



Focus: School District Health

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Habits of a Healthy School District Where All Students Thrive

by Celina Moreno, J.D., & Christie L. Goodman, APR

Health is on everyone's mind today. COVID-19 has impacted our daily lives, our work, our recreation, our plans for the coming months. Health is a state of physical, mental and social well-being, not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.

When applied to education, the same is true. School district health, for example, means more than grades or test scores. It means all students thrive. Educators, families and communities care for each other to ensure the educational well-being of students.

It takes more than a temperature check or finger prick to measure a school district's health. The core function of state accountability systems is to ensure schools are successfully educating all students. Testing can play an important role in school accountability – one that accepts the responsibility that schools have toward children and communities. But by inflicting high-stakes consequences and using test results to make decisions in children's lives (e.g., high school graduation) or dictate what children learn, student well-being can get lost.

Education leaders want to proactively explore ways to improve the health and success of their schools. Based on research and almost five decades of experience in the field, IDRA developed a change model that helps school, community, family and business leaders chart and navigate school system change. This Quality

Schools Action Framework serves as a roadmap to navigate school system change (Moreno, et al., 2019). This roadmap focuses on:

- Elements that must be in place to create schools that work for all children;
- Examples of how people can work together across sectors to strengthen schools;
- Strategies that most often lead to positive change; and
- Indicators of progress and success.

The framework guides action through five intuitive questions: (1) What do we need? (2) How do we make change happen? (3) Which fundamentals must be secured? (4) Where do we focus change? and (5) What outcomes are we seeking? Working through these questions, change-makers can develop their own unique action maps. They can gather baseline data, set specific goals, chart their course, lead effective change, and measure results.

School district health is most visible when schools graduate more and more young people with the preparation to access and succeed in college. By focusing on those outcomes, people can build school capacity to value and engage all students in learning, growing and graduating, ready to pursue their postsecondary goals and dreams.

At the same time, schools must monitor metrics that measure not only outputs and outcomes, but
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School district health means more than grades or test scores. It means all students thrive. Educators, families and communities care for each other to ensure the educational well-being of students.

(Habits of a Healthy School District, continued from Page 1)

also inputs and throughputs. Measuring outputs alone denies school leaders and communities the chance to understand the reasons behind their results and to focus efforts on substantial improvement. It can also lead to inaccurate assumptions and blaming the characteristics of the students in the school.

Every school is different and faces unique challenges. So one size does not fit all. In our work with educators to build school health, IDRA examines a number of indicators that tell us where to focus. For example, a leadership team can examine the quality of the school's educational programs of study, materials and other learning resources – and their accessibility to all students. And it can review access to higher-level courses that prepare students for college.

Teaching quality is an important measure of how likely students will be placed with teachers qualified in their fields of study and prepared for the classroom. It considers whether they receive the continual professional development and support to strengthen their skill and practice to serve a diverse student body. It also measures the classroom practices that teachers use to deliver comprehensible instruction that prepares all students to learn, grow and meet academic goals.

Another critical indicator looks at how well the school integrates families and community members into the decision-making processes of the school. It measures the quality of home-school-community partnerships. Are these partnerships based on mutual respect? Are they focused on the shared goal of academic success for all students?

From a governance perspective, a healthy school district has a democratically-elected, well-functioning, representative school board and admin-

Learn more about the IDRA Quality Schools Action Framework:

<https://idra.news/QSAFw>

Get the book: *Courage to Connect – A Quality Schools Action Framework:*

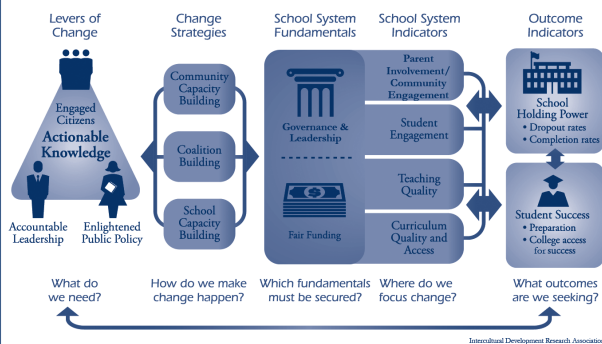
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Read how the framework aligned with one school district's dramatic transformation in *College Bound and Determined*:

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Quality Schools Action Framework™



istrators who prioritize the health, well-being and safety of students. These district leaders prioritize racial and socioeconomic equity and integration in their school assignment and boundary decisions and receive state support to enhance district performance without fear of state takeover.

In addition to these sample areas to explore, the IDRA Quality Schools Action Framework emphasizes how to make change happen. It does not point to a quick-fix or specific program. Meaningful change takes deliberate energy. We have seen that, by producing and leveraging a high-quality education for all students, we can leverage opportunity.

