

A Community Speaks

A Report on Little Rock's Coalition-Building for Education Blueprint Dialogues for Action



**Sponsored by
Intercultural Development Research Association**



INTERCULTURAL DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH ASSOCIATION

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Mission: Creating schools that work for *all* children.

Vision: IDRA is a vanguard leadership development and research team working with people to create self-renewing schools that value and empower all children, families and communities.

Functions:

POLICY AND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT – IDRA policy and leadership development promotes accountability and responsibility. Using inclusive, cutting-edge and broad-based strategies, we develop leadership within communities, schools and policy-making bodies to create collaborative and enlightened educational policies that work for *all* children.

RESEARCH AND EVALUATION – IDRA research and evaluation advance educational policies, programs and practices. Using collaborative and innovative methods, we investigate important questions and provide insights into compelling educational issues. As a national resource, we set standards in the design, analysis, and synthesis of timely and useful research involving diverse populations.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT – IDRA professional development causes people across the country to take action that empowers others. We assist people to create educational solutions through innovative, participatory, and hands-on presentations, workshops, and technical assistance that promotes sustained growth and development.

Our assistance values the needs and cultures of our participants and acknowledges their experiences. We carefully craft training designs that include reflection and application. IDRA professional development causes participants to take a new look at persistent problems and equips them to take action that produces positive outcomes for *all* children.

PROGRAMS AND MATERIALS DEVELOPMENT – IDRA programs and materials cause people across the country to improve education for *all* children. Our programs produce results. Our materials are useful and timely; attractive, cost-effective and intuitive; linguistically, culturally and developmentally appropriate.

IDRA pro-actively disseminates cutting-edge information to educators, administrators, decision- and policy-makers, parents and community leaders.

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A Legacy of Civil Rights: A Promise Unfulfilled

More than 50 years ago, in *Brown vs. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court unanimously ruled that sending children to separate schools purely on the basis of race was unconstitutional. Seven years earlier, the Ninth Circuit Court ruled in *Mendez vs. Westminster* that Mexican American children in the Westminster school district in California could not be denied access to public schools or denied quality education because they were Mexican American. The *Brown* and *Mendez* court cases, along with others like *Lau* and *Plyler*, transformed the nature of U.S. public education.

Yet, the promise of quality education remains an elusive goal for many children of color. Often, the issues of civil rights in education are viewed in the deficit and limiting terms of “Black vs. White” causing divisions among and between minority and majority groups to the detriment of our children and the nation’s future.

“How can we together create a future in which the color of a child’s skin, the language a child speaks and the side of town that a child comes from are no longer barriers to a great education and a good life?”

– Dr. María “Cuca” Robledo Montecel,
IDRA executive director

Summit on Civil Rights Implications: A Roadmap for Reform

On October 10, 2003, the Intercultural Development Research Association convened diverse leaders from various sectors in San Antonio to create dialogue and action on the implications of *Brown vs. Board of Education* for Latino students in U.S. public schools to catalyze a national action agenda for reform. Educators, superintendents, college presidents, journalists, community members and business leaders gathered in roundtable discussions to consider the state of education for children of color through the lenses of landmark civil rights cases and national commitments. This unprecedented gathering was co-sponsored by the *Brown vs. Board of Education* 50th Anniversary Commission and the Brown Foundation for Educational Equity, Excellence and Research.



Cross-Race Dialogue and Partnerships for Action

Building on the summit’s success and with funding from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, IDRA replicated five “Blueprint for Action” dialogues in Houston, Tyler, Dallas, Albuquerque and Little Rock.

These Blueprint for Action dialogues, which gathered African American, Latino and Anglo community, business and education leaders in each city, addressed key education issues, including equitable funding, ensuring graduation for all, quality schooling and access to higher education.

These local meetings provided unique opportunities to set aside differences and to work together across sectors and across race. The dialogues were successful in engaging education stakeholders in discussions about key issues and challenges in realizing the spirit of the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision. They also provided information and began to seed new coalitions among groups that seldom have the opportunity to plan positive action in improving education for all children.

A Blueprint for Action in Little Rock, Arkansas

On January 26, 2007, IDRA held a dialogue in Little Rock with a new and valuable dimension to the dialogues – that of student voices. Prior to the event, IDRA worked with 13 high school students from the Little Rock school district to present their perspectives to summit participants at the evening reception.



