

**National Dropout Prevention Center
Partnering with Parents in Dropout Prevention:
"The Need and the How"
Dixie Jordan, Deborah Leuchovius, Aurelio Montemayor
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MODERATOR: All right. Well, with that, we've got to move on. So, Aurelio, you're up next. Welcome to the program.

AURELIO MONTEMAYOR: Thank you. All families are valuable. None is expendable. At IDRA for the last 33 years, as child advocates, we've been especially concerned about families of children who are undervalued and not taught well in school, and the attitude of schools towards those families. Families can be economically disadvantaged, minority, or speak a language other than English. So, as we've done our parent engagement work, we've had to address some very central things.

Valuing versus deficit assumptions are critical to this. For example, in our work with children who don't finish school—usually labeled dropout—we had to turn the at-risk label to the valued label. And, when we think about kids that don't finish school, instead of thinking of dropouts, we think of school holding power. Because until we change the conversation about our institution and the children, we're going to continue to put the spotlight on what's wrong with the child and what's wrong with the family.

We look at family engagement in four dimensions. You know, one of the major leading researchers in parent involvement, Joyce Epstein, has six types of involvement. Those are 1) parenting, 2) communicating, 3) volunteering, 4) learning at home, 5) decision making, and 6) collaborating with the community. That's a very good outline, but it comes from looking at the institution and what the institution, the schools, have to do to better engage parents.

Our outline, our dimensions, are from the point of view of the parent, all parents. But it is especially focused on those that are just hanging on by their fingernails economically, or considered a minority, or have some other societal view of them that they are not players in the field. So, we start with parent as teacher, but not from the point of view of parenting, helping a parent be a better teacher, but validating who the parent is, exactly where they are, and how they are.

Next level is parent as resource. The sequence is wrong here. When the child goes to school, or to Headstart, or an institution, the parent is a resource. But in that list, very low, is volunteering. Number One is that the parent is the expert on that child. Whether that child has special needs, or speaks a language other than English, the parent has to be seen and drawn in from what they know about the child because I, as a teacher, need that information. So, parent as resource, again, not as a cheap labor pool, but as an expert on the child.

Then, parent as decision-maker. All parents, especially those that are hanging on by their fingernails economically, that are poor, make tremendous decisions every day, every week. So, we had to figure out how to connect their decision-making power to what the campus and the school needs in terms of making decisions.

And then the fourth level we see is parent as leader and trainer of others. Validating who they are and bringing other parents to the question of how we can have the best possible school systems for our kids. Our structure is one starting from valuing. And, for example, one thing that IDRA doesn't do a lot of—first of all, because there are a lot of other people doing it well—is parenting, because that's *how* to fix the parent, or *how* to help the parent. Obviously, all families need help.

And the business of parenting pushes the guilt button. I can ask you right now, all of those listening that are parents. *Have you been the perfect parent?* Especially the parent of an adolescent, somebody going through puberty. You're hanging on by your fingernails. Even if you have a Ph.D. in child rearing, you're going to need some help. And the problem with that is that we're going to you as fixing something that's broken. And so we really need to look at the institutions, put the spotlight on the institutions, because we know for the last 50 years, looking at the culture of poverty and what's wrong with poor people hasn't helped fix it. We can handle our institutions.

Instead of just going back to college is not for everyone—'cause as a minority, I've heard that all my life—in my neighborhood, in Spanish, in Laredo, I used to hear [Spanish saying], "Get an education, or you'll suffer what I suffered." Families know the value of education, but they're just hanging on by their fingernails, and they're also so cynical about what the institution can do that rejects them at every turn. Even in the PTA, you have the select parents that look at these other parents. So if you have a child that doesn't speak English and has special needs, who's going to listen to you?

And so what we need to focus on is the institutional assumptions about these children of these families, and look at the institutions to modify. One of our problems with alternative campuses, our DAP's, if these are tanks holding the kids that either behaviorally don't fit in, or whatever, and when and how are we going to create those campuses to be excellent campuses and parent friendly is going to take a big push because the assumptions are still we're sending them over there because they're not good enough for the regular campus. Okay?

