



Focus: English Learner Literacy

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School Leaders Improve English Learner Literacy with Focus on Inferencing

by Nilka Avilés, Ed.D.

In an era of rapid educational changes and dynamic diverse student populations, educators and transformational leaders must deeply reflect on how they are narrowing opportunity gaps. This includes making sure our schools provide English learners (ELs) a quality education that honors and builds upon the literacy skills in their home language and develops a highly sophisticated level of literacy in English.

Through the work of our School Turn-Around and Re-energizing for Success (STAARS) Leaders project in a school district in San Antonio, IDRA found some implementation practices that proved to be very effective in increasing leader and teacher capacity and effectiveness in improving literacy for ELs. This article cites a key study because of the significant number of participating ELs involved. Findings led to the creation of professional development activities that address a critical reading skill that likely contributed to the high number of students who had been failing to succeed in state assessment tests.

Building Student Inferencing Skills Tips the Scales

Researchers at IDRA analyzed data for multiple campuses focusing on the third grade state assessment and curriculum standards in reading. We found that around 90 percent of the test questions relied on some type of inferencing. Conducting a vertical analysis of the Texas curriculum standards revealed that inferencing is a skill that is

required starting in pre-kindergarten and going all the way to 12th grade. Overall, most students, including ELs, did poorly in inferencing on the state assessment test. We identified that there was a big disconnect between the curriculum, the assessment and the instructional program. This was true of all student groups involved in the study.

The research literature indicates that a key indicator in the ability to draw inferences predetermines reading skills. There is a strong correlation between inferencing and comprehension. If students cannot infer effectively, they are not able to comprehend effectively (Kispal, 2008).

In disaggregating the data for the schools we studied, we saw variation by classroom in how students performed on reading assessments. We met with the school principals to review the analysis and findings. Through reflective practices, the principals decided to focus on strengthening teacher capacity in building inferencing skills into their literacy programs. At the same time, this process helped teachers increase their content knowledge, thereby improving their overall quality of teaching and learning.

We interviewed teachers about their work to increase literacy skills, and many shared their poor preparation in their pre-service teaching programs. They also expressed the need to know effective classroom inference-focused strate-
(cont. on Page 2)

“English learners are one of the lowest academically performing groups of students, and the achievement gap widens as students progress through school. Equal access to a quality education is the civil rights issue of our generation, and we must work in every way to make educational opportunity a reality.”

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

(School Leaders Improve English Learner Literacy with Focus on Inferencing, continued from Page 1)

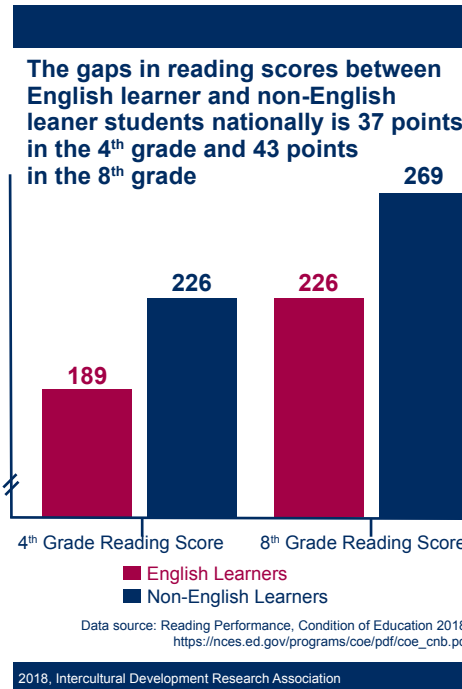
gies. In consultation with school leaders, IDRA provided customized professional development through five modules focused on inferencing and reasoning skills.

At the same time, teachers and school leaders determined which formative assessments to give and how often. Those results were analyzed and discussed within their professional learning communities to develop action plans to ensure instruction was aligned with the state curriculum standards and the state assessments. Lessons, then, strategically targeted both the standards and the assessments.

Using the explicit model of instructional delivery, inferencing using metacognition was intentionally taught, stressing the importance of developing thinking processes to become habits of the mind. The “end in mind” was to develop strategic thinkers who can meet college and career readiness standards.

