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# Solving the Digital Divide Requires Authentic Family Engagement

by Thomas Marshall

The digital divide affects millions of Texas households that cannot get broadband Internet access. As schools moved activities to virtual platforms due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many families faced even more barriers to communicating with teachers and school leaders.

About 200 parents, caregivers and students across Texas recounted to IDRA their experiences with these problems through:

- weekly advocacy training sessions,
- weekly virtual office hours,
- stakeholder webinar discussions,
- our statewide student summit and follow up meetings, and
- our digital divide video campaign.

For example, Alma Muñoz, a parent who lives in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas, described her daughter’s connectivity issues and her problems trying to engage with the school: “There are multiple times when the Internet fails because we don’t have very good Internet service where we live. I often have to speak to the school so that they do not mark her absent, and I have to explain to them that the Internet at home is not very good.”

Soon after schools closed in March 2020, IDRA launched a partnership with two community-based organizations in the Texas Rio Grande Valley to help Spanish-speaking families navi-

gate virtual classrooms. Mentors from the College Scholarship Leadership Access Program (CSLAP) provide tech support to members of ARISE, a grassroots organization that promotes empowerment through education and part of IDRA’s Education CAFE network.

Solving the digital divide comes down to access, affordability and digital literacy. Without access to devices, families cannot check-in on students’ learning progress and needs. Without an affordable, dependable Internet connection, families cannot make sure each child can participate in online classes. And without proper digital literacy training, families cannot use technology to its fullest potential, which hinders family-school interaction and student engagement.

IDRA released a report this month, *Digital Destination – Texas Needs Broadband Connectivity for All Students & Families*, on the digital divide’s effects on Texas students and families and what Texas should do to secure equitable access to broadband for Texas’ most vulnerable student populations.

At the same time, IDRA launched a video campaign, Digitally Divided – Community United, to promote digital equity and highlight community voices about how the digital divide has impacted learning and daily life for them (see box). The campaign is led by IDRA, Lit Communities, (cont. on Page 2)

Digitally Divided, Community United

## Got 15 seconds?

**Students, Parents, Educators:**  
How has the digital divide impacted you?

The Texas Legislature is considering bills to support broadband access.

Join our video campaign!  
Share your story about how the digital divide has impacted your learning & your life.

**We need your voice!**

**Record a 15-second testimony in English or Spanish**

**It's a fun way to have an impact!**

<https://idra.news/VideoAdvocacy>

(Solving the Digital Divide Requires Authentic Family Engagement, continued from Page 1)

the Digital Inclusion Alliance of San Antonio, and the Texas Legislative Education Equity Coalition (TLEEC).

The Texas Legislature has seen a number of proposals to help fix the connectivity and engagement issues. House Bill 5 and Senate Bill 5 both aim to create permanent broadband infrastructure and include steps to identify public schools that do not have access to the Internet. And since the digital divide is not limited to rural areas, House Bill 5 specifically would add an urban school district representative to the Governor's Broadband Development Council, which currently has no such representation.

Rep. James Talarico worked with IDRA to file HB 4391 to require school districts to create student and family engagement plans so schools can make sure student and family voices are at the forefront of major education decisions. This is especially urgent as schools plan how to operate during the pandemic, how to address the digital divide, and what steps to take to make up for instruction disruptions over the past two school years. Also, Rep. Mary Gonzalez filed HB 129 that would create a digital citizenship course to help students engage in the digital world.

## IDRA Bridges the Digital Divide with Family Advocacy

While connectivity is critical to schools engaging with families, family engagement must inform solving the digital divide. Over the years, IDRA has developed a family leadership model that engages families and community members in their school policies and practices through the Education CAFE model. That work continues during the current Texas legislative session.

For example, every Monday afternoon, IDRA holds "office hours" to help students, families, educators and community members submit their

own comments on education bills being debated by Texas lawmakers that week.

We also have been engaging with families in the Rio Grande Valley through weekly virtual meetings and training sessions about how the legislative process works during a pandemic and to support family members as they prepare comments to submit about proposed legislation (see story on Page 3).

Similarly, IDRA is facilitating FANBi (Familias Abogando por Niños Bilingües) to empower families of young emergent bilingual (English learner) students to participate in the legislative process. Through workshops, town halls and advocacy nights, FANBi families advocate for high-quality bilingual education programs. FANBi is part of the Texas Early Childhood English Learner Initiative led by IDRA; Texans Care for Children; Philanthropy Advocates; Dr. Dina Castro, UNT Denton; and the Texas Association for the Education of Young Children (TxAEYC).

