



## Focus: Restoring Justice

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# Integrating the Assets of Social Justice Principles to Transform Schools

by Nilka Avilés, Ed.D., and Hector Bojorquez

Creating a just society, based on the values and principles of human rights, requires recognizing each person’s dignity. Social justice in education recognizes that all are on equal footing and each has much to contribute.

Yet educators daily confront the challenges of young people marginalized by unjust schooling policies and practices, along with myriad other factors that disengage them and result in poor academic performance. This litany of factors, that can be marginalizing if not done well, includes social context, curriculum, teacher pedagogy, school culture and climate, discipline, education access, policies, and health and community engagement.

Educational institutions often fail to adequately address inequities in race, class, gender, national origin and sexual orientation, all of which are intertwined with educational social constructs. Even educators themselves can be either agents or victims of institutional biases. And educators can feel powerless to affect the inequities that hurt our children.

But we are not powerless at all. In fact, educators play a powerful role in constructing approaches from a social justice perspective.

### Five Principles of Social Justice

Research has identified five principles of social justice (Carlisle, Jackson & George, 2006) for equitable success of schools and students.

- 1. Inclusion and Equity.** The school counters social inequities by creating an environment that challenges oppressive attitudes and behaviors, values multiple perspectives, and fosters community-building across social identity groups.
- 2. High Expectations.** The school provides a diverse and challenging learning environment that supports student development, holds all students to high expectations, and empowers students of all social identities.
- 3. Reciprocal Community Relationships.** The school recognizes its role as both a resource to, and beneficiary of, the community. It creates and sustains a mutually beneficial relationship with the community focusing on equity and social justice.
- 4. System-wide Approach.** The schools’ mission, resource allocation structures, policies, procedures, and physical environment exemplify its commitment to creating and sustaining a socially just environment between and among various constituency groups and within all areas of the system. The school has an established protocol for examining leadership impact and other changes on mission, resource allocation, policies, etc. The equitable school is a model and research site for emulation.
- 5. Direct Social Justice Education and Intervention.** Faculty and staff are reflective prac-

(cont. on Page 2)

*“This problem of blaming the students – because their soul, their mind, their heart, or their community environment is deemed unhealthy – is perhaps the main reason we fall short of keeping the promise to educate all children. Today, it is time to dream together a better future, and the core of our dream must value young people – all young people.”*

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

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titioners and pedagogical/content specialists willing both to teach and learn about social justice in all disciplines and teach social justice as content.

### The Principles in Action

Applying these principles means ensuring that the success of all students prevails schoolwide purposefully, urgently and with commitment. It requires reflecting critically on the school environment and systems, and it requires committing purposefully to transform them.

When social justice principles permeate, marginalized communities are recognized as being full of talents and resources, not broken. This is the heart of asset-based practices and principles. As *Principle 1: Inclusion and Equity* implies, the school must be a safe and nurturing place for all where everyone is valued. The asset vision undergirds all social justice principles outlined above and has implications for all educational initiatives and reforms.

For example, in the curriculum, a common way schools attempt to address low student achievement in mathematics has been a sequential approach. This usually means that for students to succeed on standardized tests, they must “go back to basics.” Although seemingly logical, this approach can marginalize students perceived as needing to constantly play catch-up to get missing vital skills. But mathematics is not built on a ladder. And consistently low performance in higher math by students of color reflects this self-fulfilling prophecy.

The “back to basics” math movement has been fraught with questions as it hurts marginalized students more when teaching does not show the reasons for the basics and the connections to higher math applications driving our world. Students of color and poor students often end

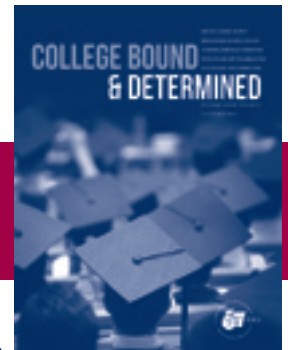
## College Bound & Determined

A report profiling what happens when a school district raises expectations for students instead of lowering them

“All students deserve an equitable, excellent and college bound education. By using the IDRA Quality Schools Action Framework, we tell the story of how one school district has brought that ideal closer to reality for all students.”

— Dr. María “Cuca” Robledo Montecel, IDRA President & CEO

College Bound & Determined is available from IDRA for \$15 and is free online at: <http://budurl.com/IDRACbdw>



up merely with rudimentary skills that limit their professional and economic future.