So, our goals are to have our parents become active in having excellent schools for all children. And we go through a process where we listen to them in a language that they understand, value who they are and what they've already done, and share that because if the dialogue that where the emerging parent, the parents that have not been heard are silent in a school setting have a lot to say. We experience that all the time. But it's a setting that has to be parent-friendly, culturally, linguistically, and [inaudible phrase] of class. There are many poor, white parents that failed in school, and they're going to feel the same feeling of 'I'm powerful at home in my kitchen, but when I walk into that

institution, I didn't do well.' And so you have all this bad stuff come up, and the institution reinforces it. That's why the assumptions are so important.

When we have diminished expectations based on social and institutional feelings and limitations, of course these institutions are going to be appropriate. We're not even accommodating for language, forget for a disability. I mean, people had to chain their wheelchairs to buildings so that the buildings were created so that you could even go up. So we said, 'Okay, let's figure out how we can get that wheelchair up the steps,' rather than just put a ramp. In other words, the institution has to become flexible to the needs of the learner because a lot of these children, I know, some of them are not college material. But I come from a history where most of us are told we're not college material. And the middle-class, wealthy kids, even if they're dumb, they'll go to Yale because of the legacy. So, you know, we have to be very careful with that college is not for everyone because the institution will quickly give up on the kid, especially if he's minority, especially if he doesn't speak English, and especially if he has identified disabilities.

So, yes, I don't want to be with my head in the clouds, on the good ship lollipop about what children can achieve. But the way [inaudible phrase] at least, I don't hear counselors saying 'College is for everybody.' I don't hear most of the public schools saying most kids are college material. If you're middle class, if you speak English, and you come from a professional home, you're automatically assumed to be college material. And if you have a disability, those parents will make sure that they're going to protect that child from getting inappropriate expectations, and be guided into an inappropriate profession.

So in our look at parent involvement, we look at peer listening, building mutual support among families to support each other in what is an *extremely* difficult task—raising children. And as long as we just want to solve individual kids' and individual families' problems, and it's certainly in the field of special ed when you have that individualistic push—I'll get it for my kid, and I'll fight for my kid—we never have the collective will to make every single public school the best possible school for all kids, regardless of what we consider their disability. We need to look at parent leadership because that's what's going to save the schools. Public monies are going to leave to private schools, and public schools that most need to stay open are going to shut down if these families don't, collectively, support having that school the best possible school for their kid. I'll stop there.

MODERATOR: All right. Aurelio, do you want to open it up for questions now?

A. MONTEMAYOR: Sure. We've got about 10 minutes left, or five minutes left, I don't know.

MODERATOR: All right. We'll do that. So if you would like to ask a question of Aurelio, just press "star" and the number 1 on your telephone keypad, then that will place you in the live queue, and I'll call on you by the name of your city. So, go ahead and press star 1 now. You can also continue to email your questions to moda@krm.com.

Let's go to our email. I have a question here, *What is your opinion about fusing career and technical training in the secondary curriculum?*

A. MONTEMAYOR: I have a very strong opinion about secondary education. I don't have any weak opinions, actually. But when you look at how teachers in schools are trained, elementary schools are much more family friendly. Middle school teachers—and I come from being a high school teacher—middle schools and high schools don't have a tradition of real family engagement of any kind. You have band boosters, you have a PTSA here and there. But, generally, if a school becomes family friendly, they're going to be able to integrate what the family needs are. In other words, if you have, say, a very active PTSA—Parent Teacher Student Association—and parents are saying we don't have enough connection to the world of work here, this is all college prep—and, actually, you might call it college prep, but most kids don't even finish the college prep. So, if we had an effective program, we should have some technical training, some high level training, or even chef classes. But, in other words, it's going to come from the community having input into the curriculum. I think a secondary school can do it very, very well. I think there's an amazing array of things that secondary schools can do if the will is there and the community says we need this.

For example, if at the high school level, I want to have a pre-chef training school, also that means that that campus, though, is going to have to work on its own attitudes about kids and what kids can do. So that if my skills in reading are limited, just consider the societal attitudes towards accent. If I have a German accent or a French accent, there's a societal notion that I'm somehow educated or sophisticated. Generally, if I have a Mexican accent, I'm a dumb Mexican. I mean, that's the societal attitude. So if we don't handle how we look at kids and listen to them, whether they know how to read or not, that secondary technical training program is not going to work because we still have low expectations for the children. So, yes, you can have that if there's a lot of input from the communities if they want it, but you really have to get at the diminished expectations aspect of the adults on that campus.

MODERATOR: All right. Thank you for that. And Deborah and Dixie, you can weigh in on that if you wish.

