the community informed. If we are to move schools forward and assure student success, we must engage and involve all players. When you build this capacity for change and success, along with it come the state and national honors and student success.

Resources

- Montemayor, A. "IDRA's Family Leadership Principles," *IDRA Newsletter* (San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development Research Association, September 2007).
- Robledo Montecel, M. "A Quality Schools Action Framework – Framing Systems Change for Student Success," *IDRA Newsletter* (San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development Research Association, November-December 2005).

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ARISE South Tower PTA Comunitario – A New Model of Parent Engagement

By Aurelio M. Montemayor, M.Ed.

First Anniversary

In the heart of a south Texas *colonia*, a small wood-frame house with a large back room was the setting of recent elections for the second year of a new PTA model. A year before, in March of 2009, some 20 parents gathered to explore forming their own *community-based* official PTA unit. Most were fluent only in Spanish, and all were poor. All of the schools their children attended were either academically challenged or feeders to low-achieving secondary schools.

The Founding of a New PTA

At the initial meeting, the parents shared their reasons for wanting a PTA and compared their opinions with those of the National PTA available in Spanish on the web site. They confirmed that their vision was congruent with that of the national organization.

The group elected officers, decided to meet monthly and agreed to be a parent advisory committee for the Texas IDRA Parent Information and Resource Center (PIRC), whose director is also a PTA *Comunitario* member and an elected member of the national PTA board. In April, the Texas PTA state president officiated at the installation of officers and was the guest of honor at a supper prepared by the parents.

The Ongoing Process

The monthly meetings of this unique organization are housed and nurtured by ARISE, a grassroots organization established by Sister Gerrie Naughton, a recently-deceased Irish nun who came to south Texas in 1986 to support women's leadership in poor neighborhoods.

ARISE now has four independent centers in some of the neediest *colonias* (unincorporated small communities), with staff and volunteers who work in their neighborhoods to better the community and support the emerging leadership. The weekly outreach and home visits use the *promotora* model, a unique method of family involvement.

The Texas IDRA PIRC has been supporting these

centers because they are comprised of low-income families with children in Title I schools and are fervent participants in the training and technical assistance provided to parents and parent educators on their roles and responsibilities under the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act*, currently titled the *No Child Left Behind Act*.

ARISE has been a partner for more than a decade in receiving training and carrying out the IDRA model of family leadership in education. ARISE's development of leadership among the most isolated and poorest of women is congruent with IDRA's idea of parents becoming leaders and effective advocates for excellent public neighborhood schools.

Most of this group's monthly PTA meetings have included participatory workshops on school accountability, public school choice and supplementary educational services. Conducted mostly in Spanish, each meeting has been continued evidence of the interest, passion, eloquence and energy these families have for the education of their children.

The National and State PTA Connection

The national and Texas state-level PTA have been shifting emphasis for several years. While reaching out to communities that have previously not participated in PTA is on the front burner, fundraising is less of a priority. Without diminishing the honor and respect due to the generations of PTA members who invested so much time and effort, the structure and process must be flexible enough to bring new families into the PTA fold. Participation and membership in PTA has been diminishing, but trends are showing that many families will participate if PTA is congruent with their language, culture and interests. What all families have in common is a deep and fervent interest that their children have an excellent education in a safe and hospitable environment.

(cont. on Page 4)



Newly-elected officers of the ARISE South Tower PTA Comunitario (left to right): Delia Nepomuceno, secretary; Emilia Vega, treasurer; Angelica Nava, second vice president; Carmen Vargas, historian; Eva Carranza, president; and Jacinta Serna Secretaria, first vice president.



Installation of first officers in April 2009 (left to right): Jan Wilkerson, Texas PTA state president; Eva Carranza, president; Mari Saavedra, vice president; Gloria Murguía, secretary; Lourdes Flores, vice president.

IDRA Texas PIRC

For more information about the Texas IDRA Parent Information and Resource Center or to request technical assistance, contact us at 210-444-1710 or contact@idra.org.

Additional resources are available online at www.idra.org/Texas_IDRA_PIRC.htm

funded by the U.S. Department of Education to serve the state of Texas

ARISE South Tower PTA Comunitario, continued from Page 3)

The Texas IDRA PIRC Connection

The PIRC's mandate is to work with families whose children are in Title I schools, emphasizing those not showing adequate academic progress. Federal regulations make no mention of volunteerism or fundraising, but rather give particular attention to parent consultation about such issues as campus parent involvement plans, academic report cards, and compacts (annual agreements) that reflect the expectations and responsibilities of parents, teachers and students.

The PTA *Comunitario* is a felicitous marriage of local needs for information about the education of children with the priorities of a federally-funded statewide PIRC that is an integral part of IDRA, an independent organization that since 1973 has been advocating for schools that work for all children.

