



## *Focus: Visions of Educational Equity for the New Year*

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# Healing-Centered Engagement – Transforming Education in the Pandemic and Beyond

*by Irene Gómez, Ed.M.*

This time last year, like many students, I didn't know if I would finish the semester. On paper, as a Harvard grad student, I seemed to thrive. But in a then-vaccineless pandemic, I was caring for a mom with cancer, worried for a dad teaching in person, and navigating a degree not originally meant to be online. I had quality preparation for school. I had access to remote employment and mental health care. Still, I was drowning – and I wasn't alone.

Studying and experiencing education policy during massive systemic change, I often saw education graduate students positioned to stand in solidarity with young people. In the classroom, we had undergone the same chaotic shift to online learning as K-12 students. We witnessed (and many times were) educators, mentors and leaders pushed beyond their limits. We sensed the same intergenerational grief and moments of humanity through a pedagogy of Zoom.

Outside the classroom, many Black and Latino graduate students intimately understood the inequities K-12 Black and Latino students face. Hardest hit by the pandemic physically and financially, our families had fewer opportunities to work in safe conditions and, like many communities from the Global South, a higher likelihood of meeting healthcare barriers (Sim & Obasi, 2021) and vaccine apartheid (Folkenflik, 2021). While racist violence rose,

as well as backlash against protests for justice, other policy failures led to disasters like Texas' power outages during the winter freeze (Yancey-Bragg & Jervis, 2021).

It made sense in early 2021 that I came close to taking multiple incompletes. Yet one key difference between graduate students and K-12 students is that no one deemed my learning lost or behind. At one of the world's most elite institutions, I did not take a single test because project-based learning is considered best practice (Terada, 2021), along with providing time and space to build trust and relationships. Why then, don't young people deserve the same grace?

### **Reframing Trauma-Informed Care**

When I think about grace in education, I return to the work of Drs. Jeffrey Duncan-Andrade and Shawn Ginwright, whose frameworks are highly relevant to our pandemic reality. In his research, Duncan-Andrade highlights how toxic stress negatively impacts student health outcomes. He emphasizes that many traumatic experiences, such as housing and food instability or the school-to-prison pipeline, stem from inequitable policies (Duncan-Andrade, 2010).

Meanwhile, Ginwright stresses that adults in the education field can use this systemic analysis to build on the idea of *trauma-informed care* (cont. on Page 2)

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*Often, adults discuss trauma as an individual personal problem. But “healing-centered engagement” means contextualizing the widescale collective harm many communities experience and thinking through the actions groups can take together to chip away at societal root causes.*

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(Healing-Centered Engagement – Transforming Education in the Pandemic and Beyond, continued from Page 1)

and tap into a more expansive fullness for communities called *healing-centered engagement* (2018).

Often, adults discuss trauma as an individual personal problem. But healing-centered engagement means contextualizing the widescale collective harm many communities experience and thinking through the actions groups can take together to chip away at societal root causes.

In one example, Ginwright reflects on the term *post-traumatic stress disorder* and the connotation it carries of a single person impacted by an isolated incident or series of incidents. Ginwright counters that in our society “there’s nothing ‘post’ about the trauma that young people are experiencing,” and that *persistent traumatic stress environment* can be a helpful reframe for the many institutional factors creating adverse childhood experiences (2019). From March 2020 to today, persistent traumatic stress environment certainly seems fitting.

### Tenets of Healing-Centered Engagement

Healing-centered engagement aims to move with our pain into more moments of joy, rest and communion. Ginwright offers the following ways this can take shape in the education system.

**Let students explore past, present and future realities.** Citing research on youth development, Ginwright explains that, as young people gain agency and political awareness to engage with the issues that impact them, they develop a sense of control over their lives that improves their well-being. Ginwright emphasizes that this type of exploration should include ethnic-racial identity development and guidance to

work through current events (2019).

During the pandemic, over 30 states considered classroom censorship legislation or state-level action, with at least 14 states passing censorship laws to date, including Texas (Education Week, 2022). IDRA fought tirelessly through three Texas legislative sessions in 2021 to stop these bills and is extending policy, research, advocacy support and teacher training in states where similar bills are being considered or have been passed (Latham Sikes, 2021). We affirm the importance and legality of youth participatory action research, culturally-sustaining pedagogy and K-12 ethnic studies classes that teach students the hard parts of history and current events (Gómez, 2021).