Teachers used what they had learned in training sessions with principal support for intensive small-group interventions focusing on different types of inferencing along with metacognition practices. Emphasis was placed on developing academic language and thinking processes in all content areas.

During professional learning community sessions, teachers reviewed and analyzed the data, and they used the data to inform their instruction. They worked as a team in lesson development, delivery, and monitoring the progress of the students in order to move them into higher proficiency levels. Teachers and leaders tracked students’ growth to consistently guide students in improving their learning.



By having this strong focus on intentional teaching and learning results, the schools improved literacy scores and helped close the achievement gap between EL and non-EL students. They also were moved out of the “needs improvement” rating and received awards for distinction.

Transformational Leaders Create a Focused Environment

This example demonstrates that for school leaders to be effective with EL policies and implementation strategies, they must value students, believe in their potential success, build teachers’ content knowledge, and implement strong instructional programs with genuine support systems and resources. Leaders must use a social justice lens to build a culture dedicated to equity and excellence for all students beginning with developing

literacy (Avilés, 2016).

Research by Stepanek & Raphael (2010) reinforces the need for school leaders to face two major questions:

- How do we create a culture of urgency and a focus of high standards and expectations for teachers to implement evidence-based instructional practices that will improve EL linguistic and academic achievement?
- What does it take for a transformational leader to establish a school culture dedicated to engaging ELs and improving literacy and student success for ELs as well as for all students?

First, transformational leaders must support, articulate and advocate for student rights and respect for cultural and linguistic differences. Leaders must first define and establish operational norms that are asset based and grounded on a philosophy that “all students are valuable; none is expendable.”

For ELs, this means recognizing that they have a language, culture and experiences that form the foundation for their learning. Leaders and teachers must foster a nurturing and positive approach, one that embraces and recognizes their strengths and “funds of knowledge” that will contribute to EL engagement in their own educational growth.

Second, leaders and staff must have a shared vision of success for all children. Everyone must be committed, inspired and accountable to improving instruction along with delivering genuine support services. This vision is one in which all students meet high standards. The transformational leader communicates the vision and its direction and provides the support and resources for all teachers to ensure that there is an ongoing monitoring process for improvement.

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Creating Effective Diverse Classrooms through Accelerated Teacher Certification

by Felix Montes, Ph.D.

Students in schools with fewer resources are at most risk of receiving a poor education. One manifestation of this problem is the acute shortage of prepared teachers in areas that directly impact these students. This article highlights the teacher accelerated certification approach IDRA took to address this problem. We'll review it from four perspectives: the issue, the solution, the results and the recommendations.

The innovative approach was summarized in the recent IDRA publication: *IDRA Transition to Teaching Program – 15-Year Synthesis*. Dr. María “Cuca” Robledo Montecel was the program's principal investigator, Dr. Abelardo Villarreal served as its program manager, and the programs were directed by Dr. Linda Cantu, and Dr. Felix Montes.

Teacher Shortage Areas Consistently High Nationally

Many schools in Texas don't have well-prepared teachers to serve their increasingly diverse classrooms, particularly in bilingual/ESL, special education, and STEM. In early September, the Houston Chronicle sounded the alarm once again about this problem for special education, stating: “Where will schools find up to 9,000 new special education teachers? Schools already have a hard time recruiting special education teachers, so much so that the state offers incentives, such as student loan forgiveness programs. But those incentives aren't enough to meet the demand, leaving schools across the state struggling every year to find enough teachers to provide specialized services to students” (Matos, 2018).

IDRA's new report underscores the severity of this issue through the remarkable consistency of the teacher shortage areas reported annually by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) to the U.S. Department of Education.

The Department of Education receives similar figures from other states and combines them to make a global list of high-need fields in schools

that serve low-income students. The most recent listing includes: bilingual education and English language acquisition, foreign language, math, reading specialist, science, and special education (August 2017). Both TEA and the U.S. Department of Education show that the shortage of teachers in high-need schools is critical.

IDRA's Transition to Teaching Program

IDRA helped address the teacher shortage by preparing over 800 recent college graduates and mid-career professionals to be culturally proficient educators and succeed in classrooms with diverse student populations, including English learner, special education and low-income students.