To repeat: Students’ assets must be acknowledged and connected to the essence of educational social justice. Even if our social justice efforts identify resource gaps and funding inequities, they will fail if a deficit view of students and communities still dominates.

Putting social justice principles into practice means assessing even our most cherished educational notions. View “back to basics” mathematics instruction through a justice lens and see how that practice affects inclusion and high expectations. Spotlight the low expectations. Hold all students to high expectations and provide the academic and emotional support systems that produce student success: *Principle 2: High Expectations*.

Pharr-San Juan Alamo (PSJA) ISD in the South

Texas Valley models social justice principles carried out with asset-based practices (Bojorquez, 2014). To address school holding power and dropout recovery, PSJA recruits students who have dropped out to return to prepare for college, not to get a GED. Rather than follow a traditional response to dropouts with a weak curriculum, pushing them toward a GED or technology-assisted credit recovery opportunities, they are registered in dual-credit courses.

The traditional approaches of low-expectations would view these students as at-risk and only having capability for minimum requirements. By engaging in *Principle 3*, school districts focus their efforts on how the community addresses inequities and how, as visionary leaders, to debunk deficit practices.

PSJA implements a counter intuitive approach based on asset based-practices. A case in point is (cont. on Page 7)

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# How Using Restorative Practices Can Prevent Exclusionary Discipline Issues

by Kristin Grayson, Ph.D., Paula Johnson, M.A.

Removing students from the school setting for discipline is harmful for their academic achievement. When students aren't in school, they can't learn the material, and they become more disengaged from school.

Schools are suspending and expelling students at alarming rates. Data show that boys, students of color, and students with disabilities are significantly overrepresented in school discipline rates (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). This gap raises the issue of racial discrimination in school discipline. Students of color and boys often receive harsher treatment for similar misbehaviors or offenses by their peers.

The process of reforming discipline involves creating a positive climate in schools, which also helps all students learn (Colombi & David, 2015). Removing students from the classroom (such as for suspensions) makes it difficult for students to reconnect and catch-up academically when they return to class, which can lead to other misbehaviors.

Avoiding exclusionary discipline minimizes the negative effects related to poor school climate, continued poor behavior, loss of instructional time, poor academic achievement, higher drop-out rates and greater involvement with juvenile justice systems (Colombi & Osher, 2015).

## Using Asset-Based Strategies

Pro-active districts, campuses and teachers use asset-based strategies to create a culture of connectivity and care where all members of the school community can thrive. This is especially needed for students who have been harmed by these prior disciplinary practices or those who have harmed others and received disciplinary actions.

Rather than placing blame and sanctioning students, educators must seek to understand the situation and any harm that has resulted. They then use this knowledge to resolve the situation equitably, seeking to restore relationships among students, teachers and school leaders (McCluskey, et al., 2008).

## Critical Role of District Leadership

Teachers have the closest interaction with students. However, restorative practices are most effective when district and campus leaders initiate reforms along with teachers. Districts can begin by reviewing their student codes of conduct to ensure that the language is not ambiguous (or subject to multiple interpretations) and that it is inclusive and equitable in recommended practices.

At the same time, school leaders and educators must focus on creating an inclusive school climate for all students, including suspended students when they return to the campus. Effective leadership supports the critical role of the teachers throughout this process. These restorative school discipline practices focus on (re)establishing relationships and repairing harm as opposed to just punishment for misbehavior. The process focuses on building empathy through strategies, such as conferencing, classroom discussions and peacemaking circles (Teaching Tolerance, 2015).

School leaders must be aware of racial bias in school discipline. This can begin with a review of discipline practices and district data. Data may reveal higher numbers of incidents for students of color, boys and students with disabilities. The IDRA EAC-South has many years of experience working with districts during this process. Examples of technical assistance and training available through the IDRA EAC-South include the following.

- Assess discipline policies and practices, make recommendations to reduce loss of learning time, and achieve improved school climate and equity for all students;
- Collaborate on equity plans to address civil rights compliance issues;
- Provide professional development to school leaders and educators on cultural competency and implicit bias, and co-create train-the-trainer models;
- Co-develop and assist with the implementation of school desegregation plans; and

(cont. on Page 4)

*The process of reforming discipline involves creating a positive climate in schools, which also helps all students learn.*

