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Focus: Students Are Speaking

Books Are for Learning, Not Banning

By Grace Ding, High School Junior

Growing up in the South, I often struggled to understand myself and my identity. Finding characters in books who had similar thoughts and experiences made me realize I wasn’t so different.

For example, in my freshman year, I read *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan in school, and it helped me feel connected to my Asian American heritage. Many stories like the *Joy Luck Club* resonated with me in ways I never expected. They gave me hope during a confusing time.

All students deserve to feel seen and understood like I did, which is why my school district’s recent book ban is harmful.

School districts have the responsibility to educate. While many district leaders are wasting time, resources and taxpayer money for book review committees, they are taking away time, resources and taxpayer money from our students who desperately need inclusive literature.

While there’s a fourth-grade student dying to read *Do Animals Fall in Love?*, Katy ISD would rather let all of our new books rot away in a warehouse. The people in power who are in favor of creating discriminatory policies help foster an increasingly hostile environment (Zuwanich, 2024).

Because every single new book is jailed in the warehouse, the “book reviewing committee” has a lot on its plate. This review system risks

preemptive bans based on speculation rather than content because no one has time to review thousands of books in the span of a year. Even so, Katy ISD’s prejudicially-curated book reviewing committee is definitely not bias-free, and it certainly is not representative of all Katy ISD students. In fact, students aren’t even allowed to serve on the book reviewing committee (Ding, 2023).



Sheltering our students from a diverse literature promotes ignorance, not virtue. It’s simply immature to ignore the fact that great works often spark controversy by pushing boundaries. But limiting students’ exposure to diverse ideas severely hinders critical thinking and imagination, which are core tenets of education.

Schools must trust students to evaluate complex opinions themselves and trust our educators’ guidance. Restricting literature suggests we believe youth cannot handle complexity or opposition. This is a disservice to any school district that aims to create a new, informed, insightful generation capable of independent thought. We must have faith in our students.

Rather than bans, we need more communication between parents, educators and students

Sheltering our students from a diverse literature promotes ignorance, not virtue.

about which books are right for each child. Every family has different values, and their choices should be respected. But one family’s views should not dictate what all students can or cannot read.

While my own path is still unfolding, I know that inclusive literature paved the way. Every student should have that same choice.

Resources

Ding, G. (September 6, 2023). *Katy ISD’s Book Bans Alienate Students*. Shift Press.
 Zuwanich, A. (August 27, 2024). *Katy ISD board votes to ban books about gender identity from many school libraries*. Houston Public Media.

Grace Ding is a high school junior in Houston and a member of IDRA’s Youth Advisory Board.

Celebrating Student Leadership

We are excited and honored to share this edition of the *IDRA Newsletter* featuring articles by students in our Youth Advisory Board, along with a poem by a student in our Valued Youth Partnership program. IDRA's student programs demonstrate our core values that recognize the assets all students bring, listen to students, and engage with them both in their own learning and in their leadership to transform schools and communities. Below are highlights of our current student programs.



Valued Youth Partnership – An asset- and research-based dropout prevention and student leadership program that has kept 98% of its tutors in school. The program identifies secondary students in at-risk situations and enlists them as tutors for elementary school youngsters who are also struggling in school.



VisionCoders – Eighth-grade computer science course in Title I middle schools. Students who are in at-risk situations are becoming software designers, creating educational games for elementary students (their “buddies”).



Youth Advisory Board – High school students are providing IDRA their insights about equity in education and advocacy.



Youth Leadership Now – An in-school program where eighth-grade students considered high-need become tutors of elementary students. Teachers also mentor the tutors to help them prepare to transition into high school.



IDRA Youth TechXperts™ – A new program that will equip middle school students with cutting-edge STEM skills while also fostering leadership, inclusivity and real-world experience.



MAS for Our Schools – High school students lead youth participatory action research projects about access to Mexican American Studies.



IDRA Digital Ambassadors – A youth-led technology program where students engage in participatory action research to identify the most pressing technology needs within their community and then lead community training events.



Safety, Dignity and Belonging – High school students studying the school discipline experiences of Black girls by connecting research principles and frameworks to legal scholarship and advocacy, called legal youth participatory action research (LYPAR).

