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in Education*

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IDRA Education CAFE – A Structure for Families Transforming Schools in their Communities

by Aurelio M. Montemayor, M.Ed.

With a new grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, IDRA is creating a Texas Education CAFE Network that will reach multiple regions of the state. This network will inform public education policies and practices related to implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). The targeted communities are in Dallas-Fort Worth, El Paso, Houston, and the Coastal Bend region around Corpus Christi.

An Education CAFE (Community Action Forums for Excellence) is a parent group that is rooted in a community-based organization, rather than in a single school. Its sole purpose is to collaborate with schools to improve the success of students in the community. With the new W.K. Kellogg Foundation funding, this empirical model developed by IDRA will be taken to these four geographic areas with urban populations of varied ethnic backgrounds and economic classes.

IDRA’s Family Leadership in Education principles assert that families are the strongest long-term advocates for quality public education. When families are treated with the dignity and respect they deserve, their leadership can lead to transformational change that benefits all children.

Innovative from the Start

“What are our dreams and aspirations for the education of our children?” “What critical information is available on their education in our schools?” “What can we do together to improve our schools?” The answers families give to these

questions form the essential pieces of an Education CAFE (formerly called Comunitario PTAs).

A number of years ago, this vision took shape in new and powerful ways in the Texas Valley. At the invitation of Sr. Gerrie Noughton, founder of a grassroots organization called ARISE, we began conducting training with families in several *colonias* (unincorporated small communities). Soon, there were teams of mothers visiting their children’s schools to investigate, for example, why the majority of the students were failing the state math test. As our relationship continued, a youth leadership group, the ARISE Tekies, was formed to assist in bridging local families with computers and technology.

In the summer of 2010 in an event called ¡Ya Es Tiempo!, IDRA convened families to examine school data in collaboration with ARISE and other community organizations (IDRA, 2010). Soon after, IDRA’s first model Comunitario PTA site was born at ARISE with Lourdes Flores’ leadership – making it the first Comunitario PTA in the nation (Montemayor, 2010). Later, we brought together a larger representation of families, communities and educational institutions in McAllen, Texas, in the first Mesa Comunitaria (see box on Page 7) (IDRA, 2016).

Along with these successes, in late 2012, IDRA was selected by the U.S. Department of Education to research and expand IDRA’s model in five
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“Effective family engagement is based on respect and a shared goal of academic success for every child. Effectiveness 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

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communities in South Texas, through the i3 Initiative. By the end of the grant period, there were eight Comunitarios that collaborated across communities on several education leadership projects – and that number continues to grow.

The groups now include two sponsored by ARISE in South Tower (south of Alamo) and Las Milpas in south Pharr. In Brownsville, Proyecto Juan Diego continues in its seventh year and, across town, Mano a Mano is sponsoring four groups. Vida Digna continues to have two groups: one in San Benito and another in Los Fresnos.

Comunitarios have multiplied their membership and actively coach other groups interested in starting a similar organization. The Equal Voice Network in south Texas facilitated the expansion and now monitors, guides and supports the activities and projects through its Education Working Group.

Education CAFE Expansion

The new name unveiled in January, *Education CAFE*, emphasizes the diversity of communities who are engaged in impacting their public schools. By establishing Education CAFEs in community-based organizations, communities can leverage existing local assets and networks to foster a sustainable base of family engagement from kindergarten through high school. Three components are central to the Education CAFE approach as follows.

Community-based, Distributive Leadership – Education CAFEs are born in their communities. They are connected to a local organization that commits to focus on education (among its other mission areas). Meetings are attended by parents, grandparents, students' older siblings, neighbors and all who consider themselves custodians of children's academic success and fu-



Third anniversary of the ARISE PTA Comunitario (left to right): Lourdes Flores (ARISE Support Center), Eva Carranza (ARISE South Tower), Andrea Landeros (ARISE Muñiz), Emilia Vega (ARISE South Tower), Andrea Olvera (ARISE Las Milpas) in 2012

ture. By rotating leadership roles, the Education CAFE is not dependent on a central charismatic leader, and instead is based on a distributive leadership model.

School Partnerships – Education CAFE members come together and partner with schools in their neighborhood to ensure student success. Collaboration includes co-planning and sharing responsibility for outreach and ongoing activities that improve education in their neighborhood public schools.

Education Projects – Education CAFEs carry out education projects using actionable data (see story on Page 5). For example, they bring families together to examine education policies and their implications for children's access to advanced placement, dual credit and pre-algebra courses; the state's education budget; and college readiness strategies. They also meet with school administrators to dialogue about shared concerns.