## 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.

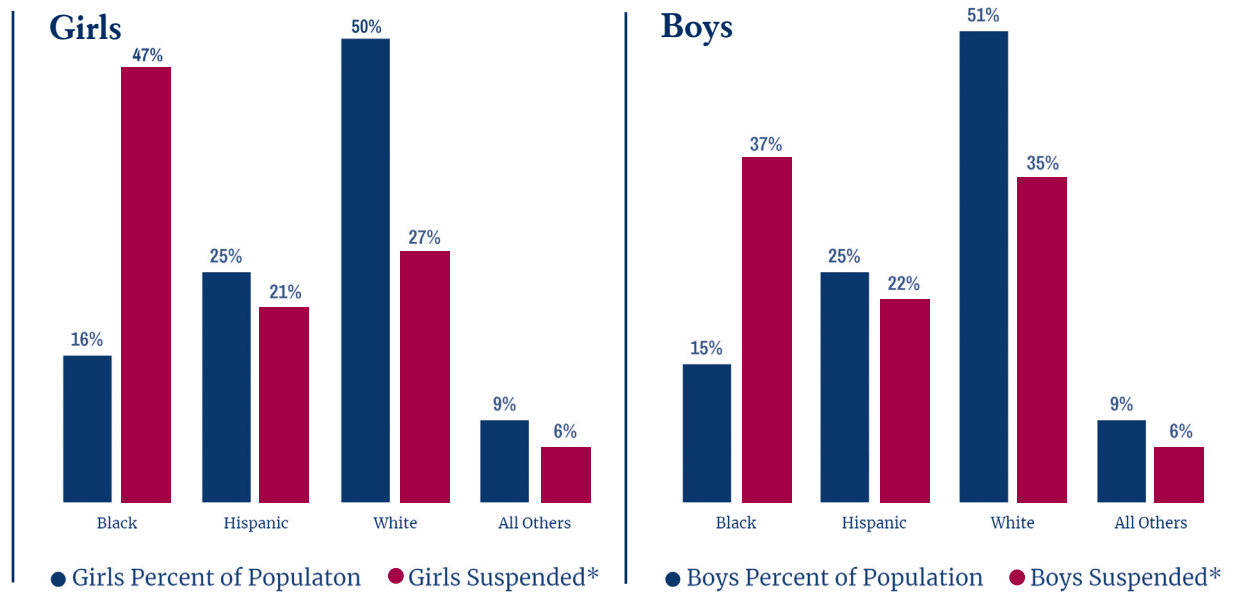
Additional resources are available online at <http://www.idra.org/eac-south/>

funded by the U.S. Department of Education



(How Using Restorative Practices Can Prevent Exclusionary Discipline Issues, continued from Page 3)

## U.S. Schools are Much More Likely to Suspend Black Students



\*Percent receiving at least one out-of-school suspension

Data source: OCR Discipline Dataset 2013-14

- Develop tools that monitor and assess the success of district and school improvement plans.

For example, the IDRA EAC-South worked closely with one school district in revising its student code of conduct. In use for over a year now, the new code uses a system of tiered behaviors. As a result, the district shows a gain of almost 1,300 days of individual student instruction from the previous year. There has been no use of corporal punishment, down from 24 cases the previous year. There also was a decrease in out-of-school suspensions and referrals to an alternative school.

### Positive School Climate with Restorative Discipline

Restorative discipline builds positive school climates that value all students. The goal is to develop welcoming learning environments that are inclusive of all students and foster relationships within the school community. Children experience four fundamental needs as they transition to adolescence: having others welcome them into a group and developing a sense of belonging; making contributions and earning respect; feeling appreciated; and having close, stable relationships (Hamburg, 1998). With these needs fulfilled, students thrive and are more likely to engage in constructive classroom participation.

Teachers can take steps to meet these needs by demonstrating genuine interest in each student

and taking notice of the effort and progress they make. Students know when teachers are really interested in what they are saying (Smith, et al., 2015). Therefore, it is important that we know how to show students that we truly care about them and their success. The following key practices can help reassure students that they are part of a community:

- **Know their names.** This seems like a given, and perhaps it should be, but knowing our students' names and referring to them by name frequently is a simple but vital way to begin to build a relationship.
- **Take notice of absent students and connect with them when they return.** They may have important information to share that could be helpful to you as their teacher. Take the time to welcome them back and let them know they were missed. This small act shows them that you value their participation in the learning process.
- **Show support in their afterschool activities.** It is very tempting to go home after a long day of classes. Try to attend some activities occasionally. Go to a basketball game, chess tournament or school play. You will get to see your students' interests. They will see one of their teachers supporting them. If you cannot attend, talk to your students about their activities outside of your classroom. Encourage all

your students to seek out activities and peer groups they feel connected to.