IDRA also led several initiatives to elevate student voices, such as our Texas Student Advocacy Convening, a virtual summit for students to hear the results of a student-led survey about their experiences with school during the pandemic, discuss major policy issues the legislature is considering and issues they think policymakers should consider, and plan next steps for elevating student voices at the capitol.

New IDRA Report  
**Digital Destination**  
Texas Needs Broadband Connectivity for All Students & Families  
by Thomas Marshall & Christina Muñoz,  
IDRA Education Policy Fellows

**4 Key actions for Texas to address the digital divide in education:**

- 1 Invest in sustainable broadband infrastructure within Texas communities
- 2 Continue distribution of digital devices that are consistent, reliable and suitable for students' education needs
- 3 Offer training and support to educators, students, and families in digital literacy and citizenship
- 4 Invest in robust community engagement programs, such as ongoing community-led digital equity studies and resources for school district capacity to support students and families

Learn more in IDRA's report:  
<https://idra.news/DigitalDestinationPDF>

IDRA

Creating an effective broadband infrastructure for the state of Texas depends on robust student and family engagement at all levels. We must help create sustainable fixes to the digital divide, because without them, we will struggle throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

## Resources

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# Education CAFE Families Provide Insight on State-Level Education Policies

by Aurelio M. Montemayor, M.Ed.

The Texas Legislature is hearing from a new contingent of families through IDRA's Education CAFE network. The legislature holds its regular session from January to May every two years. Education CAFE members in the south Texas Rio Grande Valley started preparations in the fall of 2020 with the leadership of ARISE Adelante, which supports family leadership in education through the work of community centers situated in colonias (unincorporated communities with scarce public services).

The Education CAFE network in the area holds community events once or twice per year focused on education issues members raise. Due to COVID-19, they moved their Mesa Comunitaria online in the fall of 2020 to review education issues concerning families, especially those in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods. Participants identified several central issues of concern: inequitable school funding, college preparation and access, the digital divide exacerbated by the COVID-19 isolation, effective dual language programs in their schools, and mental health and wellness concerns aggravated by the pandemic.

The network asked IDRA to provide several training and support sessions to follow the regional Mesa Comunitaria. They wanted to learn more about the basic structure of the legislature and how bills become law. Following the general overview and introduction to the legislative process, IDRA provided a training-of-trainers session on how to submit public comments and testimony to the legislature.

Each chamber of the Texas Legislature set new rules for public comment this session as a health precaution. The rules dramatically reduced the opportunities for providing face-to-face testimony. But the Texas House of Representatives set up new systems for accepting written comments online during hearings.

## New Texas Education CAFE Advocacy Network

IDRA launched the Texas Education CAFE Advocacy Network with weekly email alerts identifying upcoming hearings related to the issues families raised. IDRA provides support through email and virtual meetings as participants craft and submit their comments. Spanish speakers develop their ideas and written comments in Spanish, and IDRA provides translation support. For many, this is their first time submitting official public commentary on proposed legislation.

For example, on the issue of school funding, excerpts of testimony submitted by parents include the following.

"I'm asking for resources so that all districts have trained teachers so that all students can achieve at a high level." – *Raquel Negrete*

"We want to ask you that more funds be destined for the schools so that we have prepared teachers, help in counseling for the students, safe transportation and a safe environment for the protection of our children so that parents have more peace of mind knowing that their children go to school in an appropriate environment." – *Mari Orozco*

"Teachers are going to have a bigger job. They are going to need more psychologists to support them. With all that is happening, the pandemic, the confinement and everything, there will be collateral damage. So, you need to allocate funds to either train the teachers more or hire specialized personnel to treat anxiety and stress." – *Brenda García*

The parents and caretakers also publish their opinions on social media, send letters to the state legislators from their region, and even present their ideas to their local school boards and urge them to join in advocating key issues with state legislators.

(cont. on Page 4)

*Families are learning the details about how legislation that impacts their children is developed and how they can voice their opinions about critical issues. Families, previously unheard, are influencing education policy.*

(Education CAFE Families Provide Insight on State-Level Education Policies, continued from Page 3)

Education CAFEs are intergenerational by design. Some students submitted their own testimony supporting broadband proposals. For example, Andrea Guzmán said: “With slow Internet, we become anxious and stressed because the pages won’t load fast enough. We have the constant thought that the Internet might crash at any moment and we won’t be able to access the exam anymore.”

This process demonstrates the power of IDRA’s Family Leadership in Education framework as it lives in the IDRA Education CAFE model. The key elements of the model are: (1) community-based, distributive leadership (for collective action); (2) school partnerships; and (3) education projects that affect school policy and practice. The projects are the laboratories for the parents and caretakers to take action, and they showcase how families – especially those marginalized, ignored and generally seen through a deficit lens – can and do affect educational policy and practice.