Today there are hundreds of Education CAFE families in multiple areas working with school leaders to monitor the academic success of their children and other neighborhood children. Each has its own unique characteristics and family leadership in education projects, but they all are connected and collaborate in area-wide projects.

Some group projects have included campus visitations to introduce the new organization, open hearings with school board candidates, large public events to protest cuts to the state education budget, and surveys about how new graduation plans are being implemented and their impact on poor and minority students.

In 2015, they conducted a bilingual survey totaling more than 1,600 families in their neighborhoods (Cortez, 2015). The results were presented to the larger community in August of 2015. Now families are conducting a follow-up survey to assess whether there has been any improvement or if conditions have remained the same.

As IDRA rolls out the plan for statewide expansion of its Family Leadership in Education model, we will continue to support and inform these established groups. Each year, there has been a presentation from one or several of the groups at the Annual IDRA *La Semana del Niño* Parent Institute™. This year, they co-presented in San Antonio with a live-stream two-way session that focused on the work of the Equal Voice Education Working Group.

A common theme for education projects in the Texas Education CAFE Network will be the (cont. on Page 4)

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Preventing and Addressing Cyberbullying through Equitable State and Local Policies

By David Hinojosa, J.D.

As the use of social media and cell phones continues to expand and connect students more readily in important ways, so too does the rising threat of cyberbullying. Whether it concerns students “trolling” other students on Twitter because of their perceived gender, sending continuous text messages harassing a student because of their race, or posting repeated disparaging pictures implicating a student’s religion or immigration status on Instagram, cyberbullying comes in many forms.

While reports vary on whether cyberbullying is increasing, a conservative estimate in the 2015 Youth Risk Behavior study by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention shows that one in six students is subjected to cyberbullying (MMWR, 2016).

Research shows that cyberbullying can increase the likelihood that bullied students use alcohol and drugs, skip school, receive poor grades, have lower self-esteem and experience health problems (www.stopbullying.gov). However, finding the right solution is not always easy.

School boards and state policymakers must balance civil liberties concerns invoking free speech with the need to intervene and protect students from harassment and cyberbullying, even occurring outside the school setting. They must address the need to fairly discipline the bully while ensuring that loss of learning time is minimized.

Schools must balance several other concerns with the ultimate goal of providing a safe and healthy learning environment for all students. This article provides some key insights into how state and schools can adopt equitable policies to help prevent or stop bullying in systemic ways.

Defining what conduct constitutes cyberbullying is often where policymakers begin, and definitions can range from the simple to the complex (Kowalski, et al., 2015). [Stopbullying.gov](http://www.stopbullying.gov) defines *bullying* as: repeated, unwanted aggressive behavior among school-age children involving a real or perceived power imbalance. *Cyberbullying*

is defined as “bullying that takes place using electronic technology,” which includes the use of cell phones, tablets and social media sites.

While the two are obviously related, there are differences. For example, because cyberbullies often perceive themselves as anonymous, it opens up the pool of potential bullies who might not otherwise bully someone in person. The round-the-clock availability of several different modes of cyber communications also can heighten the threat of cyberbullying.

Furthermore, the concept of anonymity may significantly reduce chances for empathy or remorse by perpetrators because they cannot readily see how their victims are affected by their actions (Kowalski, et al., 2015). Accordingly, many anti-bullying laws and policies should be revised to take into account these contextual differences.

In defining cyberbullying in state and local laws, several experts and researchers strongly suggest that the definition explicitly enumerate protected classes of students (i.e., GLSEN).

Another recommendation is that the reach of the law goes beyond the schoolyard and into off-campus behaviors that substantially disrupt the learning environment, including cyber communications (Hinduja & Patchin, 2015).

On the issue of enforcement, states and local school districts should ensure that they do not overreact in response to a highly publicized, traumatizing bullying incident by criminalizing every behavior. Criminalizing behavior can induce student disengagement, incarceration and ostracism of vulnerable populations (GLSEN, nd).

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Service managed website, stopbullying.gov, identifies the following “Key Components in State Anti-Bullying Laws” and provides examples of various state policies reflecting the components.

- **Purpose Statement** – describes negative effects caused by bullying and states that all forms of bullying are unacceptable and will be (cont. on Page 4)

Research shows that cyberbullying can increase the likelihood that bullied students use alcohol and drugs, skip school, receive poor grades, have lower self-esteem and experience health problems. However, finding the right solution is not always easy.