- **Chat with them frequently, beyond small talk.** Beyond "hi" and "how are you?" try to learn enough about each student to strike up a real conversation. Doing so helps your students feel important and cared for. These conversations can also inform the topics you bring into instruction.

Strong relationships with students build empathy in both parties. This makes it harder to treat others in rude or disrespectful ways (Smith, et al., 2015). Restorative discipline has the power to prevent discipline issues and build positive relationships. It is helpful for discussions during times of conflict. Students learn to use this model with peers, their families and other adults in their lives. This life skill promotes social, emotional, and academic growth.

For IDRA EAC-South assistance please contact us through <http://www.idraeacsouth.org/> or call 210-444-1710.

### Resources

- Colombi, G., & Osher, D. (2015). *Advancing School Discipline Reform – Education Leaders Report* (Arlington, Va.: National Association of State Boards of Education).
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# ESSA Requirements for Schools and Parent Involvement – New Tool for School Districts

by Aurelio M. Montemayor, M.Ed.

Last year in April, IDRA held its 19th Annual IDRA *La Semana del Niño* Parent Institute. Among the many concurrent sessions, we have taken the materials for four of the presentations and created packages to be used for training and technical assistance for school districts. These packages are tools to strengthen family engagement in public schools.

The first package is “ESSA Requirements for Schools and Parent Involvement” based on a presentation by David Hinojosa, IDRA Director of National Policy. The goal is to train families on how the state and the local school district must have plans to improve learning for all students, including poor and minority students and to involve the community in creating those plans. Key elements are:

- Parents serving on peer-review teams to evaluate school district and state education plans,
- Involving parents in creating state report cards,
- School outreach to parents,
- Partnering to create school-parent compacts,
- Family engagement funding, and
- Statewide family engagement centers.

The materials include an ESSA Action Pack for community members, a PowerPoint set on ESSA and a video. (The training materials are online at: <https://budurl.me/IDRAFamPKGw>.)


As states get their ESSA plans approved by the U.S. Department of Education, families can review local equity plans and have input on how Title I programs are carried out to serve economically disadvantaged communities. Even though each state has its own unique ESSA plan, the family engagement requirements are universal and provide an important opportunity for families to influence both policy and practice.

The ESSA requirements for family engagement don't speak to providing parenting sessions or to working with parents for volunteerism and fundraising. The rules however do specify that districts inform families about the academic goals for, and achievements of, students in Title I schools.

Along with the need to serve children whose families are economically disadvantaged, there are issues of civil rights in public education. Funded in part by the U.S. Department of Education, the IDRA EAC-South technical assistance in the U.S. South promulgates family engagement as a civil rights issue because families are the most logical advocates and supporters of all children's rights to an accessible, excellent, equitable and welcoming public school.

The 20th Annual IDRA *La Semana del Niño* Parent Institute will be held on Friday, April 6, at the Whitley Center in San Antonio, the same site where it has been for the last four years. It will be bilingual (English-Spanish), with some sessions live-streamed, and offer an array of concurrent presentations of interest to families, with many of the presentation led by parents. Family leadership in education is the connecting thread and overarching theme of the event.

## Annual IDRA La Semana del Niño Parent Institute™



**Bilingual Parent Institute • April 6, 2018**  
Special event for families, community groups and educators

This annual institute offers families, school district personnel and community groups from across the country the opportunity to network, obtain resources and information, and receive training and bilingual materials on IDRA's nationally-recognized research based model for parent leadership in education. This institute is interactive and participatory. All presentations are bilingual (English-Spanish).

**Highlights coming in 2018**

- Bilingual presentations on successful family engagement
- Roundtable educational presentations
- Parent interviews
- Breakout sessions on education topics
- Refreshments and lunch
- Exhibitors, including service providers, college and universities and non-profit agencies

**“ The fact that everybody was engaged, was participating; this is something I don't see in any other conference. [In other conferences], people just go and listen. Here people come to participate to be engaged – that was impressive! ”**

– previous participant

**Get details:**  
<http://www.idra.org/events/la-semana-del-nino-parent-institute>

# Texas Charter School System Suffers Low Graduation Rates

## The Class of 2016 saw Graduation Rates of 62% in Charter Schools Compared to 90% in Traditional Public Schools

by María “Cuca” Robledo Montecel, Ph.D.