Funded by the U.S. Department of Education for 15 years through six multi-year Transition to Teaching grants, IDRA partnered with higher education teacher preparation programs, and 55 urban and rural high-need school districts across Texas. The figure on the next page illustrates this unique accelerated preparation program.

IDRA's program comprised three sequential gears:

- Recruit and carefully select participants among minority community professionals who want to make a difference and recent graduates committed to work in diverse classrooms.
- Prepare them through regular coursework at partnering colleges and universities, and individualized online and on-site professional development, so they can excel in diverse classrooms and obtain their certification.
- Place them in the classrooms, initially as interns, eventually as teachers of record.

After placement, teachers continued to receive from IDRA highly personalized asset-based mentoring and coaching, classroom observation and feedback, and focused interactive workshops called *platicas*. In these *platicas*, teachers

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IDRA helped improve alternative route programs by emphasizing minority student needs and the importance of preparing teachers to succeed in a multicultural environment.

(Creating Effective Diverse Classrooms through Accelerated Teacher Certification, continued from Page 5)

discussed topics they were engaged with, such as cultural awareness in bilingual classrooms, teaching multilevel language groups, engaging students, and reading in the content areas. This assured that teachers had a rewarding experience with peer support in their newly-acquired profession, increasing their chances of staying in it. All of this made a difference, as demonstrated below.

IDRA's synthesis report published this month shows that IDRA recruited 935 prospective teachers. Out of these, 815 completed the program and 768 started teaching in high-need classrooms fully certified. All figures exceeded the program's targets. Not only were the teachers well-prepared, but demographically they also resemble their classroom profiles better than the rest of teachers in Texas.

IDRA helped improve existing alternative route programs by emphasizing minority student needs and the importance of preparing teachers to succeed in a multicultural environment. Comments from collaborating school administrators revealed a high level of satisfaction: "Districts needed knowledgeable, capable teachers to help students succeed in high-need subject areas – mathematics, science, language arts. IDRA assured that all teachers selected met the requirements to be selected to enroll and complete projects requirements, successfully passed state test requirements and were placed in high-need campuses."

More than 93 percent of teachers felt that the program was effective at training them to work effectively in diverse classrooms. One teacher said: "My preparation was completely accurate. I work in a school in which 99 percent are at-risk students."

On-site mentoring and coaching was the most successful way to support teachers. As one teacher indicated: "My mentor highlighted what we should expect in the classroom and [how to] handle ourselves outside."

According to these teachers, the program's main strength was that it presented an opportunity for them to:

- obtain the required training to function efficiently in a multicultural setting;
- facilitate their transition from training to teaching by supporting their interaction with the district and school staff;
- focus on student success by emphasizing high

expectations for all students; and

- realize all of this in a friendly environment where they learned from each other and could ask for help whenever they needed it.

The report concludes with important recommendations for teacher preparation programs, organized in three areas.

Value and Practice Diversity – Place a high value on teacher education for diverse student populations and support their work across disciplines. Schools of education should hire faculty who are experienced, well-prepared and knowledgeable about effective strategies for diverse students, including competencies that emphasize all aspects of developing student self-esteem.

Include All Stakeholders – Expand research and knowledge about effective teacher preparation involving all stakeholders in the education process. Non-profits and community-based organizations can provide a link with the wider society, particularly with minority communities.

Expand Intervention Models – Develop holistic assessment and support programs for educators that rely primarily on the demonstration of knowledge and performance in the classroom.

Schools of education are more effective when they provide consistent and long-term support for individuals as they enter teacher education programs. Effective strategies support teaching throughout and beyond the certification process by enabling prospective teachers to study theory and to practice during their training while applying prior experience in the classroom. Co-teaching, group planning and similar collaborative strategies used in IDRA's Transition to Teaching program are critical to long-term success and sustainability. Teaching does not have to be a lonely endeavor; teachers can support each other to ease their work and accelerate their growth.