“I would hope that as individuals read ‘A Tale of Two Centrals,’ they will do so with a desire to hear the voice of the student, understand the message conveyed and be catalyzed to act on behalf of all students everywhere across this nation knowing that there are still new, more insidious forms of segregation, discrimination and the denial of civil rights that impede the full measure of educational equality and opportunity to which every student is entitled regardless of their differing characteristics.”

– Dr. Bradley Scott, director of the IDRA South Central Collaborative for Equity

Students identified eight key issues:

1. The need to create positive dialogue on racial equality in education;
2. More communal support for students’ educational experiences;
3. Minority students need additional support and encouragement from teachers to begin the initiative;
4. The Advanced Placement (AP) classes have created defacto segregation; minorities are not encouraged or motivated to take AP courses;
5. Education is unequal because regular classes are not rigorous enough;
6. Social stratification remains a reality in this country;
7. The United States’ place in education (losing competitiveness); and
8. The mindset that this is the best it can be.

One of the students, Brandon Love, a student at Central High School, wrote a compelling essay, *A Tale of Two Centrals*, which was featured in the *IDRA Newsletter* (April 2007). Brandon’s story of

prevailing inequities served to underscore the urgent need for these dialogues and for change.

“Today, I walk the same halls walked by the Little Rock Nine. Oddly enough, in a school that was the first to desegregate and now boasts vast diversity, injustice reigns.”

– Brandon Love, high school student in Little Rock

In addition to the student presentations, IDRA shared student perspectives from earlier work of students in the Albuquerque public high schools who photographically captured their school realities, in the context of *Brown* and *Mendez*.

Within this context, participants focused on exploring key questions in three roundtable discussions.

Roundtable I: Identifying Capital for Action

- ❖ What are the challenges to overcome for access and success for *all* students in Little Rock?
- ❖ What resources, strengths and assets can be tapped to create a local blueprint for action that will result in access and success for *all* students in Little Rock?

Roundtable II: Sharing Capital; Creating a Vision

- ❖ What collective assets and capital do we have to build upon in creating a blueprint for action for our metropolitan area?
- ❖ What challenges must we confront across sectors and across racial and ethnic groups in our metropolitan area?

Roundtable III: Constructing Blueprints for Action

- ❖ What local actions are needed to fulfill the promise of *Mendez* and *Brown* for *all* students?
- ❖ What opportunities can be leveraged? What tools and resources are needed?

During the Little Rock Blueprint for Action meeting, IDRA provided 57 participants with local education and demographic data, facts for fair funding for Little Rock, local policymaker contact information, summaries of the *Brown* and *Mendez* court cases, and a checklist for the Goals of

Educational Equity and School Reform developed by IDRA. Dissemination of this and other relevant information continues via the IDRA's Brown and Mendez web site (www.idra.org/mendezbrown).

Challenges

Little Rock dialogue participants cited the following challenges in their community.

Advocacy and Coalition Building

- ❖ Establishing linkages between the business community and schools so that students will have clear options for career paths and opportunities for life options.
- ❖ Engaging the entire community in the educational process and work together toward a common purpose of serving all of the students.
- ❖ Adopting an institutionalized and internalized definition of mission and vision.
- ❖ Changing mindsets.
- ❖ Leveraging opportunities such as the 50th anniversary of Central High School activities.

Fair Funding

- ❖ Equitable facilities and funding in neighborhood schools and communities throughout central Arkansas.

School Accountability

- ❖ Use evaluations, benchmarks and assessments of student progress across the educational pipeline and to drive decisions.
- ❖ Practice accountability for service providers.

Teacher Training

- ❖ Strengthen professional development to include discipline, classroom management and multicultural education.
- ❖ Provide professional development for experienced and inexperienced teachers, particularly in terms of foreign language acquisition and English language learners.

- ❖ Strengthen staff with committed and well-qualified instructional leaders.
- ❖ Gear funding for teacher and staff training toward rigor and teacher retention.

Equitable Access

- ❖ Student access to positive role models in different fields.
- ❖ Access to quality supplemental services, programs and technology.
- ❖ Quality educational programs and opportunities for *all* students.
- ❖ Equal access for students into higher level classes, programs, particular schools and support needed to ensure success.

Family Leadership

- ❖ Inclusive parent and family involvement and access to resources.
- ❖ Responsive programs to address the language needs of students and using people in the community to bridge the language and cultural barriers.

Policy

- ❖ Alignment of policy decisions at the local, state and federal levels.
- ❖ Funding for unfunded mandates.
- ❖ Emphasis on responding to political and economically powerful influentials rather than the needs of all students.





