



## Focus: Welcoming School Climates

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# Welcoming and Safe Schools Require Authentic Relationship Building

by Morgan Craven, J.D.

There are many strategies that research tells us help create welcoming school climates for students, families and adults, including robust family engagement programs; inclusive curricula and instructional practices; and research-based social-emotional support and conflict resolution practices.

At the root of these strategies is a common thread: achieving welcoming school climates requires seeing the humanity in others and creating the conditions for growing deep and meaningful relationships between adults and students in a campus community.

One problem we see again and again that prevents some school leaders from effectively fostering cultures of care and prioritizing relationship building is the belief that doing so is disconnected from their bottom line – student learning and success – and, in some cases, that doing so is even counterproductive to those goals.

For example, I was speaking with a teacher recently who reflected on advice she was given on her first day of teaching: Don't let the students see you smile. If you smile, you signal to them that you are soft, and they will take advantage of you.

This is ludicrous advice. A smile is not soft. A smile helps to build a bond. It demonstrates kindness and care and makes the harder things

that happen to kids in school easier to bear. A smile is the seed of trusting relationships that are necessary for deep learning, for identifying opportunities to address needs, and for proactive school safety.

Teacher and staff training protocols, even informal ones, that do not center meaningful relationships (with appropriate boundaries) and instead promote cold, detached approaches to adult-student engagement run contrary to research about the importance of relationship building to student success and strong school climates.

**Strong relationships between teachers and students contribute to better student academic and social engagement** (Rimm-Kaufman & Sandilos, 2015). A review of almost 50 studies related to teacher-student relationships, including longitudinal studies, found consistent evidence of the connection between these relationships and positive school and student outcomes across a number of measures, including academics and attendance (Quin, 2017).

Teachers who report having strong, positive relationships with their students are better able to support their students' academic success (with effects that last over time). Their students are less likely to experience attendance challenges and more likely to engage in learning. (See Rimm-Kaufman & Sandilos, 2015)  
*(cont. on Page 2)*

*When we envision safe schools, we see schools that are not only safe from physical violence but that also provide safe conditions for students to thrive academically and socially.*

(Welcoming and Safe Schools Require Authentic Relationship Building, continued from Page 1)

By contrast, weaker relationships and high teacher-student conflict negatively impact academic achievement and contribute to poorer social skills and more behavior challenges (see Rimm-Kaufman & Sandilos, 2015).

One study found that by simply practicing empathy as part of relationship building, schools reduced the use of suspensions by half in one academic year (Okonofua, et al., 2016).

**Strong relationships promote self-confidence and leadership.** The type of teacher-student relationship matters for academic success and students' future self-concept and leadership.

A 2018 study found that when teachers were trained to build deeper, reciprocal, multi-faceted relationships with their students (rather than one-dimensional, compliance-based relationships), students were better prepared to think independently and engage with teachers confidently. Deeper relationships fostered students' confidence in their "inherent value as human beings and their agency over their educational (and life) experiences... prepar[ing] them to engage with authority figures, and to someday hold positions of authority themselves" (Theisen-Homer, 2018a).

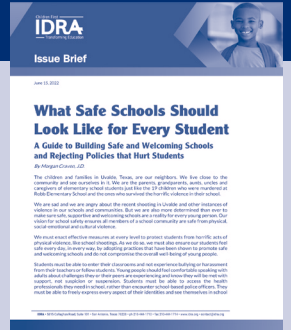
And, as the researcher notes, when compliance-based relationships are emphasized by teachers in schools that serve communities of color (as they were in her study), schools run the risk of perpetuating a belief among students of color that their value is highly tied not to their own individual assets but to the degree to which they are able to behave and fall in line with the demands of school leaders (Theisen-Homer, 2018b).

# What Safe Schools Should Look Like for Every Student

## A Guide to Building Safe and Welcoming Schools and Rejecting Policies that Hurt Students

IDRA's issue brief by Morgan Craven, J.D., provides resources for schools and communities. It outlines the barriers to safer schools, including harms of school-based policing. And it gives a roadmap of strategies for safer schools for all students.

<https://idra.news/SafeSchoolsIB>



**Strong relationships contribute to holistic school safety.** When we envision safe schools, we see schools that are not only safe from physical violence but that also provide safe conditions for students to thrive academically and socially.

We envision schools where students see themselves in the curricula and instructional practices, schools that have swift and immediate responses to bullying and harassment, and schools that emphasize authentic family engagement (Craven, 2022).