Learn more at: <https://www.idra.org/support/student-programs>

The Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA) is a non-profit organization with a 501(c)(3) tax exempt status. Our mission is to achieve equal educational opportunity for every child through strong public schools that prepare all students to access and succeed in college.

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Students Deserve Religious Holidays Off

By Inayah Naqvi, High School Senior

Growing up in a Muslim household meant that when Eid rolled around, there was joy and excitement. Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha are the most important Muslim holidays. These significant holidays commemorate different things. Eid al-Fitr marks the end of the 30-day fasting period during the holy month of Ramadan. Eid al-Adha commemorates the Prophet Abraham's devotion to God.

Every Muslim deserves the chance to take the day off and celebrate with their families. The push for public schools to make Eid a school holiday has been an ongoing movement nationally. Areas such as New York City, New Jersey, and even Houston have implemented policies making Eid a school holiday. This clearly shows that more progress is being made in terms of giving Muslim communities visibility by granting the holy day off.

What is different about Eid compared to many other holidays is that it falls on a different date each year since it follows the Lunar calendar. While having school off during Eid would be nice, this may create an extra hurdle for school districts to maneuver. I believe the bare minimum school districts can do is to be more intentional and considerate by ensuring STAAR test dates do not fall on any religious holidays. Yet, when the Texas Education Agency (TEA) plans out testing dates, it seems non-Christian religious holidays are not considered in this process.

Muslim students in Texas public schools are sometimes burdened with the task of STAAR testing during this time. Because of this, many Muslims end up going to school to take these exams rather than being home and celebrating the holy day with their families.

Last year, Eid al-Fitr fell on April 10. On this same day, the STAAR test for seventh grade English language arts was administered. I know several people in my community who have felt

pressured to stay at school during Eid because of these exams.

Additionally, it is not only the TEA that needs to be held accountable when scheduling standardized tests. The College Board must be held to the same standards. The College Board designs and schedules tests like the SAT and AP exams. Despite it being a national organization, it has still scheduled AP exams during Eid al-Fitr.

In 2022, Eid al-Fitr took place on May 2. There were four AP exams scheduled that day. Recently, the College Board started to consider options for Muslim students. But in 2024 still set a test date on Eid. Moving forward, when any religious holidays fall during the standardized testing period, they must be taken into greater account.

Eid is not the only holiday that matters when it comes to standardized testing schedules. For the committees who oversee the testing decisions, it is key that they take all religious and cultural holidays into consideration when making them. Most students do not want to attend school and take an exam during their respective holidays. No one would even think to schedule an exam on Christmas or Christmas Eve. So why not have this mindset when considering other religious holidays?

Resources

Harb, A. (April 20, 2023). 'Progress': How Eid is becoming a US school holiday. Aljazeera.

Inayah Naqvi is a high school senior in San Antonio and a member of IDRA's Youth Advisory Board.



No one would even think to schedule an exam on Christmas or Christmas Eve. So why not have this mindset when considering other holidays?

Addressing Teacher Burnout and More

– Reflections from My Teacher Survey

By Diego Aranguiz Mourgues, High School Senior

As a part of IDRA's Youth Advisory Board, I have had the opportunity to work and bring a few of my ideas to fruition. One of the ideas was a survey of teachers in my school district. I wanted to pursue this project because my mother is an educator and would often tell me the struggles she has faced as an educator, so naturally, I was intrigued.

I asked myself, is this just a small issue that only she is facing? Or is this a bigger problem that multiple teachers are facing, and is this more of a problem than I thought? This could affect not only teachers in my mother's district but also mine and Texas, possibly even nationally.

These questions were just some of the reasons I decided to conduct a teacher survey to understand the challenges educators are facing day to day in the classroom and on campus. Overall, my aim was to understand how students and teachers can work together to improve campus culture and climate at our school.

I recruited teachers from my San Antonio high school who teach different subjects in order to collect a melting pot of responses that could help me strengthen the data. This strategy was to ensure I collected a broad, diverse view of teachers' struggles. I used the data I collected to evaluate the issues teachers are experiencing on our campus and inform sustainable solutions to address teachers' concerns.

My survey included items that asked teacher respondents to rank the severity of common issues in the education space, including teacher burnout, staffing shortages, hiring and retention, diversity hiring, campus climate and school funding. Additionally, I included questions that asked teachers about what kinds of resources they needed to teach effectively.