Resources

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Preparing Teachers to Serve Today's Classrooms
IDRA Accelerated Teacher Certification Model

With schools facing teacher shortages in math, science, bilingual/ESL, and special education fields, IDRA created a new model for recruiting and preparing teachers to work in high-need schools. The results of IDRA's 15 years of teacher preparation through its multi-year Transition to Teaching program, funded by the U.S. Department of Education, were significant. IDRA's program in Texas recruited over 900 recent graduates and mid-career professionals who had been working in fields other than teaching. These new teachers participated in intense professional development while in a first-year paid teaching internship. They committed to working in high-need school districts for a set number of years.

What Made This Model Stand Out?

- 1 Recruitment & Selection**
Participants were actively recruited and carefully selected among minority community professionals who want to make a difference, and among recent graduates committed to work in diverse classrooms.
 - Recruitment was informative and motivational, eliciting a sense of commitment and purpose, rather than one of economic convenience.
 - Selection involved verifying that participants met their eligibility requirements and their commitment to the goals of the program.
- 2 Preparation & Certification**
Participants were prepared through regular coursework at partnering colleges and universities and through individualized training via online and on-site professional development, so they could excel in diverse classrooms and obtain their certification.
 - The preparation assured that participants were pedagogically ready to be placed in high-need classrooms, through IDRA professional development that was both face-to-face and in online peer groups, along with coursework at the partner college.
 - Certification involved supporting the teachers in meeting the official requirements needed to work in the classroom, including test preparation support.
- 3 Placement & Retention**
Participants were placed in classrooms, initially as interns and eventually as teachers of record.
 - In the placement stage, IDRA provided personalized support for participants to be employed in the high-need school, including interview preparation and resume writing.
 - For retention, the in-service training involved IDRA's on-site asset-based mentoring and coaching, classroom observation, feedback and individual support, on-site and online experiences to support (and) implementing the district-selected curriculum, and IDRA pláticas (interactive workshops) so teachers could discuss issues and reinforcement around specific topics, such as discipline, parent involvement and cultural diversity.

Value Added
IDRA's focus was on developing culturally-proficient educators who could be successful in classrooms with diverse student populations. IDRA collaborated with colleges and universities to provide teacher preparation and certification and worked closely to define or redefine the teacher preparation program.

Diversity Added
The IDRA program created a substantial influx of minority teachers into the school system. Those teachers were prepared to teach students in STEM areas in the context of multicultural, minority student settings. And program participants increased the gender and ethnic diversity in the pool of teachers employed.

Effectiveness Added
93% of teachers felt that the program was effective at training them to work effectively in diverse classrooms. One teacher said, "My preparation was completely accurate. I work in a school in which 99 percent are at-risk students."

Transformation Added
93% of teachers gave the highest rating to the statement, "Because of this project, my minority students improved their performance." They also felt that IDRA's program helped them improve their confidence and efficacy as teachers.

IDRA Recommendations

- 1 Value & Practice Diversity**
All teacher education programs should include formal coursework in cultural diversity and have students experience diverse classrooms as part of their preparation.
- 2 Include All Stakeholders**
Schools of education need to create innovative and meaningful partnerships between schools, communities and universities to support teacher recruitment, preparation and placement.
- 3 Expand Intervention Models**
Schools of education are more effective when they provide consistent and long-term support for individuals as they enter teacher education programs to complete all requirements for certification and work in the classroom.

More recommendations and findings are available in the report, "IDRA Transition to Teaching Program 15-Year Synthesis, 2001 – 2017" www.idra.org/services/transitions-to-teaching

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Readers Theatre – Teatro en el Aula

New IDRA Semillitas de Aprendizaje™ Product for Young Learners

Building a strong academic foundation and a strong sense of self-efficacy from an early age holds the best promise for English language learners to persevere and succeed in slowly changing educational institutions. One of the contributing factors is the lack of bi-literacy and self-efficacy curriculum.

IDRA's Semillitas de Aprendizaje bilingual supplemental curriculum has been enjoyed in classrooms from preschool to early elementary. The storybooks provide a balanced approach to reading that acknowledges oral language proficiency levels in the home language and in English and that combine the language and literature rich activities associated with meaning, understanding and the love of language with explicit teaching strategies as needed to develop fluency associated with proficient readers.

Semillitas de Aprendizaje stories are especially effective in the use of *Teatro en el aula*, or Readers Theatre, a method that provides opportunities to further engage students in developing oral fluency, a critical factor necessary for reading comprehension.

