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Graduation for All Students

Dropout Prevention and Student Engagement Strategies and the Reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act

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Mr. Chairman and distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for the invitation to appear before you to discuss an emerging vision that ensures graduation for all.

I am María Robledo Montecel, executive director of the Intercultural Development Research Association in San Antonio, Texas. IDRA is an independent, non-profit organization founded in 1973, committed to one mission: creating schools that work for all children, especially those children who have traditionally been left behind – those who are poor, minority or speak a language other than English.

We have partnered with thousands of educators, administrators, and business, family and community leaders to strengthen public education at the national, state and local levels. IDRA designed and leads the award-winning Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program, a model program that has helped schools in the United States and Brazil succeed in keeping 98 percent of students in school and learning.

IDRA has worked with schools in Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas through our federally-funded equity assistance center and across Texas through our federally-funded Parent Information and Resource Center. We have partnered with thousands of educators, administrators, and business, family and community leaders to strengthen public education in Arizona, California, Georgia, Michigan, Oregon and Pennsylvania, among many others.

We have worked closely with schools and school systems, helping them address the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act. In collaboration with the Public Education Network, IDRA conducted a statewide hearing in Texas on NCLB, bringing together stakeholders across the education spectrum to gain first-hand insight on NCLB implementation. IDRA has also partnered with the Hispanic Education Coalition to frame recommendations for NCLB reauthorization regarding English language learners; on

which the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund recently testified before the Senate.

In 1986, I served as principal investigator for one of the first statewide studies of school dropouts. With that study, IDRA developed an enrollment-based methodology that has become the foundation for dropout counting methods by other researchers across the country, including the Harvard Civil Rights Project and the Urban Institute. Since 1986, Texas schools have lost more than 2.5 million students. One student is lost every four minutes.

That seminal study also looked at the cost of under-educating our young people. Findings from our annual cost study, when totaled over 20 years, indicate that \$730 billion have been lost to the state of Texas alone.

But IDRA has never limited its work only to research the problem; it has also dedicated its work to creating solutions that keep students in school, such as IDRA's internationally recognized, research-based Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program.

With the magnitude of this loss, what is needed is a seismic shift from "dropout prevention" to graduation for all; and "all" must mean "all." Many dropout prevention efforts fail either because they are too narrow, or piecemeal, or because they blame students and parents for the problem. Dropout prevention efforts also fail because all too often schools plan for failure.

Recently, I was talking with a teacher. She had been hired to teach freshman English in a large inner-city high school. She had finished preparing her curriculum, identifying books and her principal now sent her a list of students for the coming school year. When she learned 38 students had been assigned to her class, she marched to the principal's office and told him that she could never do a good job with 38 students in one class. He told her: "Not to worry. In six weeks, your class will have 24 students." The other 14, he assured her, will have dropped out by then.

We need to be honest about the fact that right now we plan on one third of students leaving school before they graduate. This assumption is built into classroom assignments, teacher hiring practices, curriculum purchases and facilities planning.

Some will say we cannot afford to adopt an emerging vision that expects all students to graduate. But this ignores the short- and long-term costs of insufficient or misdirected action.

Over the last two decades, the inability of schools to hold on to students through high school graduation has cost the state of Texas about \$730.1 billion in forgone income, lost tax revenues, and increased job training, welfare, unemployment and criminal justice costs.

It is estimated that across the United States, 1,252,396 students in 2004 did not

graduate on time (Urban Institute). Based on this number, the cost to the country is \$325 billion in lost wages, taxes and productivity for one class of students (Alliance for Excellent Education). By contrast, if every household were headed by an individual with at least a high school diploma, there would be an additional \$74 billion in collective wealth in the United States (Alliance for Excellent Education).

IDRA's research shows that for every \$1 invested in education, states yield a \$9 return. Texas economist Ray Perryman estimates that just a 10 percent reduction in dropouts would produce 175,000 new jobs in the state and \$200 billion in economic output (Zellmer, 2004).

We must move from a low and archaic expectation that *only some* of our country's students *can* successfully graduate from high school to a *guarantee that all* of our students *will* graduate.

It is time to plan for success, not failure.

To move from dropout prevention to graduation for all, I offer three primary recommendations focused at the campus, district and system levels.

At the campus level, strengthen and support school-level change through Local Accountability Teams.

Community oversight is a critical missing ingredient in effective and accountable dropout prevention efforts at the local level.

For years, researchers, educators and policymakers have generally focused on “fixing” students rather than on strengthening the school systems that are responsible for ensuring that children and youth succeed throughout the educational system.

It is not about fixing students; it is about schools that make a difference and succeed with all students. The student-deficit approach has never worked.

What does work are dropout prevention efforts that focus on the inherent value of the students and their families. But it is critically important to recognize that what exists is not enough. Part of this emerging insight is that we cannot simply look for a new or better, or even another “program”; what is needed are effective systemic reforms that will improve a school's holding power.

We also know that schools and communities working together have the capacity to craft and carry out effective solutions that will make a difference for students.