**Center asset-based practices in the classroom.** One difference Ginwright illuminates between trauma-informed care and healing-centered engagement is: “When we talk about healing-centered engagement, it is dream-


driven... We begin to create opportunities for [young people] to have an imagination about their lives so they can begin to move forward in a positive way” (2019).

Asset-based practices that focus on relationship-building and student strengths include pedagogies of restorative justice (Wilson & Johnson, 2021), anti-racist social-emotional learning (Simmons, 2021), funds of knowledge (NCCLR, nd) and community cultural wealth (Da Graca & Dougherty, 2015). IDRA offers free training and assistance for these approaches to qualifying schools in 11 states in the South and Washington, D.C., through our federally-funded equity assistance center, the IDRA EAC-South (learn more at <https://www.idra.org/eac-south>).

**Support the adults who are supporting youth.** In 2019, Ginwright noticed during his decades-long career that educators received (cont. on Page 8)

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# Equitable Education Policies in the U.S. South Can Push the Country Toward Education Justice

by Terrence Wilson, J.D., and Chloe Latham Sikes, Ph.D.

The U.S. South is home to a young and racially diverse student population. Nearly one in three public K-12 students in the country goes to school in the South (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019a), and about 40% of the country's Black and Latino K-12 public school students live in southern states (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019b). This makes equitable education policies in the South important for every part of national educational policy.

IDRA is building a policy agenda for 2022 to promote education equity across the U.S. South. To set evidence-based and community-grounded policy priorities, we aligned our focus on four main priorities: fair public school funding, excellent education for emergent bilingual students, culturally-sustaining schooling and college preparation for all students.

Across all policy issues, IDRA advocates for equitable education opportunities for historically marginalized students, especially Black, Latino and LGBTQ+ students. In this article, we discuss each of the four priority areas.

## Fair School Funding

Contemporary research shows, not surprisingly, the positive impact of school funding on student outcomes (Jackson, 2020). States throughout the U.S. South have historically spent less than the national average on funding education. Southern states spent about \$11,810 per pupil on education services while the national average sits at \$13,118 (NCES, 2018). That difference translates to \$32,700 per classroom of 25 students.

The overall lower level of spending was exacerbated by pandemic-related cuts in 2020, but this trend may be starting to shift. Several southern states have restored cuts made in 2020, and a few have even gone beyond previous levels. For example, Alabama leaders passed the largest state budget in its history in 2021 (Crain, 2021).

Other states across the South need to re-examine their school funding formulas to address persistent funding shortages. In 2021, Tennessee leaders began this process by conducting a 90-day review of the state's current formula as well as a months-long public comment and committee process that resulted in a new proposal introduced in the 2022 Tennessee legislative session. Similarly, South Carolina's Governor has proposed a new student-based formula to send more state money to school districts.

Others throughout the region may look to these states as examples to show how they may begin to close the funding gaps that have existed for decades.

On the other hand, Texas made formula changes in 2019 that still left imbalances between high and low wealth districts, inequities in targeting of funds, and insufficient weights for determining funds for serving special populations (Latham Sikes, 2021).

To responsibly address inequitable funding, leaders across the South must make sure that they invest in schools by returning funds that  
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*When leaders provide resources and rigor in the classroom, safe and inclusive learning environments, and unbounded opportunities for all students to realize their full potential, they build a better education system and carry the country forward in the march toward justice and a stronger future.*

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*(Equitable Education Policies in the U.S. South Can Push the Country Toward Education Justice, continued from Page 3)*

were cut during the pandemic and by considering the impact of short-term investments on the long-term needs of education systems. In particular, leaders should factor in how short-term investments, like teacher pay raises and targeted student supports benefit schools, and how policies with long-term consequences, like tax cuts, may be to their detriment (Baker & DiCarlo, 2020).

### Excellent Education for Emergent Bilingual Students

Texas has a longstanding history in establishing bilingual education laws and programs for serving emergent bilingual students (Latham Sikes & Villanueva, 2021). IDRA and our coalition partners made recent strides to build stronger and more equitable policies (García, 2021).

Texas recently passed legislation to create a statewide strategic plan for emergent bilingual student education (SB 560, 87R). The plan contains specific objectives to strengthen bilingual/ESL education, including by increasing the number of certified teachers in this area; informing families about opportunities for students' bilingualism and multilingualism development; and bolstering data collection, reporting and monitoring procedures for emergent bilingual student education from pre-kindergarten through high school graduation.