IDRA EAC-South

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

Additional resources are available online at <http://www.idra.org/eac-south/>

funded by the U.S. Department of Education

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- taken seriously;
- **Statement of Scope** – describes the reach of conduct subject to school interventions, including off-campus activities that significantly disrupt the school environment;
- **Specification of Prohibited Conduct** – provides a clear definition of both bullying and cyberbullying, including a non-exhaustive listing of specific behaviors prohibited;
- **Enumeration of Specific Characteristics** – includes actual and perceived student characteristics but also makes clear that bullying need not be based on any specific student characteristic;
- **Development and Implementation of School District Policies** – requires school districts to develop and implement anti-bullying preventative policies through a collaborative process with all stakeholders, including parents, families and staff;
- **Components of School District Policies** – requires local policies to include definitions, reporting requirements, investigation and response procedures, written recordkeeping, graduated sanctions, and counseling referrals for the perpetrator and the victim, as well as families;
- **Review of Local Policies** – ensures regular review of policies to ensure goals are met;
- **Communication Plan** – includes processes for meaningfully notifying students, parents/guardians and staff of bullying policies;
- **Training and Preventive Education** – requires schools to provide training for all teaching and non-teaching school staff on preventing, identifying, and responding to bullying and cyberbullying;

- **Transparency and Monitoring** – requires school districts to report annually to the state and the public, the number of reported bullying incidents and responsive actions taken;
- **Statement of Rights to Other Legal Recourse** – ensures that victims are aware that they may pursue other legal recourse; and
- **Model Policy** – ensures that school districts can access equitable model policies and adapt as necessary to address any local needs or requirement.

Local policies also should reflect the adoption of more positive, preventative and comprehensive bullying strategies. For example, using a relational youth violence framework, schoolwide interventions can be integrated into the curriculum and local policies, as opposed to the mere traditional practice of documenting the incident and addressing it as an individual action (Bahena, 2017). Examples of this type of preventative strategy include curricula that incorporate understanding and acceptance of differences and building upon relationships across differences, direct engagement with students on the role of power and inequities, and implementation of restorative justice practices (Bahena, 2017).

Local policies should engender practices that result in students and educators developing positive problem-solving skills, providing a safe haven of supportive families and adults whom students can trust and turn to, and creating a positive school climate (CDC, 2016a). These practices can help prevent bullying on the front end and address factors that contribute to a higher likelihood of bullying including “externalizing problems, such as defiant and disruptive behavior, harsh parenting by caregivers, and attitudes ac-

cepting of violence” (CDC, 2016b).

When cyberbullying overlaps with issues of race, national origin, gender/sex, or religion, not only may state and local policies be implicated, but so too may federal civil rights laws (OCR DCL, 2010). If this occurs, the Region II federally-funded equity assistance center, the IDRA EAC-South, may be able to assist your school, district, or state in addressing and preventing the bullying and cyberbullying. Through expert staff and access to consultants across the region and nationally, our center may provide you with a range of universal, targeted or intensive technical assistance and training. If you require assistance, please contact us at eacsouth@idra.org.

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See references for this article at <http://budurl.com/IDRAm17b>



See a list of links to resources on cyberbullying <http://budurl.com/IDRAcyberB>

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federal education law, ESSA, which gives parents and communities the opportunity to be more directly involved in children’s education. ESSA specifically calls for state education plans developed in consultation with parents and involvement of parents in creating state report cards, and for Title I school districts (those with high percentages of households below the poverty line) ESSA requires direct parent outreach, school-parent compacts and at least 1 percent of Title I funding reserved for family engagement.

As Lourdes said: “If a group of parents can raise \$5,000 for this campus, OK. But if a group of

parents can join together to make sure the math scores go up, this school will benefit much more. They might not know how to do algebra but they know it’s important.”

The dreams and aspirations for the education of all children are the driving force for these groups. Having access to actionable school data deepens their understanding and informs their actions. Families, through their collective leadership and projects like the Texas Education CAFE Network, can change and transform schools for the better. For more information on the IDRA Edu-

cation CAFE model, contact IDRA at contact@idra.org.

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See references for this article at <http://budurl.com/IDRAm17a>



See a video on communities using data <http://budurl.com/IDRAvidCUDyt>

How to Use Actionable Education Data to Strengthen Your School

by Christie L. Goodman, APR

We often hear that strong parent involvement makes schools better. But the perceptions of what “strong parent involvement” means vary widely from fundraising to volunteering in classrooms and serving on committees. IDRA’s model emphasizes a different role that recognizes parents’ ability to lead and partner with schools to improve the education they provide. This can best be seen in IDRA’s Education CAFE model. An Education CAFE is a parent group that is rooted in a community-based organization rather than in a single school. And its sole purpose is to collaborate with schools to improve the success of students in the community (see story on Page 1).