Most recently, under IDRA's new Graduation Guaranteed/*Graduación Garantizada* initiative, we have been piloting a school holding power portal that gives community-school action teams data on how their schools are doing on student attrition and achievement. The portal provides data on the factors (from teaching quality to

curriculum access and funding equity) that affect attrition, achievement and school holding power at the campus level.

The community of El Paso has been a forerunner in these efforts. Last June, higher education and high school leaders in El Paso gathered more than 150 parents, educators, students, school board members and community members to raise awareness about high attrition rates and develop a plan for achieving their vision of 100-percent graduation for every child in their community. They asked IDRA to provide technical assistance, data and facilitation to support local action and used IDRA's Quality Schools Action Framework for their gathering ("ENFOQUE") and next steps.

Local accountability teams like this keep schools from working in isolation. They are better able to use best practices and create new solutions to strengthen the school's holding power for every student it serves.

Local accountability teams would review their local dropout and graduation data, disaggregated by subgroups, as well as data on school factors affecting the graduation rate, such as parent involvement, student engagement, curriculum access and teaching quality. Using these data, the team would develop a comprehensive graduation plan of action to include all students. These plans would address local accountability, identification and removal of barriers, and the monitoring and evaluating of the plan's implementation. Teams would bring together critical stakeholders – parents, educators, community, business and higher education leaders and students. Funding priorities for pilot projects would be based on campuses with the lowest graduation rates.

Secondly, fund district-wide efforts that focus on elementary-to-middle and middle-to-high school transition points.

Research shows that students drop out at key transition points. Research also shows that there are effective strategies that create safe passage for students.

Targeted school districts would demonstrate use of effective and coordinated practices that align curricula, create cross-level student tracking systems, and support joint planning and coordinated professional development for teachers and administrators. Funding priorities would be based on states and school systems with the lowest graduation rates.

Not too long ago, parents put their children on a flight to visit their grandparents across the country. When the flight arrived at its destination, the grandparents were there, eagerly waiting to greet their grandchildren. After everyone had left the airplane, the grandparents were frantic – where were their grandchildren? How could the airline have lost them?

Quickly, the flight crew and airline agents mobilized to find those children, and in what seemed like an eternity the children were found in another airport. The airline president apologized profusely and promised to find out what had happened and change the

system so that a child would never be lost again.

In today's schools, two out of five students are lost, one out of two Hispanic students and one out of three African American students are missing. They never reach their final destination – high school graduation. Even worse, no one is looking for them, some will not even admit they are gone. Those who do admit they have lost students, usually blame the students or their families for the loss.

Imagine if the airline president had said that their young charges had not arrived because they were minority or because their parents were poor or because the children were bored or were not “good” children.

Instead, everyone in that airline took responsibility for ensuring safe passage for those young passengers.

The same must be true of our schools. Schools, too, must take responsibility for ensuring safe passage for our children – they must hold on to them from the beginning of their journey to their final destination.

With a newly focused NCLB investment, school districts across the country can shore up the key transition points that students face (elementary to middle to high school to college and university) to secure a “safe passage” when they are most vulnerable to lack of attention and support provided by schools.

Thirdly, our recommendation is to fund HR 547 the *Graduation for All Act* and to designate a minimum of 5 percent of the NCLB allocations within each Title to efforts that focus on graduating all students.

Research on best practices of high performing schools, for example, has for many years examined the links among a constellation of indicators on student outcomes.

What is less well understood is which change strategies and school and community capacities will ensure that schools as systems can hold on to all students and secure their success.

To bridge this gap, IDRA has been developing the Quality Schools Action Framework in our collaboration with schools and communities. It offers a model for assessing school outcomes, identifying leverage points for improvement, and focusing and effecting change.

Students are far more likely to succeed and graduate when they have the chance to work with highly qualified, committed teachers, using effective, accessible curricula, when their parents and communities are engaged in their schools, and when they themselves feel engaged. We know that this becomes possible when schools and school policy reflect good governance and the funding to provide excellent education for all students.

Planning for success requires investment.

Every component of NCLB plays a unique role in all students graduating from high school. Title I focuses on improving academic achievement for disadvantaged students. Designating 5 percent of Title I to address dropout strategies for disadvantaged students is clearly needed. The same is true for preparing, training and recruiting high quality teachers (Title II); improving language and instruction for English language learner and immigrant students (Title III), and informing parents (Title V) – all key factors needed to increase graduation rates for all students.

If 5 percent of NCLB allocations within each Title were designated for graduation for all efforts, it would cost an estimated \$180 for each of the 1.3 million students who have dropped out of school. Many schools in our country operate on a 180-instructional-day schedule which means that what is being recommended is a \$5 dollar a day investment.

Just as successful schools require an integrated, coordinated plan that has everyone working together to support a common goal, it must also be the case that the reauthorization of NCLB set an example of integrated and coordinated policies and funding that are specifically targeted at improving high school graduation.

In this country, not so long ago, it seemed unreasonable to think that we would have universal education through primary school. We have that. Now we must have universal education through high school.