IDRA is helping states develop and enact statewide plans for emergent bilingual student educational success, promoting asset-based language, and ensuring that emergent bilingual students have access to education opportunities that put them on a college-ready and college-going path.

### Culturally-Sustaining Schools

Students across the South should have safe and culturally-sustaining school environments that afford them every opportunity for success. Particularly, education leaders should promote policies that affirm students' right to learn about themselves through accurate history and courses in cultural and ethnic studies, be protected from discrimination based on gender identity or expression, and be able to learn without the threat of harmful disciplinary practices.

Throughout the country, particularly in the

## In Memoriam – James David Lehmann, Sr.

Mr. James David Lehmann, Sr., a former long-time member of the IDRA Board of Directors, passed away this month. He led a life dedicated to equity in education.

“James was a smart, dedicated educator who put students first and was a great contributor to IDRA. He will be missed,” said Mr. Juventino “Tino” Guerra, IDRA board chair.

Born in Vancouver, he grew up in Eagle Pass. After college, he served in the U.S. Air Force as a sergeant and later earned his master's in education administration and joined the University of Texas at Austin's superintendency fellowship program. He was superintendent in school districts in Eagle Pass, Houston, Seguin and Weslaco. He also served on the National Bilingual Advisory Council and helped start the Equity Center in Texas.

Mr. Lehman opened many doors for others and helped advance educational opportunities for marginalized students across Texas. We send our condolences to his family.



South, leaders have enacted policies aimed at censoring what students can learn and what educators can teach. Measures have been introduced and/or passed at the federal level and in state legislatures and school boards in nearly every Southern state (Wilson, 2021). These measures often carry onerous administrative burdens for schools by requiring teachers to post curriculum and lessons plans online for public criticism. The laws also feature harmful penalties for teaching the truth (that is often included in state-set standards), including decreases in state funding and discipline of educators.

Education leaders also face attacks on students based on their gender identity or expression. States across the South passed several measures that prohibit transgender and nonbinary youth from engaging in sports or using restrooms that align with their gender identity. These efforts have been so widespread that the Human Rights Campaign dubbed 2021 the “worst year in recent history for LGBTQ+ state legislative attacks” (Ronan, 2021).

This trend looks as if it will continue. In the first week of 2022, lawmakers in at least seven additional states proposed laws to further limit the rights of transgender and nonbinary youth (Lavietes, 2022). Such policies can vio-

late federal protections against discrimination on the basis of sex (Latham Sikes, Oct. 6, 2021).

As this year proceeds, advocates should be concerned about negative and harmful disciplinary practices used in schools. Several states across the South still allow the use of corporal punishment, despite extensive evidence showing the harmfulness of these practices (Craven, 2021; SPLC, 2019). These practices are particularly distressing as Black students and students with disabilities are the most likely to be struck by educators (Craven, 2021).

Along with long-term physical and mental health impacts of the pandemic, these policies continue to exacerbate the enduring negative effects of exclusionary discipline policies (Solis, 2021) and referrals to law enforcement (Wilson, 2020), particularly for students of color.

To create more culturally-sustaining school environments, education leaders across the South should abandon all efforts to censor what students learn, stop marginalizing youth based on their identity and stop subjecting them to harmful disciplinary practices. Instead, they should invest in policies that affirm and sustain all aspects of students' identities.

*(cont. on Page 6)*

# Parents Urge Schools to Enrich, Not Exclude

by Aurelio M. Montemayor, M.Ed.

News stories in recent months have shown parents shouting at school board meetings angry about topics and materials used in classrooms or about something they heard through the grapevine (aka social media) about a particular teacher or principal. The volume of these media stories and the addictive videos shared online give the impression that these voices represent the majority. But they do not.

Over the past year, IDRA has worked with families seeking information about ethnic studies courses and affirming their children's need to learn about the histories and cultures of people of color. Parents and caretakers told decision-makers about their support for richer and more extensive culturally appropriate instruction. They also called for comprehensive dual language programs.

None of these families were angry. They do not want book bans. In fact, they want *more* culturally-relevant books.