“A paradigm shift [is needed]. The students have changed. The parents have changed...think about ways to reach students and to engage them to help them be successful.”

– Dialogue participant

“One of the major challenges would be in terms of parental involvement, parental participation, parental values. And those values that those parents bring to the process as co-partners in the educational mission and pursuit.”

– Dialogue participant

“We know that we’re not doing all that we can do to make students feel or do something about their self-worth.”

– Dialogue participant

“How can we use this event [The Blueprint Dialogues] to address the various issues of all of the schools...?”

– Dialogue participant

“Even when we are celebrating this wonderful thing at Central High, there is a ‘Tale of Two Centrals,’ even at Central High. There are some kids who get a fantastic education. There are other kids who are educated a little less well, even inside that particular building... Because some of these kids have access to the brightest teachers, the brightest minds.”

– Dialogue participant

Assets

Participants also listed the resources and strengths that could be tapped in their community.

- ❖ Diversity as one of the Little Rock community’s most important resources for finding solutions.
- ❖ A cadre of highly qualified educators who care and their wealth of talent.

- ❖ The Southern Poverty Law Center, Just Communities, Department of Human Services, Arkansas Black Caucus, and other local programs, groups and organizations that can help address issues of racism and cultural diversity.

- ❖ People in the community with language skills.

- ❖ Higher education institutions in Arkansas that educate teachers and instructional leaders.

“Little Rock is the nation’s treasure where the whole history of legacy and equal access and equity all began... We need to use that equity as one of the most valuable resources.”

– Dialogue participant

“Many times people give you excuses why kids can’t perform... because of their racial background, poverty and all of that... But there is nothing in a child’s race or handicapping condition that [means they] can’t understand how to round to the nearest tens, nearest hundreds, nearest thousands... People have not been held accountable for great teaching... in this state.”

– Dialogue participant

“Just because we have legislation does not mean that we’re going to change matters of the heart. That comes from within. That comes from a deeper place.”

– Dialogue participant

Opportunities for Reform and Action Steps

The Little Rock dialogue participants provided the following recommendations for addressing these challenges.

Advocacy and Coalition Building

- ❖ Provide outreach to stakeholders, especially parents and business leaders, headed by social workers.
- ❖ Coordinate and collaborate among agencies and stakeholders that can impact access and success for all students pre-K through college.
- ❖ Form a statewide cross-cultural alliance of stakeholders and agencies that can positively impact education for all students.

- ❖ Share resources in the tri-district area to expand opportunities, including funding opportunities.
- ❖ Have a tri-district newspaper where educators and students could communicate and celebrate successes and discuss issues.
- ❖ Communicate with and educate communities so they understand what schools are doing.
- ❖ Have businesses develop incentives for students to continue to higher education.
- ❖ Help people see they have more similarities than differences.
- ❖ Create a blue ribbon committee – a cross-sector group – to disseminate the message for sustained actions at the grassroots level.
- ❖ Use state media to disseminate student “success stories.”
- ❖ Develop a comprehensive inventory of Little Rock’s human capital.

Fair Funding

- ❖ Stop the re-segregation of communities by providing affordable housing in affluent neighborhoods.

School Accountability

- ❖ Identify the many good things that are happening in Little Rock public schools and help other schools replicate best practices.



- ❖ Investigate and research successful school models.
- ❖ Use data-driven developmental strategies that meet the needs of all children.
- ❖ Develop action plans that address accountability for performance and desegregation of resources.

Teacher Training

- ❖ Expand the core group of quality teachers who care about success for all students.
- ❖ Provide internship programs for teachers and professional development for teachers and media center specialists.
- ❖ Ensure that teachers are applying the strategies learned through their professional development.
- ❖ Provide access for all teachers to specialized training so they would be able to teach AP courses, ensuring all students are successful.
- ❖ Create a paradigm shift for media center specialists that changes the media center from a quiet, exclusive place to a dynamic and inclusive center for all students.
- ❖ Promote students’ self-esteem through cultural awareness and understanding training for schools.

Equitable Access

- ❖ Support activities, such as tutoring, that will help students succeed in higher level classes.
- ❖ Include the student perspective and voice in planning, discussion groups and focus groups.

Family Leadership

- ❖ Involve the entire family in education, including summer institutes, child development and parenting courses for all high school students.
- ❖ Establish a parent education component that has satellites in all of the schools, neighborhoods and churches.
- ❖ Tap parent leadership and have parents develop a community action plan.