Readers Theater is the performance of a written script that calls for repeated and assisted reading that is focused on engaging and delivering meaning to the audience. Readers must use their voices, facial expression and body language to convey meaning since there are no props or scenery involved. The goal of fluency instruction then becomes that of improving prosody (reading with expression) and meaning.

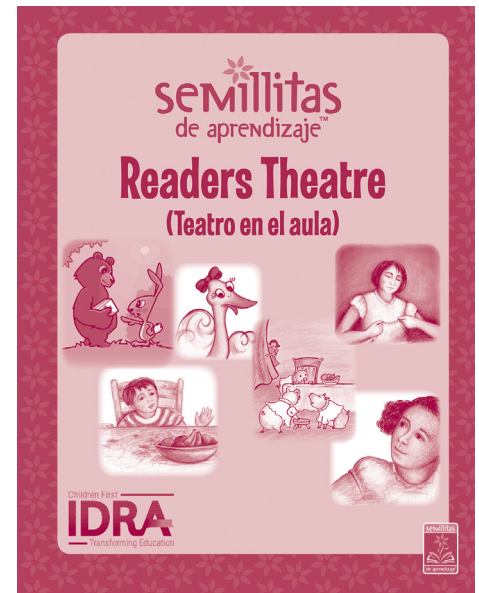
The benefits of this approach with bilingual children's stories are many, including motivation, meaningful contextualization for re-reading and group performance for self-expression, thinking, and engaging students in active listening and sharing. Studies show the importance of fluency interaction and comprehension processes (Rasinski, 2003; Fuchs, et al., 2001; Kuhn, 2003).

Research on Readers Theatre also underscores the benefits of this approach in engaging students and creating meaningful context for re-reading (Tranin & Andrzejczak, 2006). Working on group performance also fosters engagement and relevance with the text that can enhance comprehension through expression, familiarity and discussion.

Beginning from the strong premise of identifying and valuing what children already know, and working from what they have already observed in the natural world, teachers can apply a research process that moves children toward creating a hypothesis and formulating questions about what they want to know more about. IDRA has modified a technique called *group memory* to inspire scientific observations and inquiry. The process culminates with an evaluative and reflective segment that asks questions to further inspire written language and synthesis. "The strategy and approach is effective at the primary level and can also be used in the intermediate grades," observed one participant in a training session.

By integrating science and mathematics into language learning, teachers can then weave activities grounded in inquiry that develop bilingual skills and oral language in bilingual classrooms by simultaneously introducing mathematics concepts at very young ages, such as graphs, polls, use of graphic organizers, and technology for even the youngest learners. This approach should always build upon a perspective that affirms and integrates existing knowledge and vocabulary and that fosters self-efficacy and self-expression.

IDRA's Semillitas de Aprendizaje offers an array of enchanting stories to engage and ignite interest in math, science, problem solving and critical thinking and that encourage students to pose and investigate questions that are generated by them, flowing naturally and inspired by history, (cont. on Page 6)



(Readers Theatre – Teatro en el Aula, continued from Page 5)

culture and the natural world around them. Dual language learning is promoted by integrating vocabulary and language development across all subject areas.

Teachers also can use the stories to promote sensitive, inquiring and collaborative leaders for the future who are attuned to listening to one another, engaged in joint problem-solving and valuing the diversity of opinions and knowledge of others in the group, while growing in their own knowledge and application of skills. Both oral and aural language development are stressed.

Margaret Wheatley suggests: “Ask, ‘What’s possible?’ Be intrigued by the differences you hear (and see). Expect to be surprised. Treasure curiosity more than certainty... Remember, you don’t fear people (or creatures) whose story you know. Real listening always brings people closer together.” (2009)

IDRA’s professional development goes beyond techniques to transform the teaching and learning process because it is based upon a valuing perspective that recognizes and honors the knowledge inherent in every student at every level, celebrating the variety of cultural expressions through language.

You can learn more about IDRA’s Semillitas de Aprendizaje supplemental curriculum and see a sample lesson guide and videos online at: <https://www.semillitasdeaprendizaje.com>.

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This article was excerpted from IDRA’s *Semillitas de Aprendizaje Readers Theatre – Teatro en el aula* (in press).

