

The Nurturing of Parent Leadership

- by AurelioM. Montemayor, M.Ed.
(/staff/aurelio-m-montemayor-m-ed/)

IDRA Newsletter • September 1997



For many years, IDRA has operated a model of parent leadership that is based on field experience with parents of children who are economically disadvantaged, minority or limited-English-proficient. Our model contains, roughly, four stages that are somewhat sequential: parents as teachers, as resources, as decision makers and as trainers. One of the parents we have worked with is Clementina Padilla (with 28 grandchildren) who has been part of the central organizing committee and a conference presenter. Speaking about the model, she shared her thoughts with us recently (see box below) in her beautiful and assertive Spanish.

Ms. Padilla's comments reflect a variety of results sought by IDRA and other collaborating groups in terms of parent leadership. Through the national Mobilization for Equity project, funded by the Ford Foundation through the National Coalition of Advocates for Students (NCAS), IDRA has led an ongoing effort to develop a network of parents in Texas who work together to achieve the best possible education for all students. Support is also provided by the STAR Center (the comprehensive regional assistance center funded by the U.S. Department of Education to serve Texas and a collaboration of IDRA, the Charles A. Dana Center and RMC Research Corporation).

Participants in this network, Families United for Education: Getting Organized [Familias unidas para la educación: ganando organizadas] (FUEGO), represent various school districts, distinct geographic areas and the spectrum of socio-economic and educational backgrounds of San Antonio.

They have come together to share information and experiences in an effective way to promote greater awareness of education issues and to develop leadership. This article provides an overview of the four stages of our model and gives examples of how it has supported the development of the FUEGO network.



Parents as Teachers

Parents are the first teachers of their children. For parents who need more self-confidence, this is an ego-boosting stage that helps them realize how much instruction through modeling they have already done for their children, regardless of educational background or economic status.

Many parent involvement programs are active in this area, and a variety of resources are available in most communities. The topics range from parenting skills and discipline at home, to how to help your child with his or her homework. One dilemma with many of these classes is that a deficit model often underlies the effort: There is something wrong with the parent that must be fixed, or there is something lacking which must be compensated. Oftentimes schools and community groups provide workshops for parents using topics such as parenting skills in order to bring parents into the school to attend a meeting. At IDRA, our vision is to regard getting parents to meetings as merely a basic step, rather than the central core of a parent leadership program. For example, in the Mobilization for Equity effort, the parents as teachers sessions that our programs have offered include the following:

- What parents need to know about multicultural literature.
- The self-concept of a child and demonstrated love.
- Learning styles.
- Parents as Resources

Parents are resources to the classroom and school campus. In our model, parents are made aware of the kinds of contributions they can make to a classroom and to a campus. The focus is, again, to strengthen the parent's self-concept and to assist schools in placing greater value on all parents. Parents should share instructional support roles with the school and not be seen solely as fund-raisers and volunteer laborers.

In the Mobilization for Equity process, IDRA has provided sessions related to parents as resources that include these topics:

- Parents advocating for the child with special needs.
- Parents conducting focus group interviews with other parents.

Parents as Decision Makers

Parents are decision makers in educational committees, boards and projects. This stage more clearly establishes a leadership role and requires much support to help parents assume the tasks of making decisions in groups, planning activities, carrying out independent projects and evaluating the results. Besides the existing formal committees and groups that either are parent leadership bodies or call for parent representation, many opportunities exist that encourage parents to become decision makers within schools.

A concern is that some campuses have a closed group of favored parents who are called upon to give support to pre-set goals and projects, and that the vast majority of parents are excluded from this stage. The core group of FUEGO participants have functioned mainly as decision makers. They have decided – starting from scratch each time – to host conferences for parents by parents. All aspects of the conferences have been planned and executed by parents, from the initial stages of identifying resources to developing presentations and inviting presenters. Each conference has then been evaluated through a series of conversations so that each individual's leadership gets reviewed. Strengths and successes receive validation and notes are kept to improve the next effort.

Parents as Trainers

Parents are trainers of their peers. In this stage, the parents become teachers and facilitators so that their peers can learn and practice those skills developed in the previous three levels. Since nothing is learned so well as when a person has to teach it himself or herself, IDRA views this stage as the crowning event of parent leadership. Parents conduct surveys of parent needs and focus group interviews. They also conduct training on leadership and the specific topics they have learned about through their experiences and the training.

At each of the three conferences already held, parents from the core group served as emcees, presenters in workshops and leaders of feedback sessions at the close of each conference. The parents have developed many workshops and are training other parents to be leaders. One workshop is specifically entitled "Parent Leadership."

Peer Support

The third and fourth stages are viewed as leadership roles, with the parent trainer teaching other parents to be leaders. In our Mobilization for Equity project, as we have concentrated on the decision maker and trainer stages, we have most focused on peer support.

Peer support remains critical because recurrent phenomena in leadership development is leader isolation, peer attack, discouragement and burnout. IDRA places major emphasis on nurturing all participants: emphasizing their strengths and successes, modeling the role of listening to each other, allowing for temporary absence from the group when family crises impinge without dropping anyone from the list, and allowing for decisions to come from the group. During the first session after their most recent conference, the planners discussed the event, lessons learned and the process in general.

Participant Martha Ortiz said: “We don’t really have big crises in this group. We are not jealous of one another, it’s the opposite, al contrario, nos damos [on the contrary we give each other] support.”