According to my survey results, one of the main issues teachers at my school are facing is educator burnout. Teachers rated it as one of

the most severe issues they were struggling with, which supports previous research and the hundreds of stories about this issue, especially prevalent during COVID-19 (Cardona, 2024).



My findings were not shocking; rather, this validated something that I feel like all teachers in Texas and even across the nation are sadly facing. They feel burned out with few resources to help them, as we have been seeing in teacher shortages more and more. Staffing issues followed close behind in the survey as one of the main concerns teachers had that impacted their confidence to teach students effectively.

While Likert scale items made up most of my survey, I also asked several questions to hear directly from teachers' voices about their unique experiences. Many teachers expressed concerns surrounding my district's lack of parent support, student vaping, too many coaches as teachers, lack of time for planning and much more.

Two teacher respondents said that one of our school's biggest issues is "overcrowding everywhere, which impedes the quality of education," and "explosive growth of population and not enough open campuses." This was something that I completely agree with as I have felt that overcrowding has been a huge issue for my campus.

One last finding that stuck out to me was that all teachers who took my survey mentioned that a big part of a student being successful in the classroom is having a safe school climate, which most importantly includes mental health resources. I believe that this clearly

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shows that without good, strong mental health support, a student will not fully feel engaged in the classroom, no matter how much an educator tries to improve their teaching or classroom environment.

While these are preliminary findings from my recent survey research, I am eager to share with the community a complete report soon. Additionally, I wanted to thank the teachers who volunteered their time for this survey. Their responses helped me and hopefully will be helpful to others.

Resources

Cardona, M. (February 28, 2024). Survey: Texas public school educators feeling burnout as districts face funding issues. KERA.

Diego Aranguiz Mourgues is a high school junior in San Antonio and a member of IDRA's Youth Advisory Board.

School Districts Must Prioritize their Students' Mental Health

By Aniyah Turner, College Freshman

Students' mental health is important to me because I had a period when I wasn't motivated to do well in school and didn't feel that it mattered to my school if I was. I felt my education wasn't prioritized by my school and felt very invisible when it came to trying to address my feelings.

I'm also very interested in this subject because I have younger siblings who I hope would avoid what I went through. I want to advocate for a change in our schools and how they treat their students.

Hello, my name is Aniyah Turner. As a recent high school student, I saw that mental health isn't really talked about or given a lot of thought. Many schools I have visited, too, don't appear to take the student's mindset or health into consideration. Many teachers and others treat students with no compassion or don't have adequate mental health resources to give to students. Mental health is very important, and the lack of support can cause problems, including with our academics.

Teenage students don't get to express themselves while they are at school. We are often burdened by emotional conflict about what the school has going on. Many students in my school district and others deal with academic pressures while trying to appease people in their lives.

There are significant numbers that indicate students are experiencing mental health issues. According to the CDC, 42% of students across the country report that they have symptoms of depression or feel sad and hopeless. This is a 21% increase since 2011. Fifty-seven percent of those students identify as female. (CDC, 2022)

Unfortunately, these things didn't seem to be addressed by my school board, which made me wonder if they cared about students' mental health.

Mental health issues in our schools have recently gone up after the state took over our school district. It has caused a ripple effect of stress to the principals, teachers, students and parents (Houston Chronicle, 2024). I worry that this will cause an academic decline and even higher rates of students being likely drop out.



Students deserve better mental health support in their schools to help with overall academic performance and better quality of life, to get the most out of their learning, and to academically and mentally be okay within their school walls.

Resources

CDC. (2024). Poor Mental Health Impacts Adolescent Well-being. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Houston Chronicle. (May 31, 2024). We asked HISD community members how things are going 1 year post-takeover. Here's what they said.

Aniyah Turner is a college freshman from Houston and a member of IDRA's Youth Advisory Board.

Students deserve better mental health support in their schools to help with overall academic performance and better quality of life, to get the most out of their learning, and to academically and mentally be okay within their school walls.

Stop School District Funding Injustice

By Mikel Quesada, High School Senior

All across Texas, students and teachers have heard in horror as news about budget cuts are happening in schools across the state due to our state leaders (Dial, 2024) and COVID-19 money ending (Craven, 2024).

Schools are given a certain amount of money from the state through their school districts. It's up to the administrators to manage the money to fund the school's operations.