- ❖ Use school and university facilities for family involvement activities.
- ❖ Have community advocates serve in *loco parentis*.

K-12 Alignment

- ❖ Improve collaboration between public K-12 education and higher education that integrates multicultural elements into curricula and instruction.
- ❖ Collaborate with colleges in making appropriate teacher placements during a practicum in order to gain some experience with teaching diverse classes.
- ❖ Establish a clear vision and align all of the resources to support staff development.

Policy

- ❖ Create policies at the state, county, district and school levels that help children, including changing teacher licensure requirements so teachers are prepared to teach all children, including English language learners.
- ❖ Develop a three-pronged approach – legislative, educational and community – that would study what is being done and provide recommendations on what should be done to ensure success for all students.
- ❖ Teach students financial literacy to help them make real-world connections to schooling.

“We’ve got to communicate to the communities that they own the schools.”

– Dialogue participant

“Create schools as centers of the community where health, recreation, senior citizens... are in the school beyond the 7½ hours that our children receive.”

– Dialogue participant

“Use schools to serve communities.”

– Dialogue participant

“It’s not going to do any of us any good to discuss all of these concerns and still have nothing there that holds us accountable for seeing that everyone is afforded... opportunities... keeping in mind that all of our successes are dependent upon someone else’s success.”

– Dialogue participant

“We see ourselves as resources for those who are concerned about success and equity.”

– Dialogue participant

“We envision students who feel good about themselves and who they are... teachers who will [have] the ability to reach the students... and immediately know that they are care about and that they are loved.”

– Dialogue participant

“We envision that professionals throughout the community would step forward always and try to do what they can to help out children.”

– Dialogue participant

“We looked into the audience and we saw a mass of humanity and all the kinds of support that we need to put in place... We want you to be a part of our little group. It’s going to be called ‘ASAP.’ And that means ‘Access for Student Achievement and Performance Now’... We need to take action right now. Stop talking about it. Do something right now.”

– Dialogue participant

“We can, in an action plan, just reclassify how teachers are assigned to kids. If they’re the best and the brightest, then the best and the brightest need to be reserved for those kids who need them the most.”

– Dialogue participant

“There should be in every building... the accountability specialist that’s going to be the dream-keeper to be sure that [there is someone for] those kids who are not succeeding to monitor that process, track that progress.”

– Dialogue participant



“We talked about us – this group that’s here today – being able to be the face of dialogue so that people can see that we were able to sit and discuss and come to some... recommendations.”

– Dialogue participant

The primary result of the Little Rock Blueprint for Action meeting was new and strengthened alliances among and between groups with local leaders committed to continuing the work through additional local dialogues and an action plan.

IDRA will continue to support this effort at regional, state and national levels and has identified themes that transcend geographic and contextual boundaries. These include:

- ❖ Communities of color need an opportunity, at the local level, to voice concerns regarding access to education.
- ❖ Communities benefit from a structure to share concerns across communities.
- ❖ Coalition building must span across disciplines and sectors to improve education.
- ❖ Facilitated interaction can yield greater interconnectedness, recognition of assets and an improved will for effective action.
- ❖ When local communities own the process, there is greater commitment for effective action.
- ❖ Each community needs to know its local context to fulfill the promises of *Brown* and *Mendez*.

- ❖ There is acknowledgment of inequalities in education by communities and parents.
- ❖ There is great readiness by communities and parents to act and to partner with schools.
- ❖ There is complexity and diversity within and among groups that both pose challenges and serve as opportunities for the greater good.
- ❖ Accountability is good, must be shared and accomplished through multiple measures and must not hurt kids.
- ❖ Education, as a common civic space, can have positive impacts and can be a leverage point for other issues (e.g., health care).
- ❖ The histories of *Brown* and *Mendez* are inextricably connected and are powerful linking points for African Americans and Latinos to dialogue and act together.

“We are going to have to feed mediocrity with excellence to the point that it explodes.”

– Dr. Bradley Scott, director of the IDRA South Central Collaborative for Equity

This endeavor has potential for lasting positive impact throughout Arkansas and the nation. Seizing the unique opportunity of changing demographics and given the momentum provided by the recent commemoration of civil rights in America, the Little Rock dialogue has begun to create a legacy of shared leadership, accountability and engaged action to ensure an equitable and excellent education for all students.



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