A key element of the model is that groups of parents and community members examine data and then take action on a specific project. Every community is different, and the concerns of one are not necessarily the top concerns of another. So, it is critical that each project be identified and carried out by the community it affects.

Questions Families are Asking

Whether or not you are part of an Education CAFE, you can work with other people to see what is happening in your schools and how you can help make change where it is needed. You may enter this task because of an issue you have already seen, or you may not be sure the root of a problem or how many people it is affecting. So, the first step is to make a list of your questions and cluster them. For example...

- Does our school have highly qualified teachers?
- Does this school have high expectations?
- Does it provide a rigorous curriculum?
- How often do teachers from this school communicate positively about our students?
- Are a lot of our kids dropping out? (This is important even if you know your own child will graduate. High dropout rates point to problems that affect the whole school.)
- Does the school actively support students with 504 or IEP accommodations? (These accommodations are required to eliminate barriers so that students with learning and/or physical dis-

abilities can excel alongside their peers.)

The next step is to take the top issue you’ve identified and dig deeper. For example, schools must hold on to students from the beginning of their journey to their final destination: graduation. Here are some things to look for:

- How many students are not graduating with a high school diploma?
- Are there differences across racial-ethnic groups, English learners or other student groups?
- How does this compare with other schools in your area or in the state?
- What grade levels have higher numbers of dropouts?
- Are some students being subtly encouraged to drop out?

The public schools’ responsibility does not end with ensuring student graduation but extends to providing a solid education and college preparation for all students. For example, when a large percentage of students are taking college entrance exams, this points to high expectations.

- Does the school offer college entrance exams (PSAT, SAT, ACT) to all students or to just the “top” students (e.g., the top 10 percent students, or gifted and talented students)?
- What percentage of students are taking those exams?
- What percentage of students are earning acceptable scores on these exams? (at least 1100 on the SAT or 24 on the ACT)
- For all of these questions, are there differences among racial-ethnic groups, English learners or other student groups?

Another area of college preparation and earning a strong high school diploma involves taking rigorous coursework.

- How many students are taking advanced courses and dual enrollment classes?
- Do students and families know about the state requirements for graduation? And are they aware of the courses colleges require?
- What percentage of each racial-ethnic group is

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By having researched the data, your group of community members will have a foundation to talk with school leaders and work together for solutions.

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enrolled in these courses? What about English learners?

Of course, teachers are central to the quality of education our students receive. Theirs is an increasingly challenging job that must balance the standards they must cover, best practices for instruction, test preparation, and a diversity of students in their classrooms. So, it is critical that they have been prepared and receive continual professional development.

- How many teachers in our school are prepared to teach the subject they are teaching?
- How do they relate to students?
- Are they open to hearing from parents?
- Are the most qualified and experienced teachers distributed evenly across the school district?

Factors that most lead to students dropping out are in-grade retention (holding a student back a year) and exclusionary discipline. There are good alternatives to both. But trends are showing that students of color are more likely to experience these.

- What percentages of different student groups are held back?
- What percentages are expelled, suspended, or sent to disciplinary alternative campuses?
- Are students in certain grades more likely to be held back? What about younger students, such as first graders?

These are just a few samples to explore. They are structured around IDRA's Quality Schools Action Framework, which focuses change on what research and experience say matters: parents as partners involved in consistent and meaningful ways, engaged students who know they belong in schools and are supported by caring adults, competent caring educators who are well-paid and supported in their work, and high quality curriculum that prepares students for 21st century opportunities.

Places to Look for Data

The hard part it would seem then, is figuring out where to go for answers to the questions you have outlined. Often the first place to look is your **state's education agency** (see list: <https://www2.ed.gov/about/contacts/state/>). Most if not all state agencies release reports throughout the year, with some providing data at the school district and campus level.

The **U.S. Department of Education** has a data and statistics website with information by topic. Other federal sources are the **National Center for Education Statistics**, which also produces

How to Start an Education CAFE

Any parent, school official or interested person can take the first steps toward organizing an Education CAFE. When parents and other community members take the initiative to start an Education CAFE, they should enlist the support of a community organization and contact IDRA for support. Depending on the resources available, IDRA can provide support through distance media measures or attend in person.

Requirements

For a group to form an Education CAFE, the following are required:

- Have 10 people willing to join; and
- Be committed to IDRA's Family Leadership in Education Principles and the key elements of an Education CAFE (see www.idra.org/families-and-communities).