When a budget cut happens or there is underfunding, schools have less money to spend. The consequences can be anything from never-replaced old school equipment to outdated textbooks. The problem happens in part because of the unjust amount of funding provided to public schools, and it could be made worse if tax dollars are diverted away from public education for misguided reasons.

Budget cuts and underfunding also happen because of unfair funding formulas and systems, which allow more money to go to richer schools in richer communities rather than the weaker and poorer schools that are in dire need of more money. Underfunding and budget cuts hurt schools and districts serving poor students more. These schools often need more resources to support their diverse students but are not provided sufficient resources from state and local sources. So, when there are cuts, these schools and districts feel the impacts more than wealthier ones.

Texas can keep budget cuts and underfunding from happening by paying close attention to the state budget and changes in the district fund distribution and the division of funds to all schools. When there is a sharp drop in the budget or lack of funds for all schools, speak at board meetings, make them listen to your opinion, and protest at open community meetings. You can also speak out by simply observing schools in your district: do facilities seem

rundown? Are the books and other curriculum resources being used outdated? Speak about the problem at school boards and the state legislature, too, to rally others against this injustice.



Resources

Dial, S. (January 26, 2024). Texas school districts making cuts after state fails to pass funding increase. KDFW.

Craven, M. (September 2024). What You Need to Know About the ESSER Funding Cliff – How Schools Will Be Impacted by the End of Federal COVID-19 Relief Funding. IDRA.

Mikel Quesada is a high school junior in Houston and a member of IDRA's Youth Advisory Board.

When there is a sharp drop in the budget or lack of funds to all schools, speak at board meetings, make them listen to your opinion.

Since I Became a Tutor

By Michelle Villegas, High School Junior

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

Since I became a tutor
I got three new little friends*
María
Jordan
Alex

Since I became a tutor
I know what it is to have recess taken away
“Don’t let her take all the letters away guys.”
“Be quiet I wanna have recess today.”

Since I became a tutor
I have got to test out different learning types
Jordan needs to write out what he’s thinking on the side of the text to understand
María needs someone to listen to her read and stay on the right line
Alex needs someone to read to him and stay focused

Since I became a tutor
I have learned to read fourth graders handwriting
María’s handwriting is the best (but don’t tell the other two that)

Since I became a tutor
I have had silly, but important conversations with my little friends
María loves cheerleading and does it in a club
Jordan loves five nights at Freddy’s and counted down with me the days until the new movie of it came out
Alex loves anything Marvel, his mouse for his computer is Iron Man

Since I became a tutor
I realized that even if I’m having a bad day, I can’t bring that into my kids’ class
Smile, breathe, focus
Make sure none of the kids have anything missing
Help them with what they’re doing
Ask them about their day and engage in conversation with them
Never let your smile drop

Since I became a tutor
I have had three new names to add to my prayers
I pray for María’s cheerleading competition tomorrow
I pray for Alex’s home
I pray for Jordan to turn in all his assignments

Since I became a tutor
My world opened up through a fourth grader’s eyes
Instead of stressing about my Algebra test
I stress about how much time we’ll have for recess

Since I became a tutor
My three little friends have taught me something
Stop stressing like an adult
And just get through the day like a person
Because at the end of the day, that’s all I am

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
My kids give me a hug every time I leave the classroom

Since I became a tutor
My world got brighter

* Tutee names changed for privacy

Michelle Villegas wrote this poem last year and is now a high school junior in Odessa, Texas. As a tutor in the IDRA Valued Youth Partnership program, her poem received third place in IDRA’s reflection contest.

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>



Focus: Students Are Speaking

The Power of Voice and Action – Elevating the Promise

IDRA Releases 2021-2022 Impact Report

The years 2021 and 2022 marked dramatic shifts as the world headed out of COVID-19 shutdowns. Schools reemerged during the pandemic as the centers of community connection.

Despite wide support of families for their public schools, public education became a target. For financial and political gain, some actors proceeded to sow distrust and lodge racial and gender attacks on students, particularly across the U.S. South.

IDRA stood strong in this climate. We value our collaboration with schools, families, students, advocacy partners and funders that make results like these possible.

We are grateful to work together as we press forward to elevate the promise of public education through the power of voice and action!



<https://idra.news/ImpactReport2021-2022>

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