Each Education CAFE’s project emerges from critical conversations in highly-engaged meetings. Sometimes a local group is alerted by other families or advocates of policy issues related to their concerns. Common themes from the network result in regional efforts. A project can be very local, such as getting a nearby school to open its doors to the Education CAFE group or to take care of specific needs in the building. Other projects can be larger, such as giving public comment or testimony on state and national legislative issues.

In this process, participants are learning the details about how legislation that impacts their children is developed and how they can voice their opinions about critical issues. Families, previously unheard, are influencing education policy.

### Family Engagement Across the U.S. South

Through the IDRA EAC-South, IDRA’s family engagement innovations support communities across the 11 southern states and the District of Columbia. For example, in Arkansas, we facilitated a State Board of Education and Department of Education statewide project to define family engagement for the state and to incorporate critical conversations among diverse families as part of the state’s approach to, and support of, authentic family engagement.

**IDRA Education CAFE**  
Community Action Forums for Excellence

“IDRA developed a family-leadership-in-education model that brings parents together to focus on how to improve the school. Instead of promoting a deficit view of families, this approach is participatory and honors the culture and language of the parent.”  
- Caralee J. Adams, Education Week

**Innovative Approach to School-Family-Community Collaboration**  
An Education CAFE is a family group rooted in a community-based organization, rather than in a single school. Its sole purpose is to collaborate with schools to improve the success of students in the community.

**Networks of family leaders transforming their public schools**

**Community-based, Distributive Leadership**  
Meetings are attended by parents, grandparents, students’ older siblings, neighbors and all who consider themselves custodians of children’s academic success and future. By rotating leadership roles, the Education CAFE is based on input and action from all.

**School Partnerships**  
Education CAFE members come together and partner with schools in their neighborhood to ensure student success. Collaboration includes co-planning and sharing responsibility for outreach and ongoing activities that improve education in their neighborhood public schools.

**Education Projects**  
Education CAFEs partner with neighborhood public schools on identifying education needs and gaps, and improving educational quality, equity and outcomes. Families carry out meaningful projects, like promoting the accessibility of advanced placement, dual credit and pre-algebra courses.

See how to start an Education CAFE in your area!  
<https://idra.news/EdCAFew>

The Intercultural Development Research Association is an independent, non-profit organization. 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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With support from the William & Flora Hewlett Foundation, IDRA is forming new Education CAFEs in Georgia and Texas. Our new Southern Education Equity Network (SEEN) will develop a virtual network to support education advocates; expand culturally-sustaining teaching that accurately portrays the contributions of all communities; eliminate discipline and policing practices that adversely affect students of color; and connect advocates with state-level policy fellows. By empowering students, families, educators and communities to confront systemic racism, SEEN’s work is aligned with the foundation’s commitment to racial equity.

For more information about IDRA’s Education CAFE model see our infographic, “5 Steps to Start an IDRA Education CAFE,” or visit <https://idra.news/EdCAFew>. Also see our Family Engagement Online Tools for Educators package with five video chapters (see Page 8 for details).

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# The Case for Alternate Assessments and Community Oversight

by *Chloe Latham Sikes, Ph.D., Hector Bojorquez, & Morgan Craven, J.D.*

COVID-19 has made it extremely challenging for many schools across the country to properly administer state assessments. School districts have to consider the public health challenges of safely testing students, the feasibility of virtual testing, and the social and emotional needs of students, families and teachers being asked to prepare for and take tests during a pandemic.

There certainly were problems with state assessments that existed long before COVID-19 as well. In Texas, for example, failures and questionable results from the state's assessment (STAAR) have steadily moved educational stakeholders to reexamine both the tests themselves and the high-stakes penalties tied to them for students and schools. And those most harmed are students of color and students from families with limited incomes.

## Short-Term Strategies

This past year has led many to rethink old habits and operations. Schools are seeing new ways to provide student support and to assess mastery. Now is the time to explore assessment challenges and research-based strategies that enable schools to accurately measure learning and identify where students need support. Recent federal guidance and relief funding laws emphasize that addressing lost instructional time due to COVID-19 ("learning loss") must ensure accurate and valid data collection, particularly data about how historically-marginalized student groups are faring in their schools.

While often spoken in the same breath, assessment and accountability are two different things. Assessment guides instruction, informs school improvement and helps to identify student support needs. Accountability should facilitate community oversight with disaggregated data; input factors, like fair funding; opportunity-to-learn metrics, such as social-emotional learning; and school climate and student engagement.

Neither assessment nor accountability should use test scores for high-stakes decisions, such as diploma denial, in-grade retention or state takeovers. And neither should be used to excuse school district poor performance because of the characteristics of the community it serves, such as low-wealth areas and communities of color (Robledo Montecel, 2019).