These research-based approaches to school safety center relationship building. With strong relationships: personal and interpersonal challenges are detected and addressed early (without the use of punitive discipline practices); physical safety threats are more likely to be leaked to an adult and investigated; and families can work with schools closely to protect students and help them to thrive.

The findings of this body of research around relationship building in schools are consistent

with IDRA's own research and observations over decades of implementing student and family leadership frameworks and teacher training programs: We know that meaningful relationships matter for creating the welcoming schools that support student learning and success (IDRA, 2024; Montemayor, 2014).

While in Atlanta recently, I had the opportunity to listen to nine incredible high school students who are part of the Atlanta Public Schools student advisory council. An audience member asked the students what advice they would give to the adults in the room who want to better support young people. Almost every student said that their advice was pretty simple: Just show a young person you care about them, even small actions can be life-changing because they lead to more meaningful relationships. Ask how their day is going and actually listen to the answer. Don't make assumptions about their behavior and who they are as a person based on one bad day. And, if they ask for support actually help them identify and access it.

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Publication offices:  
5815 Callaghan Road, Suite 101  
San Antonio, Texas 78228  
210-444-1710; Fax 210-444-1714  
www.idra.org | contact@idra.org

Celina Moreno, J.D.  
IDRA President and CEO  
Newsletter Executive Editor

Christie L. Goodman, APR, Fellow PRSA  
IDRA Director of Communications  
Newsletter Production Editor

# Texas School District Becomes First to Adopt Policy to Prevent Identity-based Bullying

Statement by IDRA, Round Rock ISD, Black Parents and Families Collective, and Access Education RRISD

This month, Round Rock ISD acted on its commitment to ensure a safe, welcoming school climate for all students by passing a comprehensive policy to prevent and respond to bullying and harassment in its schools. The policy explicitly provides protections for students targeted for identity-based bullying, sending a strong message to students, families, and educators that all students deserve dignity and belonging in school.

“At Round Rock ISD we are not only proactive for our students but responsive to the pressing need to enhance our current bullying policy to explicitly include identity-based bullying,” said Kayren Gray, Round Rock ISD’s interim chief equity officer. “By doing so, we reaffirm our commitment to a truly inclusive environment where every student is respected and protected.”

The revision updates current policy to establish a clear framework for conducting and documenting bullying investigations, providing supportive measures to impacted students, increasing communication and transparency to impacted families, and incorporating restorative responses to bullying incidents.

“This policy enhancement will not only address and deter discrimination but also extend education and provide restorative support for our students and families, fostering a culture where all students thrive for simply being who they are,” Gray said.

The policy update was initiated by Board Vice President Tiffanie Harrison, who herself has experienced threats and racial harassment during her time as a trustee.

“Our sacred duty is to ensure every student learns and grows in a safe, educational environment,” Trustee Harrison said. “Research shows that when students face threats in school,

their learning suffers. We create environments where students can excel and flourish by proactively and thoroughly addressing identity-based bullying. I am proud that Round Rock ISD has passed this policy, and I encourage districts across Texas to do the same.”

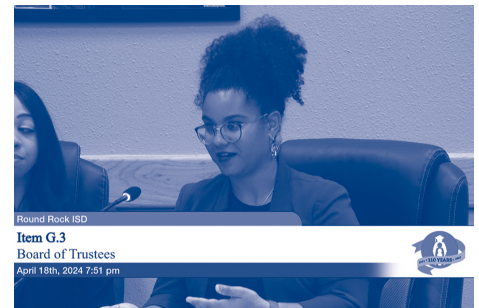
The district worked closely with IDRA and community-based partners to develop the updated policy, implementing feedback from students and the community throughout the process.

“Our children deserve to have a policy in place that truly works to keep them safe and protected,” said Ashley Walker, a Round Rock parent and co-leader of Black Parents and Families Collective. “Round Rock ISD prides itself on being a district of innovation, and at this moment we can truly say that as the first district in Texas to adopt such a policy, that they are living up to that promise.”

“This policy is essential for ensuring the safety and well-being of all students,” said Shannon Probe, a Round Rock parent and board member of Access Education RRISD. “It is crucial that our district takes proactive measures to prevent identity-based bullying and responds effectively when incidents occur, fostering trust and participation in creating a safer school environment.”

Identity-based bullying deprives students of educational opportunities and may, alone or in connection with a pattern of behavior, create a discriminatory hostile learning environment under state or federal law. Passed on the eve of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, Round Rock ISD’s updated policy honors the legacy of the brave students, families and advocates who helped enshrine the right to equal education for all.