Margarita James echoed her comments:

Each person is important, and we know that we are important. We know that the next person, what they say, is just as important as what we say, and we all take that into consideration with one another. We do have a lot of bonding together. We support one another very much. I think that’s what makes it work for us.

Martha Ortiz added:

It is the very thing that has taken place here. It is okay for us to all have different thoughts because we are all unique, and yet we bond so that we contribute to everything, and that is what makes us a success.

We do not measure our efforts in parent leadership development with numbers. The long-term impact will be measured by the stamina of the participants and the degree to which they extend themselves through the recruitment and development of their peers. IDRA’s policy and advocacy concerns might sometimes be broader and more extensive, yet we cannot move any faster in the community than the pace of development among these new leaders. What our research tells us is that parents do care about the education of their children. And, we have proof that given proper support, any parent can be a leader to create excellent schools for all children.

A Participating Parent Shares Her Perspective

“Para mí ha sido una oportunidad muy bonita de desenvolverme como líder. Me encanta eso porque tal vez ya lo trae uno dentro de si. Luego aquí lo he podido desarrollar. Ser un líder para mí es servir a la comunidad. Ser UN líder no Es estar en la punta de una organización. Es compartir con la comunidad.

“En este proceso hay una diversidad de liderazgo aquí entre nosotras y que bonito, unos en politica, otros en lo que Es la educación, en inmigración, y por

ejemplo mi liderazgo Es en la familia – para mí Es muy importante la familia. Mi familia Es la familia de todos. “Lo que más he notado en este proceso Es la confianza que nos han tenido. Nos han hecho sentir importantes. Nos han dejado que nos vayamos desenvolviendo con nuestras propias agallas de líder, aquí han hecho que crezcamos como líderes. Yo contribuí en una manera muy especial; todo enfocado en la familia. Hay muchas familias muy disfuncionales, y esta fue una oportunidad de acercarme a muchas familias. Fuí conferencista, asistí a todas las juntas y participé en Las deliberaciones, y gracias por darnos esa participación.”

["For me, this has been a beautiful opportunity to develop as a leader. But, I love that because perhaps one already has that inside. To me, being a leader means serving the community. Being a leader is not being at the head of an organization but rather sharing with the community. ["In this process there is a diversity of leadership among us, and that is beautiful. Some are in politics, some in education, others in immigration – and, for example, my leadership is with the family. The family is very important to me. My family is all families.

["What I have noted the most in this process is the trust you have given us. You have made us feel important. You have let us develop, with our own gutsy ideas of what leadership is, and you have made us grow as leaders. I contributed in a very special way with my focus on the family. There are many dysfunctional families and this was an opportunity to get closer to many families. I was a presenter. I attended all the planning meetings. I participated in all the deliberations, and thank you for allowing me to participate."]

Clementina Padilla, participant, Mobilization for Equity at IDRA

IDRA'S Parent Involvement Process

Parents as teachers

- Helping families see what they have already contributed to the education of their children
- The school validates the informal ways parents instruct their children in responding to their first words, using rhymes and games, and passing on family mores and wisdom. Parents and other family members can also be trained in effective ways to help children learn at home. At this stage, the school holds major responsibility for planning and carrying out activities. These activities for parents should be highly participatory and follow current research and practices in the effective instruction of adults. They should also encourage critical thinking and analysis.

Parents as resources to teachers

- Supporting families' contributions in the classroom
- Families realize the variety of ways they can contribute in the classroom to the teacher. With appropriate instruction and guidance, parents assist in the classroom in a number of roles.

Parents as decision makers

- Giving the parents even more responsibility
- At this stage, parents are trained and given responsibility to make decisions in groups. The context can be a newly formed parent committee or participation in an elected or appointed body within the school. Parents are trained and supported in learning, planning, assessing options and making decisions.

Parents as effective community leaders(trainers)

- Supporting leaders as they begin to emerge from family involvement activities
- Leadership training develops parents as teachers and coaches of other parents. At this stage, parents impart to other parents the skills they have learned progressing through increasingly challenging and engaged levels of participation. They help mentor new leaders and are advocates of their children's education and well-being.

Did You Know?

What steps need to be taken for significant family involvement in your school?

- Assess status quo (using, e.g., Survey of Campus Readiness instrument)
- Establish a philosophy that values all students and a vision for family involvement
- Form a team for change; involve others; broaden involvement
- Enable "buying into" the new philosophy
- Survey parent needs
- Develop a framework for family involvement by:
- Determining roles and responsibilities

- Scheduling training and other responses to staff needs for knowledge, skills, materials, etc.
- Recruiting families
- Reviewing expectations
- Responding to family needs
- Cultivating and sustaining family involvement
- Moving toward shared responsibilities
- Evaluating results
- Planning for progress and renewal

Source: Hispanic Families as Valued Partners an Educator's Guide (IDRA, 1993).

Aurelio Montemayor is the lead trainer in the IDRA Division of Professional Development. Comments and questions may be directed to him via e-mail at feedback@idra.org (<mailto:feedback@idra.org>).

[©1997, IDRA. This article originally appeared in the September 1997 IDRA Newsletter by the Intercultural Development Research Association. Permission to reproduce this article is granted provided the article is reprinted in its entirety and proper credit is given to IDRA and the author.]