D. JORDAN: I think Aurelio said it for me. Aurelio, I think that you and I have a lot in common because I've been down that road a lot of times.

A. MONTEMAYOR: I want to mention that we have some podcasts. If anybody wants to listen in on them, it's www.idra.org/podcasts. We do these about twice a month, and some of these issues we talk about more in depth on those podcasts.

MODERATOR: All right. Thank you. I'd like to remind the audience that you can ask a question of any of our speakers for today by pressing "star" and then the number 1 on your telephone keypad. And, of course, email address is moda@krm.com. And with that, let's go to Little Rock, Arkansas.

LITTLE ROCK, AR: Leverage point six, in the state's education agency monitor [inaudible phrase] programs and ensure the law is carried out. How is that completed in Texas?

AURELIO MONTEMAYOR: Leverage point six? I'm not thinking clearly right now. I know Title I. Are you talking about No Child Left Behind? Oh, yeah, okay, okay. I know what you're [inaudible]. Well, actually our state agency is monitoring through computers and telephones. We were reduced by two-thirds a few years ago at the state agency, so people don't even go out and monitor. So it's very cursory; it's self-reported. For example, if a district doesn't have a district-wide parent involvement plan, there aren't a lot of ways that you can find that out. If, for example, I blanked out on my own handout. If—

LITTLE ROCK, AR: You [inaudible phrase] question. I wanted to know if you were in that same process. That's what's happening in our state, as well.

AURELIO MONTEMAYOR: Yeah, Texas has very little actual monitoring going on. And so district self report—if they're asked to report on it—it's very cursory. What we have in our districts is a rubber stamp plan that was developed somewhere. It's there in the files. But it's not a very real one. You know, Title I is supposed to spend at least one percent of its resources on parent involvement. And most of it is not very meaningful. It's not very engaging, if at all.

LITTLE ROCK, AR: [inaudible phrase] that's the same money that IDEA uses, right? Okay.

AURELIO MONTEMAYOR: No, IDEA is a different pot of money. This is just the Title I parent involvement requirement. One percent of the funds, for example, if my district is getting six million dollars in Title I money, one percent of that has to be spent, a minimum of one percent, in what is called parent engagement. And the law now requires a more meaningful parent engagement.

D. JORDAN: I also think, Aurelio, that despite the requirement that families be involved, and No Child Left Behind gives you involvement at a different level—school choice being one of those levels—fewer than two percent of parents across America exercise their right to choice when their school's in need of improvement. So I don't know what the disconnect is there. I don't know if it's just the information problem that we're having [overlapping voices]

AURELIO MONTEMAYOR: There's not an awful lot of choice.

D. JORDAN: Well, in an inner city, there's sometimes none. I agree.

AURELIO MONTEMAYOR: But you know, one of the things that I think is very important that parents of children with special needs look at, number one, to make sure

that the generic needs of our children are met through the Title I resources, and that the school saying, okay we have the ARD, and we've got an IEP and all that other stuff [inaudible] okay that's well and good, but we are economically disadvantaged, and, therefore, under Title I, my child should be getting some after-school support because the school is not doing well on AYP and stuff like that. There's, I think, a lot of resources that most families don't realize are there. And that they have the right—not just the privilege—the right to go and say, "My child is not getting the support, in terms of reading and writing." And if it means adapting the classroom, adapting the curriculum, that is not just because IDEA says it's so, Title I says however you do it, these kids need to learn to read and write and learn math, you know? So it's not just [inaudible] okay, special ed, that goes over there, every child that goes to this school has money coming from the state and [inaudible] under Title I from the Feds, that should be used so the school does what it has to do to teach that child. And IDEA is just a more focused one on a child with special needs.

My problem with most of what the school does is they stigmatize, or label, the kid, but don't do much about it. You know, you're labeled limited English proficient, or you're labeled special ed, or whatever. But what happens? What is the institution doing to make sure that it's a family-friendly campus? The kid is really enjoying it, and is working at his or her best level, and is engaged, and all that? I mean, all the resources a school has from the state funding at the basic level, to the federal funding, all that should do to adapt this institution, not to some idealized child, but to the children we have.