Five Steps

- 1 Contact IDRA** to get an organizational packet.
- 2 Identify individuals** interested in forming an Education CAFE. This group should include families with children in public schools at any grade level. Set a time and place for a planning meeting.
- 3 Hold a planning meeting and form a planning committee** from among the attendees at the meeting. Select a chairperson and a secretary to undertake responsibilities temporarily, until the tasks are volunteered for at the next meeting.
- 4 Hold the organizational meeting**, with the following activities:
 - Explain the purpose of the meeting and policies and purposes of Education CAFE.
 - Have participants share individually what their hopes and dreams are for the education of all children in your community.
 - Create a name for the working group.
 - Set up a meeting calendar, including time and place (Note that the place does not have to be at a school. Rather, it can be at a community center or other central location.)
 - Create a list of volunteers for individual tasks, including who will set the agenda for the next meeting; who will conduct the next meeting; and what are the outreach and invitation goals for each person present between now and the next meeting.All present become the organizing group for the Education CAFE.
- 5 Contact IDRA** for follow-up assistance.

the Nation's Report Card, and the **Office for Civil Rights** database.

A number of regional and national independent organizations issue reports and data as well.

- **Alliance for Excellent Education** – reports focus on middle and high school.
- **Child Trends Databank** – data on more than 125 indicators of the well-being of chil-

dren and youth.

- **Education Law Center** – annual report card on school funding fairness.
- **Education Week** – reports on education news and also releases its annual Quality Counts report with state-level data.
- **Kids Count Data Center** funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation – state-level data to

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Established IDRA Education CAFEs to Date

Each Education CAFE group has 50 to 75 family members, and reaches a grassroots network of more than 500 families each year through trainings and workshops on family leadership in education. The San Benito/Los Fresnos and ARISE groups alone conducted training and workshops that touched about 600 people a year.

- ARISE Cesar Chavez in Las Milpas/South Pharr
- ARISE South Tower in South Alamo/Donna
- BCHC Mano a Mano Galaxy in Brownsville
- BCHC Mano a Mano Southmost in Brownsville (plus two more in development)
- Proyecto Desarrollo Humano in Peñitas /La Joya
- Proyecto Juan Diego in Brownsville
- RGV La Raiz in San Benito
- RGV La Raiz in Los Fresnos



All of the groups collaborate with the Rio Grande Equal Voice Network. They convened “Mesa Comunitaria” events where community leaders, school superintendents, college and university leaders and others gathered to consider possible collaborative actions in response to drastic changes in Texas’ education policies.

The meetings were planned for maximum participation and critical conversations. At the second event, after a brief presentation of the findings of the community survey on awareness of new graduation requirements, small groups heard testimony from a community member who had some experience in dealing with the schools on the two issues: information about graduation requirements and ensuring that their children were taking the requisite courses for college preparation. After the Mesa Comunitaria, the Education Working Group met monthly to monitor the follow-up. All the plans of action were documented and distributed to representatives of all the participating groups and collaboration with schools continued.

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inform advocacy and policies that benefit children and families.

- **National Equity Atlas** by PolicyLink and the USC Program for Environmental and Regional Equity – data resource to track, measure and make the case for inclusive growth.

Others provide state level data, such as **IDRA’s annual attrition study** and the **Center for Public Policy Priorities’ Texas Education Scorecard**.

Collect Information Yourself

And if you cannot find another source, there are ways to collect it yourself. For example, families in the Texas Rio Grande Valley surveyed more than 1,600 parents about their knowledge of the state’s new graduation requirements. They shared the surprising results with school leaders in multiple districts, who made changes in how they share information with families (Cortez, 2015).

Another group of families was concerned about math instruction at their children’s school, despite having qualified math teachers. They surveyed parents and students and learned the issue

was low expectations for most students and a climate that didn’t respond to student questions. What resulted was parents, students and educators at this large, predominantly Hispanic and low-income school having fruitful conversations to improve math education there (Montemayor, 2007).

I, myself, recently emailed administrators at each of the high schools in my district to ask about PSAT offerings to high school freshmen, finding that while some offer the test to all ninth graders, many only offer it to gifted students, and some don’t offer it at all. The information will help me and other parents urge our children’s schools both to offer the test schoolwide and to communicate with parents about it.

Sometimes, the data will confirm your thoughts about the issue your group raised, and sometimes it will point to a larger problem that needs addressing. By having researched the data, your group of community members will have a foundation to talk with school leaders and work together for solutions.

To learn more about IDRA’s Education CAFE model, visit <http://budurl.com/IDRAedCAFE>. And be sure to sign up for IDRA’s email notices, which include our new Actionable Knowledge for Equity bulletin (<http://budurl.com/IDRAsubscribe>).

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See references for this article at <http://budurl.com/IDRAm17c>



See a list of links to the data sources mentioned in this article <http://budurl.com/IDRAdataLst>



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