Challenges

Challenges naturally will continue.

- Parents who are English language learners will continue their development as local PTA officers.
- Community PTAs are a new phenomenon, quite different in process and style to school-based units and will require some work to be accepted by the larger statewide organization.
- ARISE is still testing whether or not it wants to keep supporting the PTA model. It took three years for them to agree to have a PTA. When the president of this unit told her niece she had been elected to the position, she exclaimed in Spanish, "Oh auntie, are you going to be out selling cupcakes?"
- The PIRC support depends on what happens to the federal statues, and no one knows what could change in the coming months and years.
- Public schools will continue to need support for effective parent engagement.

Celebrating Accomplishments

All challenges aside, we can celebrate, this spring of 2010, that a small group of families in south Texas have an official, dues-paying, card-carrying PTA.

- They hold monthly, participatory, predominately Spanish, meetings in their community center. Each meeting has a bilingual agenda, minutes, reports on school visits and projects, including an educational workshop.

- In this first year, this local PTA unit has not had a fundraising event, but members have visited nine of their children's schools – most which do not have a parent organization.
- A team from a middle school – a parent involvement specialist, a vice-principal, a counselor and two parents – attended a PTA *Comunitario* meeting because of the committee's earlier visit to the school.
- Every monthly meeting has had visitors from ARISE centers and from other area community organizations.
- Several other organizations are exploring the establishment of their own community-based PTA.

One new goal is to establish PTAs on their children's campuses, which is not an insignificant venture considering membership and diversity are national PTA strategic plan goals. For the Title I schools serving these families, this is a gift and an opportunity to meet a key aspect of their Title I parent involvement regulations. ARISE has much to teach schools and PTA about respectful, effective engagement of families who happen to be poor, speak Spanish or are recent immigrants.

While all of IDRA's Principles for Family Leadership in Education are clearly in evidence in the ARISE South Tower PTA *Comunitario*, the sixth one seems most obvious: "Families, schools and communities, when drawn together, become a strong, sustainable voice to protect the rights of all children."

Resources

Montemayor, A.M. "The Lens for Viewing the Full Dimensions of Families," *IDRA Newsletter* (San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development Research Association, April 2009).

Montemayor, A.M. "IDRA's Family Leadership Principles," *IDRA Newsletter* (San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development Research Association, September 2007).

Montemayor, A.M. "E-ruption! Bridging Language and Technology – Educational Leadership Across Generations," *IDRA Newsletter* (San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development Research Association, March 2006).

Aurelio M. Montemayor, M.Ed., is an IDRA senior education associate and director of the Texas IDRA Parent Information and Resource Center. He also serves on the national board of PTA. Comments and questions may be directed to him via e-mail at comment@idra.org.

ARISE has much to teach schools and PTA about respectful, effective engagement of families who happen to be poor, speak Spanish or are recent immigrants.

Get More Online at IDRA's Newsletter Plus

- Community action guide
- IDRA Family Leadership Principles handout
- Podcasts on parent and community engagement
- PTA *Comunitario* bilingual minutes
- Links to related research
- Sample chart of valuing and deficit assumptions
- Resources on education English language learners

Visit www.idra.org for more information.



Benefits of Parent and Community Engagement – A Community of Learners Approach

By Rosana G. Rodriguez, Ph.D.

When we as educators recognize that benefits can be accrued by engaging parents and community as partners, we open the door to making our job easier and more transparent, and we enrich the opportunities for children to experience success.

Parent engagement deepens our understanding of the teaching and learning process and can be an exciting, fruitful journey for educators. By seeking connection with families and the communities that surround our schools, we enter into a dynamic community of learners that can enrich our teaching, our sense of meaningfulness and our effectiveness in engaging students in the classroom. Ultimately, parent engagement can positively impact *how* we teach and *who we reach*, far beyond *what* we teach.

Our effectiveness as teachers improves when we are willing to enter into a genuine exploration of the students we serve, seeking to understand their context, unique gifts, individual learning styles and what motivates each one best. This requires entering into the territory of engagement, creating relationships with parents as their children's first teachers.

Parents have critical information about their children's strengths, assets and needs that helps teachers make better informed instructional decisions. When we fail to see the contributions of parents in the educational equation, we shortchange both the quality of our instruction and the academic benefits to be accrued for the child.

Through effective parent and community engagement, teachers tap into the vast knowledge of parents as a child's first teachers to better unleash the learning potential of each child. Likewise, a school system must attend to the process of engaging with parents and strengthen its connections with community, gaining new information on how best to serve their students. Working in partnership with parents and communities, school districts can weave a web of support for all students to graduate college ready.