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*IDRA Chief Legal Analyst Paige Duggins-Clay, J.D., spoke by invitation to the Round Rock ISD board of trustees as it considered its identity-based bullying policy. She led development of IDRA’s model policy, issue brief and advocacy guide for IDRA’s newly-launched IDRA SEEN Model Policy Shop.*

(Texas School District Becomes First to Adopt Policy to Prevent Identity-based Bullying, continued from Page 3)

“With instances of identity-based bullying, harassment, and hate crimes on the rise, efforts to prevent and respond to bullying must account for the specific ways that young people are targeted and the magnified harm that students and school communities experience when bullying is motivated by bias,” said Paige Duggins-Clay, J.D., IDRA chief legal analyst.

“We commend Round Rock ISD for taking action to prevent, recognize and end identity-based bullying before the behavior escalates into a more serious school safety threat or civil rights violation,” said Duggins-Clay.

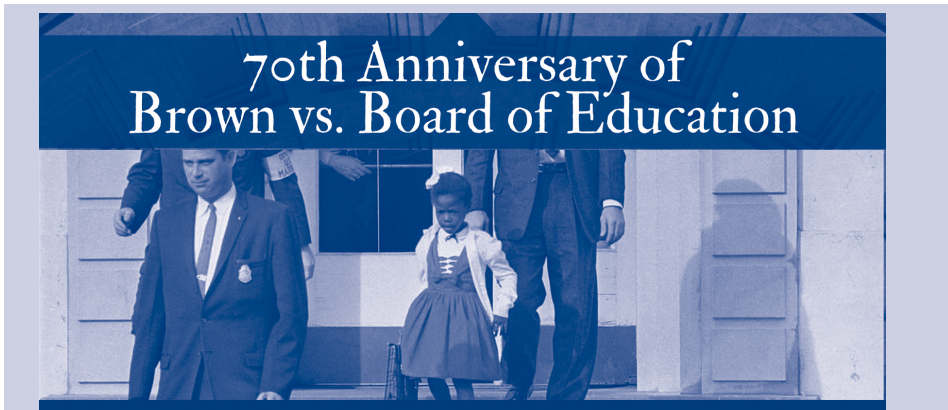
Effectively addressing bullying and harassment is critical to ensuring school safety, supporting student well-being and mental health, and creating a positive school environment.

This policy was developed through IDRA’s new SEEN Model Policy Shop, a resource designed for advocates and allies to implement education policy within their communities.

To learn more or seek assistance advocating for other school communities to adopt policies to address identity-based bullying, visit the IDRA SEEN Model Policy Shop (<https://idraseen.org/model-policy-shop>). Additional resources, including a comprehensive literature review and strategies for schools, educators, and students to identify, address, and prevent bullying and harassment, are available in IDRA’s *Interrupting Bullying and Harassment in Schools – Online Technical Assistance Toolkit* (<https://idra.news/webInterrupt>).

### Resources

Craven, M. (June 2022). *What Safe Schools Should Look Like for Every Student A Guide to Building Safe and Welcoming Schools and Rejecting Policies that Hurt Students*. IDRA.  
IDRA. (2024). *Educator and Student Support: Teaching*



This month marks the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, which struck down racial segregation in schools and public facilities.

For this anniversary, IDRA is sharing resources for learning about the case and its implications, information on important related cases, classroom lesson plans, and book recommendations for students’ freedom to learn.

- ***Brown v Board of Education – The Law in Education***, IDRA webpage with background and context info about the case and what followed
- **IDRA eBook: 70 years of *Brown v. Board of Education* – Reflecting on a New Generation of Civil Rights in Education**, by Chloe Latham Sikes, Ph.D. The eBook highlights what three landmark cases mean for civil rights in education, school programs and student rights. And it asks if we are entering a seventh generation of civil rights in education.
- **Six Generations of Civil Rights in Education** – Infographic
- **The Law in Education – *Brown v Board of Ed*** – Classnotes Podcast Episode 223
- **Books are for Learning** – List of 20 award-winning banned books to consider for students
- **Free Lesson Plans** – IDRA’s award-winning SEEN School Resource Hub – We All Belong has lesson plans for elementary, middle and high school classrooms, like...
  - Landmark Supreme Court Case: *Brown v. Board of Education*
  - *Plessy v. Ferguson*: An Individual’s Response to Oppression
  - Latinos and the Fourteenth Amendment: A Primary Document Activity
  - *Mendez v. Westminster*: Separate is Not Equal

<https://idra.news/enBrownAt70>



(Welcoming and Safe Schools Require Authentic Relationship Building, continued from Page 2)

To know students is to love and support them: deep and meaningful relationships help us empathize with each other and achieve a shared vision for the safe and welcoming school climates that help students thrive.