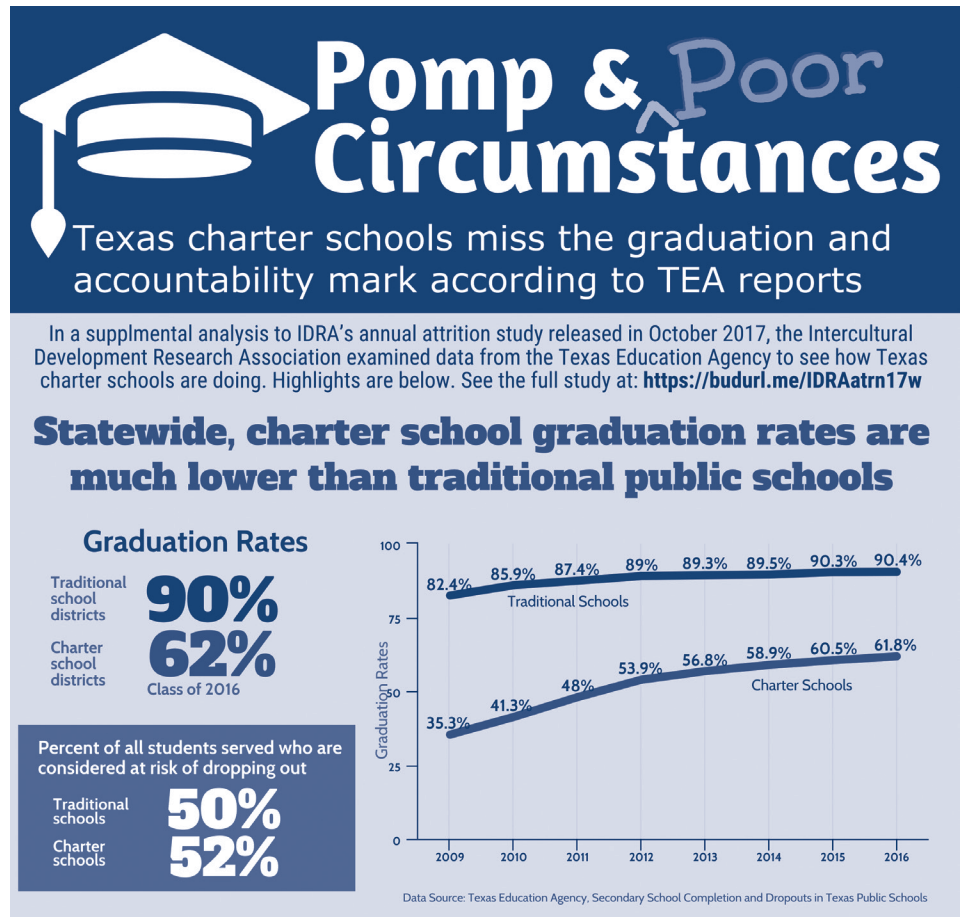
Texas students in charter schools are not necessarily faring better than their peers in traditional public schools. With significantly lower graduation rates and lower accountability ratings reported by the Texas Education Agency, the state’s planned expansion of charter schools is troubling. In an additional analysis to IDRA’s annual attrition study released in October, IDRA examined the annual dropout and longitudinal graduation rates in Texas charter schools from 2009 to 2016.

Key findings show:

- The Class of 2016 saw graduation rates of 62 percent in charter schools compared to 90 percent in traditional public schools.
- While some charter schools serve some of the students in highest need, analysis of TEA data for 2016-17 statewide reveals that there is very little difference in the percentage of students served who are considered at risk of dropping out: 50 percent in traditional schools compared to 52 percent in charter schools.
- Nearly one out of every five charter campuses (22.9 percent) failed to achieve “met standard” or the lower “alternative standard,” compared to about one of every 25 traditional public schools.
- Texas public schools serve 5.4 million students, while charter schools serve only 273,000. State funding for charter schools increased at a much faster rate than for public schools in the last decade, with an 8 percent increase for traditional schools compared to a 236 percent increase for charters.

Texas needs to let go of the claim that charter schools can ‘rescue’ students from their so-called failing neighborhood public schools. As our communities predicted, the data show otherwise. Our families and communities don’t need ‘rescuing’ by lottery. They demand strong neighborhood public schools.

The state of Texas is required to provide an excellent education for all students. Rather than funneling tax money to private interests or to



charter school operators that are not accountable to the public, our state must shore up neighborhood public schools where all students graduate from high school prepared for college or the world of work, no matter what the color of their skin, the language they speak, or where they happen to be born.