Ask educators why they entered this profession and most will say they want to improve the lives of their students, to make a difference or to be involved in something meaningful. Many will say they felt a call or vocation to teach. This implies relationships. No one exists in a vacuum in our interconnected world. By entering into relationships with parents and communities, educators broaden their own growth in their profession. Parent engagement can impact a teacher's sense of belonging and satisfaction with the profession, as well as their persistence in teaching.

Some erroneously view parent engagement as "soft," "fuzzy" or "irrelevant" compared to more technical, structured elements of teaching. But this negates the interconnectedness of life and fails to see schools as an integral part of their communities.

Some teachers consider parent engagement in terms of solely fulfilling a mandate. Sadly, we often hear comments that engagement is not important or "we don't make time for that."

Even worse, parents are sometimes treated as guests rather than as *partners* in learning. In some well-intentioned schools, a space is designated where parents can come to meet "if they want to," but no real outreach to parents occurs.

Other school districts may hire parent liaisons to "do that work" instead of focusing on teachers, who may feel ill-prepared or believe parent engagement is beyond their responsibilities. Granted, community liaisons do perform an important role that is vital for schools, but they should not replace teacher-parent interaction around student learning.

Still other schools unwittingly adopt a social service model of parent engagement. These schools provide volunteers to help parents navigate appointments or locate housing or other emergency needs. Again, while these efforts represent steps in the right direction, they cannot
(cont. on Page 6)

Effective engagement begins with the recognition that each member of the partnership – teacher and parent – has a unique perspective to offer that can improve learning.

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 http://www.idra.org/South_Central_Collaborative_for_Equity/

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Benefits of Parent and Community Engagement, continued from Page 5)

take the place of meaningful parent engagement that focuses on planning together for each student's success.

Meaningful engagement is a horizontal activity, not top down. It is built on a shared premise of mutual learning and inter-dependence, creating a community of learners. Fundamentally, it recognizes that there is something to be gained in the home-school relationship that is profoundly important to teaching and learning in support of each child. It is based upon a valuing perspective that focuses on student success.

Effective engagement begins with the recognition that each member of the partnership – teacher and parent – has a unique perspective to offer that can improve learning.

Meaningful engagement is a student-centered relationship, a journey for understanding, growth and change that is focused on how best to support each learner's exploration and discovery in an interconnected world. This requires the skills of listening, conversing and respecting in order to plan together how best to support learning for each child. This kind of interdependence has great potential for sharing knowledge, responsibility and support surrounding each child we teach, ensuring their high school graduation and college success.

In her insightful book, *Leadership and the New Science*, Margaret Wheatley (2006) speaks about the "invisible fabric of our connectedness" and relational dynamics. She says: "In this exquisitely connected world, it's never a question of 'critical mass.' It's always about critical connections."

Wheatley outlines these applications for professionals leading organizations, such as corporations, non-profit organizations, health care systems and schools. Over the last 36 years, IDRA has promoted meaningful parent involvement as a necessary component of effective schools and affirms it in our Quality Schools Action Framework, developed by Dr. María "Cuca" Robledo Montecel, IDRA's president and CEO (2005).

Teacher preparation programs also must prepare teachers for effective parent engagement and reinforce the importance of interacting in partnership with parents and communities.

What will be the "critical curriculum" of our

Community Engagement Series for Educators

by Rosana G. Rodríguez, Ph.D., Juanita C. García, Ph.D., and Abelardo Villarreal, Ph.D.

This series is designed for educators to give ideas for creating a culture of engagement with parents and community as partners to ensure school success for all children. There are seven issues in the series, one for each month of the school year. Each includes a theme for the month, classroom tips, an equity goal for the month, ideas for breaking down barriers, a self assessment tool, ideas for breaking down barriers, a self assessment tool, and an action planning guide and resource suggestions.

Available from IDRA for \$8.00 per set plus shipping.
(No ISBN; 4 Pages per Issue; 7 Issues; 2010)



future world view? We learn in science that even simple cells live within a system. For schools to remain viable, the system must include parents and community as a source of growth and vitality. As educators, we can contribute to the development of a new leadership of networks, preparing our students to participate in our world of interconnectedness by modeling this type of leadership within a school, engaging with parents and communities to discover and apply this wisdom to our teaching.

IDRA has designed a new *Community Engagement Series for Educators* that supports teachers and principals in setting forth their commitment and planning for effective engagement (see box). The seven-part series reflects the Six Goals of Education Equity put forth in IDRA's South Central Collaborative for Equity.

Since relationships are different in each context, there is no one solution for all. However, the superintendent and other school district leaders must set the vision to value parent engagement. IDRA's new resource can help the principal to uphold and execute this commitment, while each teacher applies this to their classroom teaching and local context. Ultimately, what is essential is that we have the courage and foresight to create the shared vision and set forth our commitment for meaningful parent engagement to support all learners, as an equity and excellence issue in education.