The pandemic crisis raised a renewed desire for an excellent education, especially for children in economically disadvantaged homes facing challenges with isolation and digital inequities and gaps. At the same time, the expansion of technology into homes through schools' dissemination of computers and new connectivity resources brought many more families into contact with each other and their teachers and educators.

IDRA extended our authentic outreach and engagement with several hundred families and community members to the virtual world with bilingual sessions that were well attended, dynamic and interactive. Families connected with each other, getting informed and dialoguing through online forums, interviews, interactive meetings, training sessions, and conferences using such tools as Zoom and Facebook Live.

Parents and caretakers specifically asked us for sessions on equitable school funding, col-

lege preparation for their children, COVID-19 safety in schools, excellent dual language programs, and how to prepare public comments and testimony to elected officials. Their interests ranged from Legislature 101 on how education policy develops in the state capitol to an introduction to Mexican American Studies.

We did not experience shouting sessions of parents and other adults complaining about materials being used in classrooms. They did express strong frustration with classroom censorship proposals.

For the first time in their lives, more than 30 parents and caretakers submitted comments, made phone calls and gave testimony before the Texas Legislature on critical issues of concern, including support for ethnic studies, equitable funding of public schools, dual language programs, digital and Internet equity, and college preparation and access for all students.

Speaking from their experience, these families have many positive things to say about the education of their children and youth. Any critical comments they share are clearly on the side of wanting more funding and resources, more inclusion of materials by the ethnic and racial

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*“Right now, we need young people who are prepared and biliterate so that they have a better future in the workplace with better opportunities in general. And our young people should not lose their roots, their cultures, or their traditions.”*



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*(Parents Urge Schools to Enrich, Not Exclude, continued from Page 5)*

group they represent, and a more accurate accounting of the past. Families and caretakers stressed that they want all children to know about the contributions of all major ethnic and racial groups in the state.

One mother said: “Right now, we need young people who are prepared and biliterate so that they have a better future in the workplace with better opportunities in general. And our young people should not lose their roots, their cultures, or their traditions.”

Families who have been laborers agree that the work of wage earners is an appropriate theme for the elementary and secondary classroom. One stated: “If we didn’t pick the crops, there would be no fruits and vegetables on the table. Our sweat and toil in heat and cold with little pay is honorable and should be taught about to all children.”

These families are not interested in excluding books and topics but are committed to including the wide spectrum of excluded histories and literature. They lament the non-presence of their language and culture and the ethnic and racial erasure of their histories. As they mourn their own limited and interrupted education, they rejoice at the new offerings and possibilities for their children, such as ethnic

studies and bilingual-bicultural development through high school. And they celebrate the cultural, artistic and historical additions dedicated teachers are bringing to the classroom.

One parent stated: “Our people have contributed to the economic wealth, cultural richness and social growth of this state. It is about time our traditions, deeds and influences inform what is taught to our children.”

In addition, families and students participated in IDRA’s listening sessions to provide community-based recommendations for how federal relief funds should be used in ways that lead to an equitable response to the pandemic and that address persistent education equity concerns. (See IDRA’s report, *Building Supportive Schools from the Ground Up*, by Morgan Craven, J.D., at <https://idra.news/SupportiveSchools>).

No family members we interviewed or spoke with consider the histories of campaigns for civil rights and social justice to be harmful to children or embarrassing. Just as the painful events covered in traditional curricula, such as the civil war, are necessary for all children to understand the evolution of our democracy, the same is true for the generational struggles for equality, equity and justice among poor people, people of color and those conquered

and decimated through force. The painful past must be known, understood and faced if our children are to create a more just and equitable future.

Families want their children engaged in an education that is culturally rich and inclusive. They desire a path that prepares their children for a wide array of choices for a college education. These same families advocate for equitably and fully-funded neighborhood public schools. They understand that painful histories are a prelude to positive and bountiful futures.

The vision for a college education for their children permeates the dialogues with the poor and isolated families we hear from. Without diminishing or denigrating the value of manual labor and blue-collar work, they echo a message to all children: “Get an education so that you don’t suffer what we’ve had to go through!” These families value and desire an excellent education for all children through college graduation. For this, they are ready to respectfully speak loudly and assertively.

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## College Preparation for All Students to Succeed

All students deserve the educational tools to succeed in college and beyond, no matter what paths they may choose after graduation. College should never be a foreclosed opportunity for students based on their lack of K-12 preparation, information or academic advising.