With a three-year grant of \$59,164,996 from the U.S. Department of Education, the State of Texas is planning the expansion of 115 new charter schools.

IDRA’s Quality School Action Framework™ guides communities and schools in identifying weak areas and strengthening public schools’ capacities to graduate and prepare all students

for success. IDRA’s book, *Courage to Connect: A Quality Schools Action Framework* shows how communities and schools can work together to be successful with all of their students.

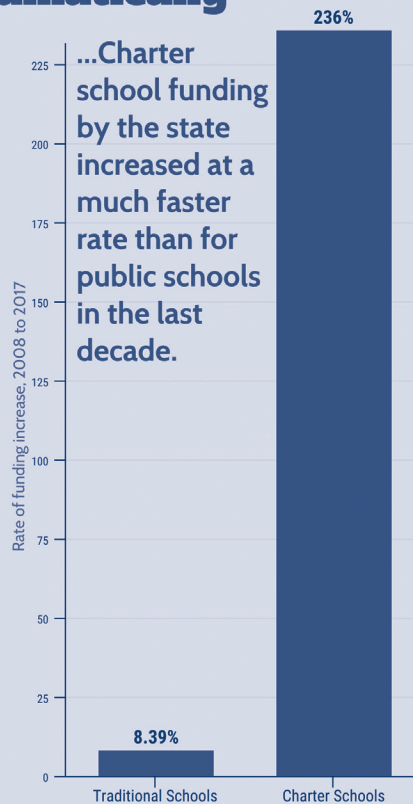
María “Cuca” Robledo Montecel, Ph.D., is the IDRA President & CEO. Comments and questions may be directed to her via email at [contact@idra.org](mailto:contact@idra.org).

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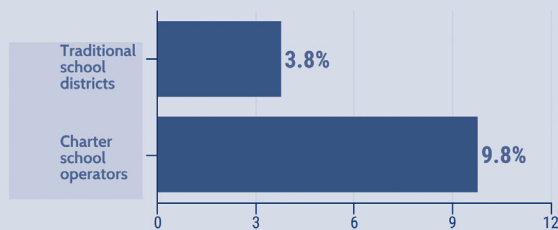
## State funding for charter schools has grown dramatically

Texas public schools serve 5.4 million students, while charter schools serve only 273,000...



Data Sources: Texas Attorney General's Office, January 2013; Texas Education Agency, 2017

## Texas charter schools had twice the failure rate of traditional schools in 2016



Data Source: Texas Education Agency, Comprehensive Biennial Report on Texas Public Schools, 2016



Texas needs to let go of the claim that charter schools can "rescue" students from their so-called failing neighborhood public schools. As our communities predicted, the data show otherwise. Our families and communities don't need rescuing by lottery. They demand strong neighborhood public schools.

Dr. María "Cuca" Robledo Montecel, IDRA President & CEO

(Integrating the Assets of Social Justice Principles, continued from Page 2)

the PSJA College, Career & Technology Academy (CCTA). Here, students earn college credits while they finish high school. The district flipped the conversation by supporting students who are in at-risk situations to succeed far beyond minimum requirements. The results have been remarkable. Within the first year, PSJA's dropout numbers were reduced by 50 percent.

This System-wide Approach (*Principle 4*) also is an example of establishing Reciprocal Community Relationships (*Principle 3*) as the institution created an academy as a response to a need in the community that treated dropouts as students fully capable of having a college-going future. PSJA's CCTA involves teachers, leadership teams and central office administration in regular learning communities. Together, they address social justice issues in education and the community and they co-create interventions with students. This practice has led to deeper involvement in other specialized programs in the district, such as the Sotomayor High School for teen parents and parent engagement in social justice issues in the colonias.

To address *Principle 5: Direct Social Justice Education and Intervention*, the faculty of these schools engages in reflective communication and staff development on their content and pedagogical practices. They examine, critically and honestly, their own racial and class attitudes for implicit biases and affirmatively counteract any inequities (Hackman, 2005).

Social justice principles in education get positive results when carried out through asset-based practices. These are not pipe dreams, but tangible realities. Transformation and progress come by addressing social justice issues in education by discarding views of our students as broken by economic and social injustices, but rather full of potential, promise and brainpower. And educators co-create a new reality where their work has deeper meaning and success.

### Resources

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*achieving equal educational opportunity for every child  
 through strong public schools that prepare all students to access and succeed in college*