Quality. IDRA webpage.  
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Thiesen-Homer, V. (2018b). *Teaching for Human Connection: Relationships, Race, and the Training of Teachers*. Doctoral dissertation, Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Morgan Craven, J.D., is the IDRA national director of policy, advocacy and community engagement. Comments and questions may be directed to her via email at [morgan.craven@idra.org](mailto:morgan.craven@idra.org).

# The Value of Integrating STEM, the Arts and Ethnic Studies

by Aurelio Montemayor, M.Ed., Stephanie Garcia, Ph.D., & Asaiah Puente, Ed.D.

Perhaps influenced by the false belief that we are either left-brained or right-brained, education has a tendency to treat STEM and the arts as distinct, separate content and skills (Shmerling, 2022). Students from K-12 through higher education typically encounter subject areas separately rather than in ways that are interdisciplinary and interconnected, especially once students enter middle and high school.

The transition between middle and high school is also a point in time where there is an indirect relation between an increased identity formation and a significant loss of interest or confidence in STEM subjects (Heaverlo, et al., 2013; Wang, et al., 2022).

The single-subject approach to teaching does not relate to or support real skills needed by individuals in STEM degrees and professions. It also perpetuates a disconnect for girls and students of color who, despite a 63% interest in STEM (Rubin, 2023), continue to feel like they do not see themselves in the STEM fields of study.

Studies suggest “given that girls interested in STEM have a desire to be in careers that help people (94%) and make a difference in the world (92%), there is opportunity in making the connection between those motivations and related STEM fields” (Goodman, 2018).

A key strategy then is to make STEM education more inclusive and culturally relevant by adding the arts (‘A’) to STEM, thus expanding it in “STEAM.”

The “A” in STEAM can introduce a creative approach to learning STEM subjects. It gives students the opportunity to connect with STEM subjects on an interpersonal level, which is essential to establishing a sense of belonging in young women and students of color (Johnson, 2016).

The arts have an essential impact on belonging and have a positive impact on retention of STEM knowledge. According to the recent *State of the Arts Report*, students who are engaged in the arts are 112% more likely to see high scores on standardized exams (Texas Cultural Trust, 2023). This shows us that students are using the skills they develop through arts engagement to learn and retain information in core subjects.

Integration of the arts into core subjects and elective courses can develop a student’s critical thinking skills, problem-solving, creativity, innovation, communication skills and civic-mindedness. These are all essential skills for standardized testing to display student comprehension and academic performance.

When we integrate the arts into STEM education, we also increase creativity, innovation and humanistic perspectives in a traditionally analytical and technical field. Specifically, doing so increases opportunities for creativity and innovation; emphasizes necessary communication skills (especially visual and graphic arts); and highlights interdisciplinary connections that tie in cultural and historical connections that broaden students’ perspectives of societal issues.

## STEM and Ethnic Studies

Recognizing the severe underrepresentation of hidden figures in history who have greatly contributed to society through innovations that touch all subject areas, especially in STEM, students, families and teachers are urging that cultures and histories be included more in academic studies.

Whether it is a separate course for teens or, importantly, it is integrated in classroom lessons for all grades, ethnic studies is a powerful avenue for making cultural connections (see Rodríguez & García, 2014).

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*As students improve communication and other power skills through ethnic studies, they strengthen their development in the technical areas of STEM.*

(The Value of Integrating STEM, the Arts and Ethnic Studies, continued from Page 5)

No human profession, no matter how technical, can avoid a human interaction or exclude itself from having an impact on humanity. Whether they are in technology, science, math or any other profession, students' technical skills from STEM will be enriched and supported when they understand social and cultural conflicts and issues.

There is no separation. Ethnic studies give a deep and rich understanding, especially of the parts of society that have been left out of curricula and instruction. We have ethnic studies, such as African American or Mexican American studies, because the regular social studies and district curriculum from elementary to secondary has typically excluded the histories of, for example, people of color.