(School Leaders Improve English Learner Literacy with Focus on Inferencing, continued from Page 2)

Third, leaders can improve teacher practice through targeted professional development and cognitive coaching. They can increase student performance by developing a growth mindset and school culture to support asset-based instruction. For example, when students struggle, educators advocate Carol Dweck’s concept of “not there yet,” giving students the time and support to master the required content knowledge. Their talents and potential can be nurtured through refining their efforts and supporting a determination to excel. Thus, all students establish learning goals, become cognizant and more accountable of their own learning, and monitor the rate of intellectual growth.

Instructional leaders must have an unwavering commitment to sustain systemic change to ensure student success for all. If you are this visionary transformational leader, you will compellingly contribute to the creation of innovative systemic changes that will ensure the academic success all children deserve.

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 See article: “Using Semillitas de Aprendizaje™ in the Early Childhood Classroom”
<https://idra.news/SdAeceClass>

 Listen to “Readers Theatre in Early Childhood Ed” – IDRA Classnotes Podcast #134
<https://idra.news/Pod134>

 Get the Semillitas de Aprendizaje™ brochure
<https://idra.news/SdAbroP>

 See video clips from the Storytelling & Storyreading Videos DVD
<https://idra.news/SdAwVid>

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Semillitas de Aprendizaje™

Early Childhood Bilingual Literacy Development



Semillitas de Aprendizaje is a bilingual (Spanish/English) supplemental early childhood curriculum created by the Intercultural Development Research Association, based on the art of storytelling. It focuses on literacy development and has culturally-relevant materials for early childhood and primary grades.

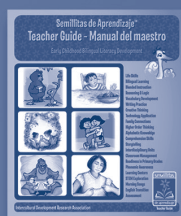
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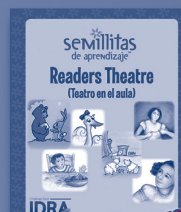
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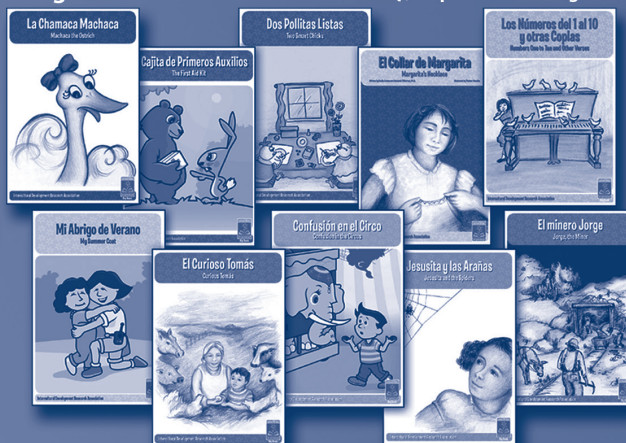
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stories and activities to strengthen oral fluency and engage students in active listening and sharing. in press



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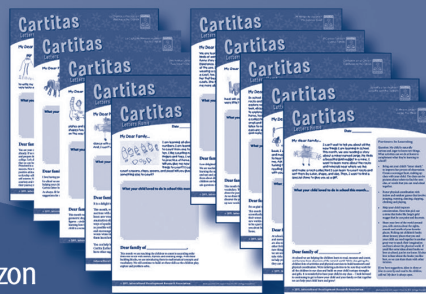


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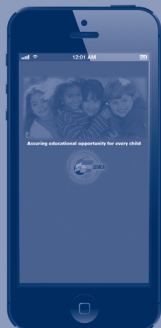
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Annual Report Released

Keeping the Promise – Profiles in Leadership and Education

IDRA's annual report for 2017, *Keeping the Promise: Profiles in Leadership and Education*, features leaders in education, family, community and youth – Jacquelyn Carter Thigpen; Alexander Yang; Gregory Rivers; Eva Carranza and her daughter Andrea; Linda Darling-Hammond; and Tery Medina. The report tells how their commitment to keeping the promise of quality public education for all children has been woven into their paths and how they work with a community of partners and colleagues to keep this promise.



The report is online at:
<https://idra.news/IDRAa17p>



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