National reading and math scores of 12<sup>th</sup> graders in 2019 indicated just over one in three were ready for college (NAEP, 2019). Between 2017 to 2020, the number of high school graduates directly enrolling in college dropped by over seven percentage points in both Texas (from 52% to 44.9%) and Georgia (from 61.5% to 53.9%) (THECB, 2021; State of Georgia, 2020).

Test scores and enrollment rates are important indicators of academic preparedness for college, but many other factors are key. Full college readiness means rigorous academic options in K-12, particularly advanced coursework, from

middle through high school; college and career advising; meaningful assessments of student performance; and aligned systems of support around high school to college transitions (Anderson & Fulton, 2015; Bojorquez & Bahena, 2018; Rodríguez, 2021).

Policies that promote college access for all students regardless of their citizenship status are also critical. Texas was the first state to make sure undocumented Texas high school graduates could access public colleges and universities at in-state tuition rates and apply for state financial aid.

Unfortunately, Georgia prohibits undocumented students from enrolling in public colleges and universities at any tuition rate (Higher Ed Immigration Portal, 2021). State DREAM Acts that expand college access and affordability to eligible high school graduates regardless of citizenship status help make postsecondary education equitable for all students who seek it.

## Conclusion

The future of Southern education policy matters to the entire country. Policies that exclude or marginalize Black, Latino and LGBTQ+ students excise a costly toll on the country’s path toward racial and educational justice. When leaders instead provide resources and rigor in the classroom, safe and inclusive learning environments, and unbounded opportunities for all students to realize their full potential, they build a better education system and carry the country forward in the march toward justice and a stronger future.

(Citations are available online at [www.idra.org](http://www.idra.org).)

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# New Online Toolkits for Educators

## New Toolkit on Interrupting Bullying & Harassment in Schools

Bullying and harassment are two forms of relational violence that can interrupt the establishment of safe spaces in schools and undermine students' abilities to learn. This IDRA EAC-South Interrupting Bullying & Harassment in Schools online toolkit is designed to give educators and school leaders tools that they need to prevent bullying and harassment by fostering a positive school climate.

This free online toolkit includes three chapters, each with a video and supporting resources, infographics, articles & podcasts.

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Bullying and harassment are two forms of relational violence that can interrupt the establishment of safe spaces in schools and undermine students' abilities to learn. This IDRA EAC-South Interrupting Bullying & Harassment in Schools online toolkit is designed to give educators and school leaders tools that they need to prevent bullying and harassment by fostering a positive school climate.

This free online toolkit includes three chapters, each with a video and supporting resources, infographics, articles & podcasts.

Chapter 1	Chapter 2	Chapter 3
<b>We Want Our Schools to Be Safe and Friendly</b>	<b>A Message to School Leaders about Bullying &amp; Harassment</b>	<b>Teachers Are Essential to Providing Safety and Trust</b>
Get an overview of interrupting bullying & harassment in schools. 2:30 min.	Get tools for data collection and strategies for schools, communities and working with individuals. 1:21 min.	Get strategies for teachers at the classroom level. 1:09 min.

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The IDRA EAC-South is the equity assistance center that provides free or low-cost technical assistance to schools in the U.S. South. With roots in the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the four federally-funded equity assistance centers help school districts build capacity to confront educational problems occasioned by race, national origin, sex and gender, and religion.

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## Focus: Visions of Educational Equity for the New Year

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too little time for reflection or collective care. Meanwhile, researchers documented high nationwide teacher attrition, especially among systemically under-supported Black educators (Carver-Thomas, 2018). During the pandemic, teachers have endured injustice and exploitation and had to jump through impossible hoops, such as simultaneously teaching online and in-person students in the same class period, with less time off and under harder collective circumstances (Cardoza, 2021). IDRA urges school and state leaders to meaningfully prioritize and protect the well-being of district employees, like my dad, through humane policies and benefits that alleviate teacher workloads and ensure their safety.

One year ago, I didn't know if I would finish the semester on time. But I know now it would have been okay if I didn't. In a persistent traumatic stress environment, it makes sense if we pause or move slow. Beginning 2022, I am

grateful to rest and to push for more people's right to do the same.

My rest includes catching new episodes of *Station Eleven*, a timely mini-series about healing pandemic childhood trauma. As communities in the show come together to make art and rebuild society, we would do well to remember their mantra: "Survival is insufficient."

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