### Complementary STEM and Ethnic Studies

Students have shared with us that their counselors and academic advisors often convey to students that they can only pursue one category of subjects: ethnic studies or STEM. Either you choose STEM or you choose the arts and culture. Reportedly, there is not enough time or space to learn both. (Hernández, et al., 2024)

Also, some would say if students want a better job, they should not spend too much time on the arts, culture or ethnic studies.

The truth is that each is valuable and can be shared and enjoyed by students. For example, the arts, especially the study of culture, bring certain kinds of emotional skills that improve the student's ability to analyze and reflect, and it nurtures emotional intelligence.

STEAM education and ethnic studies can complement each other in several ways, bringing together diverse perspectives, and encouraging critical and creative thinking. Below are some ways they can be integrated.

**Interdisciplinary Projects:** Create projects that blend elements of STEAM disciplines with topics from ethnic studies. For example, students can explore the cultural significance of traditional art forms while also learning about the chemistry of pigments or the mathematics behind geometric patterns. (See sample Ethnic Studies in Physics Lesson by Spacetime Archives, Porandla, 2024.)

## Teacher Tools for Culturally-Sustaining Education

The award-winning IDRA SEEN School Resource Hub provide teachers with lesson plans, instructional best practices and historical resources to support you in delivering culturally-sustaining classroom lessons.



<https://idraseen.org/hub>

**Cultural Context in STEM:** Integrate discussions of cultural context into STEM subjects to help students understand the real-world implications of scientific and technological advancements. This could involve examining the historical contributions of diverse communities to science and technology or discussing how different cultural perspectives shape the development and application of STEM knowledge.

**Critical Analysis:** Encourage students to critically analyze how historical and contemporary social factors intersect with scientific and technological developments. This could involve examining issues, such as environmental justice, healthcare disparities, and the impact of colonialism on indigenous knowledge systems.

**Inclusive Curriculum:** Ensure that curricular materials represent diverse perspectives and include contributions from historically-marginalized communities. This could involve incorporating literature, visual storytelling, artwork and historical narratives from a wide range of cultural backgrounds into STEAM lessons.

**Community Engagement:** Partner with local community organizations and cultural institutions to provide students opportunities to engage directly with families and diverse communities and to learn from their experiences (Johnson & Vega, 2019). This could involve field trips, guest speakers and community-based research projects.

By integrating STEAM and ethnic studies, educators can provide students with a more holistic understanding of the world, fostering empathy, critical thinking and a deeper appre-

ciation for diversity and social justice. Furthermore, as students improve communication and other power skills through ethnic studies, they strengthen their development in the technical areas of STEM.

### Resources

- Goodman, C.L. (February 2018). School-Based Strategies for Supporting Girls in Technology – With Perspectives from a 14-Year-Old Coder. *IDRA Newsletter*.
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Aurelio M. Montemayor, M.Ed., is an IDRA senior education associate. Comments and questions may be sent to him via email at [aurelio.montemayor@idra.org](mailto:aurelio.montemayor@idra.org). Stephanie Garcia, Ph.D., is IDRA's STEM and gender equity education specialist. Comments and questions may be directed to her via email at [stephanie.garcia@idra.org](mailto:stephanie.garcia@idra.org). Asaiah Puente, Ed.D. is an IDRA consultant.

# IDRA Valued Youth Partnership Tutors Win Reflection Contest Awards – Tutors Share Stories of the Program’s Impact on Their Lives

Ten students received prizes in a national competition among participants in the IDRA Valued Youth Partnership program, our nationally-recognized cross-age tutoring program. The VYP tutors artfully shared how the program helped them do better in school and how they had helped their tutees to do better. This year, IDRA opened the contest beyond essays for students to submit poetry or artwork if they chose. See our booklet with the winners’ full entries: <https://idra.news/VYPreflectionsBooklet>.



*High School First Place*

**Monserrat García**

*9<sup>th</sup> Grade, Odessa High School,  
Ector County ISD, Texas*

In her essay in Spanish, Monserrat wrote: “Este programa realmente me ha dado fuerza. También he visto cómo los niños no se dan por vencidos por lo que quieren hacer o aprender... Así es como veo las cosas. Si un niño no renuncia a lo que quiere lograr, yo tampoco debería renunciar.” [“This program has really given me strength. I have also seen how children do not give up for what they want to do or learn... Now that’s how I see things. If a child doesn’t give up on what he wants to achieve, I shouldn’t give up either.”]



*High School Second Place*

**Roslynn Ortíz**

*11<sup>th</sup> Grade, Odessa High School,  
Ector County ISD, Texas*

Roslynn submitted artwork.  
(See the full color version at

<https://idra.news/VYPreflectionsBooklet>.)