There are a number of short-term strategies that states and school districts can adopt to move away from harmful and ineffective assessment and accountability systems right now:

- Use tests for diagnostic purposes to determine how students are learning and being supported by their schools. These assessments should not be tied to high-stakes consequences, such as grade retention or for determining school district ratings in state accountability systems.
- Expand the use of *formative assessment* methods, which include tests, assignments and projects that measure over time how students are learning content and where they need additional support.
- Collect additional data that are complementary to diagnostic assessments and can help to determine how schools are doing in educating their students (Latham Sikes, 2020). Such data include information about digital literacy and access and student engagement. Recent guidance from the U.S. Department of Education requires the collection of chronic absenteeism data and technology access as a condition of granting certain waivers to state assessment reporting (Rosenblum, 2021).

## Long-Term Strategies

In addition to the immediate responses above, states should engage in long-term reforms, beginning by performing independent studies concerning their assessment systems. These studies should be commissioned by states with independent oversight by a panel of education stakeholders, including education advocates,

*(cont. on Page 6)*

*Too often, students and families are seen as passive consumers of data with no follow-up or mechanism for meaningful input. If we are serious about redefining assessment systems, schools should engage students and families in new ways.*

(The Case for Alternate Assessments and Community Oversight, continued from Page 5)

community members, families, recent graduates and researchers.

Such studies should examine the impacts of assessments on teaching and learning over time. Suggested research questions include: (a) Have the tests accurately measured education outcomes? (b) What have been the least effective practices for measuring content learning? (c) What have been the best practices for measuring content learning? (d) What are the causes of performance plateaus in standardized tests? (Rothman, 2017) and (e) What dynamics across all state assessment tests lead to strong early results that drop off in the higher grades?

Even as states perform these evaluations, they can look to well-established research on avoiding harmful impacts of testing systems that hurt students and the strategies to accurately measure achievement. High-stakes accountability systems have a negative impact on pedagogy that is illustrated by the underperformance of students of color on other standardized assessments (Valenzuela, 2005).

To further two decades of work on this issue, an independent committee can propose answers, suggestions and topics for further research on the following foundational questions:

- What does a meaningful assessment look like?
  - What are the guiding principles that effective assessment must embody?
  - How is equity ensured?
- How do we maintain the integrity of asset-based ideas that continue to focus change in educational practices rather than blaming students' socioeconomic conditions?
- What mechanisms must be in place that provide increased support for underperforming schools?
- What role do assessments play in a reimagined 21st century accountability systems that concentrate and measure the following indicators?
  - College access and success for all students,
  - Culturally sustaining educational practices that include ethnic studies, and
  - Critical thinking skills that include 21st century media literacies.

## Community-led Assessment Systems

The next decade will surely bring significant changes to accountability and assessments that

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## Watch our Q&A webinar for details.

<https://idra.news/CSOqaWebinar>

<https://www.idra.org/texas-chief-science-officers-program>

could lead to a new era in school reforms. It is imperative to move forcefully but fortified with the lessons from our past.

One of the most important and untapped assets at our disposal is our families and communities. School districts should create systems that enable students and families to provide regular feedback concerning local educational policies, programs and practices.

Too often, students and families are seen as passive consumers of data with no follow-up or mechanism for meaningful input. If we are serious about redefining assessment systems, schools should engage students and families in new ways, including to identify the culturally-sustaining practices and assessment tools that would best help students connect to their schools and engage in their coursework. It is through this community-led approach to teaching and learning that we can best support students and ensure schools are centers of learning and growth rather than test-prep machines.

## Resources

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**Now more than ever, reconnecting with students is critical. IDRA can help!**

The IDRA Valued Youth Partnership is a proven cross-age tutoring program that works by identifying middle & high school students in at-risk situations and enlisting them as tutors for elementary school youngsters who are also struggling in school. Given this role of personal and academic responsibility, the Valued Youth tutors learn self-discipline and develop self-esteem. Schools shift to the philosophy and practices of valuing students considered at-risk.

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- ✓ Strengthen academic skills
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Tutors tutor a minimum of four hours a week for one class period a day.



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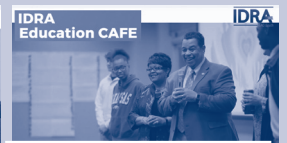
*Focus: Family Engagement*

## Family Engagement Tools for Educators

### Available free!

The IDRA EAC-South's Family Engagement Online Technical Assistance Package is designed to provide educators tools for embracing what, for many, is a new vision for engaging with families and community members.

The package includes literature reviews, articles, podcasts, and five learning chapters, each with a video and supporting resources.



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