And if this child comes to me in a wheelchair, we'll figure out how that wheelchair's gonna fit, because part of what I think is important, I do know that sometimes for special kinds of situations, you need to separate children. But I think, I don't want our public schools to lose that essential piece of democracy that this is the marketplace where we meet and engage. And if we engage across race and class, we also engage across special needs. And we all need that. I mean, I think mainstreaming has done a lot of bad things because schools and teachers are not ready for it. But in an ideal world, any campus would be welcoming, and quite ready to accept the child if the child comes in a wheelchair, or the child has an emotional problem. Just like if a child [Spanish saying] we have to use the language the child understands, at least until the parents and kid can connect to what's going on in school.

And by the way, in terms of language instruction, we already know a heck of a lot of how to teach children who don't speak English. It's a matter of having the training and the will to do it at the campus level.

MODERATOR: All right. Thank you. Now, Aurelio, we have some audience members here who have asked that you repeat the Web address for the podcasts that you mentioned a few minutes ago. [overlapping voices]

AURELIO MONTEMAYOR: Oh, I'd love to, yes. It's www.idra.org. Now, that's our website. If you do www.idra.org, that gets you to our website. If you add a back slash and the word p-o-d-c-a-s-t-s, that takes you straight to the podcasts. And you know, the last

one we did was brilliant. I was the one being interviewed. It was just wonderful. [laughter] I'm sorry I'm so [inaudible] I [inaudible phrase] in this domain [inaudible phrase] to get me going. I'm a little bit neutral on these things.

MODERATOR: The next question's actually for Deborah. And it would like you to explain the statement about the Latino student population improving their dropout rate. Would you please explain that, Deborah?

D. LEUCHOVIUS: ... I'm looking to see where I found that. "Hispanic youth have experienced the smallest improvement in school completion over time"...

AURELIO MONTEMAYOR: There's been a slight increase. Let me tell you, though, my organization has done a statewide attrition study in Texas for the last 22 years, I think. And we have looked at the attrition rates for all children. What we do, we have a formula. We look at them as incoming freshman, and four years later, where are they? And we've seen, for example, that the attrition rates for students of color are much greater than for Caucasian or white students. Latino rates have not improved. Our current, for our last report, if you visit our website, there's an October newsletter that shows that 46 percent of Latino students are not around four years later. And our formula already allows for in and out migration and other stuff. The official state data, and what schools self report, is different because they have all kinds of lever codes, and they figure out how to play a little chess game with all this stuff so that it doesn't look so bad.

I'm really concerned, for example, that they're counting GED as high school completions. But that has been, for Latino kids, an age-old way for the schools to get money from the state and not have to teach them the full course. You're overage, get your GED, you still get your allotment from the state. But the Latino community's being told that a GED is as good as a high school diploma. And [inaudible phrase] an employer would consider that. I know there are special cases of some children that the GED is the best route. The problem is it's being used with students of color, with both black and brown kids in Texas, as the way to not have to educate them and telling them 'that gets you into community college,' and, of course, they're not gonna get into community college. Our figures are horrible there. So you've got to be very careful about that.

What we do know is, nationally, Latino school holding power rates are really disastrous, really disastrous.

D. LEUCHOVIUS: Thank you, Aurelio, for jumping in there. I appreciate it. If you're looking for the citations, it sounds like the website for Aurelio's organization would have information on it. There's also information on the OSEP website about school completion, and that's broken down by ethnicity and gender and all of that.

MODERATOR: All right. Thank you. And with that, we've got time for one quick question. We've got about one minute. *What are some of the recommended ways to best reach Latino parents?* And we've got about one minute.

AURELIO MONTEMAYOR: Approach them with dignity and validate who they are. Have someone who speaks their language be the connection. And find out how much they really value education.

MODERATOR: All right. Thank you for that. And we would like to extend our appreciation to Deborah Leuchovius and Dixie Jordan of the PACER Center, and Aurelio Montemayor, of IDRA, for today's informative telephone seminar.

Thanks, also, to our listening audience for participating today. We appreciate your interest in building school and family partnerships, and are pleased to have been able to offer you today's seminar. We look forward to your joining us for future seminars in this series. Please visit our website at www.ndcp-sd.org for future events, and transcripts and keypoints from past telephone seminars. Again, that web site is www.ndcp-sd.org.

If you have any questions about the material that was presented today that were *not* answered, we invite you to email those questions to Deb Hall. That email address is dhall@edc.org.

And I would, again, like to remind our participants to carefully fill out the evaluation form and to fax it to the number listed on the page, or use the krm online evaluation site. The link to that site is toward the top of the printed evaluation form.

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