*High School Third Place (tie)*

**Michelle Villegas**

*10<sup>th</sup> Grade, Odessa High School,  
Ector County ISD, Texas*

Michelle submitted a poem excerpted below:

“Since I became a tutor  
I know what it is to feel proud  
María got a 100 on her Sirius assignment  
Alex has no missing assignments  
Jordan started answering questions in class.

Since I became a tutor  
My days became better  
My kids give me a hug every time I walk in the classroom.”



*High School Third Place (tie)*

**Alondra Holguín**

*11<sup>th</sup> Grade, Odessa High School,  
Ector County ISD, Texas*

Alondra submitted an essay saying: “Tutoring, to me,

means to change someone for the better. As a child who has struggled with all the subjects, even now, I’m so glad I got a tutee... I’ve seen so much progress in these kids... I can’t say this enough, but I am so proud of them, so incredibly proud... I get excited just to come to school. I would always hate coming, but I always tell myself now I can go, and I can do it... I love this program, my teacher, and my little tutees.”



*Middle School First Place*

**Serena L. Sánchez**

*8<sup>th</sup> Grade, Alan B. Shepard  
Middle School South San  
Antonio ISD, Texas*

Serena’s poem included the following:

“Since I became a tutor, my heart has grown wide,  
With love and compassion, for each student inside.  
I’ll keep on guiding, supporting and cheering them on,  
For the joy of learning is a journey that’s never done.”



*Middle School Second Place*

**Nathan Gómez**

*8<sup>th</sup> Grade, Dwight Middle School,  
South San Antonio ISD, Texas*

Nathan wrote in his essay: “There have been days where I think to myself, ‘This is too

hard.’ But I know that this program isn’t just about teaching little children at the elementary school, it is about helping us evolve as people and get ready for the future. By being in this program, I have seen so much growth and improvement in myself, and I am very grateful for having the opportunity to be a part of this amazing program!”



*Middle School Third Place*

**Shannell García**

*8<sup>th</sup> Grade, Dwight Middle School,  
South San Antonio ISD, Texas*

In her essay, Shannell wrote: “Seeing these students grow

and change how they do their work and seeing them use their strategies to accomplish tasks makes me happy and feel a sense of accomplishment. I’m so proud watching them succeed and do great things. The IDRA Valued Youth Partnership has taught me how to be a leader and to be responsible. I don’t have enough words to describe the bond I have with my tutees. This program has helped me to grow into the person I want to be, and I’m very grateful to be a tutor.”

IDRA awarded honorable mentions to Ariel Morones, 8<sup>th</sup> Grade, Alan B. Shepard Middle School (essay) and Liliana Presas, 8<sup>th</sup> Grade, Robert C. Zamora Middle School (essay), both in South San Antonio ISD.

IDRA also invited fourth grade students in a  
(cont. on Page 8)

## Focus: Welcoming School Climates

(IDRA Valued Youth Partnership Tutors Win Reflection Contest Awards, continued from Page 7)

pilot program at Franz Leadership Academy in Judson ISD, San Antonio, to submit entries as posters. Winners were: First Place, Vivianna Caballero; Second Place, Jordyn Morris; and Third Place, Nadia Barrientez (see their posters at <https://idra.news/VYPreflectionsBooklet>.)

### Valued Youth Partnership Helps Students Build their Socio-Emotional Skills

The IDRA Valued Youth Partnership has provided leadership experiences for students all over the country. It increases students' connectedness, academic achievement, self-efficacy and self-esteem by placing students in leadership positions.

VYP's key philosophy of valuing youth's gifts and developing social skills can provide leadership experiences for students who most need engagement.

The program has demonstrated tremendous success in helping students focus on their education and increasing the school's holding power by concentrating on students

## Learn More about the IDRA Valued Youth Partnership

The IDRA Valued Youth Partnership is a research-based, internationally-recognized dropout prevention and student leadership program that has kept 98% of its tutors in school.

**Website:** See how the program operates, its research base and how to bring it to your school.

**Factsheet:** See how VYP transforms student socio-emotional learning and relationships with school. The IDRA Valued Youth Partnership directly addresses socio-emotional factors that are essential to reconnecting and re-engaging with students.

**Winning Essays:** See the full winning reflection entries.

<https://idra.news/VYP>



with the highest need of support. For almost four decades, VYP has kept 35,500 students in school and positively impacted the lives of 750,000 children, families and educators!

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