Resources

- Lessig, L. *The Future of Ideas: The Fate of the Commons in a Connected World* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002).
- Louv, R. *Mapping the New World of Leadership* (New York: Ford Foundation, 2002).
- Robledo Montecel, M. "A Quality Schools Action Framework – Framing Systems Change for Student Success," *IDRA Newsletter* (San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development Research Association, November-December 2005).
- Rodríguez, R.G., and J.C. García, A. Villarreal. *Community Engagement Series for Educators* (San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development Research Association, 2010).
- Wheatley, M.J. *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World Revised* (San Francisco: Beret-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2006).

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IDRA Rejects Appeals Court Conclusions about Texas' Education of English Language Learner Students

A Statement by Dr. María "Cuca" Robledo Montecel, IDRA President and CEO

San Antonio (March 25, 2010) – This week, the U.S. Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals reversed and remanded the Texas court case regarding the education of English language learners in the state. At the district court level, Judge Justice had earlier ruled that the state was failing in its role to implement and monitor programs for English language learners in Texas. IDRA rejects the conclusions the appellate court reached. We do take note of the court's observation that "LEP student performance is alarming and encourage the district court and the parties involved to reconsider whether one or more individual districts should be added to the litigation in order for it to proceed..." The court also stated: "We do not suggest that state defendants cannot be held liable under EEOA [Equal Educational Opportunities Act]... we merely hold that an appropriate analysis of an EEOA claim should be conducted with regard to particular district or districts, with state educational agencies serving as additional parties."

IDRA notes that the appellate court neither threw out the case altogether nor entirely absolved Texas of its EEOA obligations. But the decision is disappointing because it represents one more lost opportunity to address what even the appellate court agrees is alarmingly low student performance at the secondary level among English language learners.

The court could have affirmed the need for additional funds for assessment, staffing of teachers who are trained in serving English language learners, specialized staff training, specialized materials, and time and space factors. Instead it gave the state of Texas permission to continue to do nothing while another round of students is ill served by an inadequate and inequitable education system – at least until a future decision prods it into corrective action.

IDRA also does not agree that protection of the

rights of English language learners requires that we challenge each individual school district to seek fair and equitable education of our children. If we have to rely on EEOA claims at the local level to address under-education and lack of education, students will have to wait for their children's children to have a shot at a remedy and the slimmest of opportunity.

It is ludicrous for the court to conclude that ultimate responsibility for ELL student failure rates must be found before the Texas Education Agency fulfills its monitoring responsibilities. The fact is that it is the state's responsibility to ensure that all of its students receive an equitable and excellent education.

For the court to suggest that it is acceptable to ignore achievement gaps across groups is entirely inconsistent with efforts in Texas and the country to close achievement gaps. Disaggregated data and comparisons across groups and subgroups are important to monitoring and accountability, and ELL and non-ELL comparisons are consistent with such practices.

IDRA's recent policy update reports that, in Texas, English language learners in middle and high school drop out at twice the rate of the larger student population. They are retained at rates consistently double that of their peers. And they perform worse than their peers by a margin of 40 percent or more on the TAKS. Nationally, there are significant gaps in achievement between English language learners and non-ELL students. As in Texas, the gap is most striking at the middle school and high school level.

While the case has been remanded to the district court, it is important for us all to recognize that the court did take note of the alarmingly low levels of ELL student achievement and in no way endorsed the current state of

English language learner education in Texas as an acceptable state of affairs. The ruling therefore provides the Texas Legislature a new opportunity to address the ills that characterize Texas services to our English language learners. The question remains whether the current state legislative leadership is up to the challenge.

Related Resources Online

- IDRA's new publication, *Education of English Language Learners in U.S. and Texas Schools – Where We Are, What We Have Learned and Where We Need to Go from Here – A 2009 Update*
- IDRA's article, "Federal Judge Rules That Texas' Services for its LEP Students Are Inadequate," about Judge Justice's ruling.
- Overview of what happened in bilingual/ESL policy in 2009 in Texas: "Post-Legislative Session Summary on Proposed Changes to Texas Bilingual Education Monitoring Procedures, Secondary Level ESL Program Reforms, and Related Litigation"
- IDRA's research-based tool for schools and communities, *Good School and Classrooms for Children Learning English*
- Other resources on policy related to the education of English language learners.



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Focus: Parent and Community Engagement

“Effective community engagement builds partnerships based on respect and a shared goal of academic success for every child. It depends on the meaningful integration of community members and parents into the decision-making processes of schools.”

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

Intercultural Development Research Association

Classnotes Podcast



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- “What Parents Should Know about Their Schools” featuring Rogelio López del Bosque, Ed.D.

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