Just look at the monumental shift schools made this spring in response to the coronavirus. Who of us could have foreseen teachers adapting their classroom lessons for online learning, school districts adopting new technologies and training teachers to use them in a matter of days, and adjusting systems for grades, attendance records, special education accommodations and meal service – and all while working from home?

It was not perfect, but when the health of our community demanded it, the system responded. We can do so again to care for the educational health of our school community.

Resources

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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.

The IDRA Newsletter (ISSN 1069-5672, ©2020) serves as a vehicle for communication with educators, school board members, decision-makers, parents, and the general public concerning the educational needs of all children across the United States.

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Portions of the contents of this newsletter were developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. However, those contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the U.S. Department of Education, and endorsement by the federal government should not be assumed.

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State Takeovers of School Districts Don't Work

by Terrence Wilson, J.D., & Chloe Latham Sikes, Ph.D.

School districts are more likely to be healthy when they are well-funded, attract and retain a diverse certified teacher workforce, engage families and communities meaningfully, and promote diversity and racial equity among students and staff. But, the practice of state officials taking control over school districts they believe are failing compromises the health of those districts and communities.

Historical Overview of State Takeovers of Local School Districts

State laws authorizing takeovers began to appear in the 1970s and took off in the 1980s as much of the federal education oversight established in the 1960s was dissolved back to state control. A new focus on school accountability and standardized testing facilitated this shift. As of 2017, 33 states had passed laws to permit the state takeover of public school districts that did not meet the state's accountability measures. Often, such districts are designated with a "turnaround" accountability status.

New Jersey enacted the first state takeover of a public school district in 1989 by taking control of the Jersey City Public Schools. Since then, over 22 state governments and agencies have taken over more than 100 local public school districts across the country (Morel, 2018).

Officials justify many state takeovers of school districts as a response to low accountability ratings, which often rely on standardized testing performance, events, such as a natural disaster (in the case of New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina), or other district actions, including allegations of fiscal mismanagement. Many state laws confer power for the takeover to either the state education commissioner or state superintendent, the state board of education, or the local mayor. In Texas, for example, the law authorizes the commissioner of education to take over a school district under specific stipulations.

State takeovers do not lead to increased academic achievement and even further destabilize the school district.

Why State Takeovers Are a Problem

While the reasons for a state takeover of a public school district often focus on declining academic achievement and fiscal mismanagement, studies show that state takeovers do not lead to increased academic achievement (Wong & Shen, 2005; Zimmer, et al., 2017) and even further destabilize the school district (Harris, 2019; Morel, 2018). This turmoil can result in greater teacher and staff turnover in the district (Greenblatt, 2018) and exclusion of parent and community engagement in district decision-making (Morel, 2018).

For example, in the Detroit Public Schools, Michigan state officials placed the district under control of an emergency manager for 17 years (1999-2016) and left it arguably worse off than before. A report of the state's management of the district found that there was an estimated \$610 million in wasteful spending and rampant mismanagement of the district's schools and educational services to students (Pitchford, 2019).

Similarly, in Tennessee, public school districts that were controlled under a state turnaround strategy had the same or worse outcomes than reform strategies that maintained local control (Zimmer, et al., 2017).

Moreover, state takeovers as a reform strategy tend to exacerbate racial segregation within a district community (Harris, 2019; Barnum, 2018; Morel, 2018). About 85% of state takeovers across the country affect majority Black and majority Latino school districts (Morel, 2018). School districts governed by and serving a majority Black

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Also Available

Classnotes Podcast #200

School District Takeovers History and Today

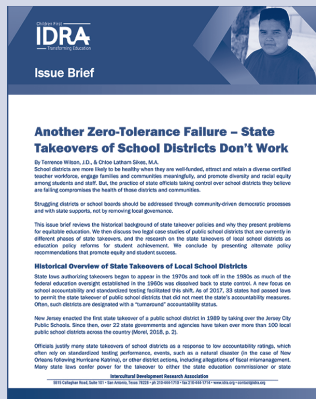


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School District Takeovers History and Today – Podcast Episode 200

<https://idra.news/Pod200>



Another Zero-Tolerance Failure – State Takeovers of School Districts Don't Work

<https://idra.news/TakeoversIssueBrief>

(State Takeovers of School Districts Don't Work, continued from Page 3)

School districts governed by and serving a majority Black population are 11 times more likely to have the local school board abolished.

population are 11 times more likely to have the local school board abolished by the state than majority White-serving districts (Morel, 2018).

Policy Recommendations

IDRA promotes family and community engagement, supportive funding, a diverse and certified teaching workforce, racial and socioeconomic integration, and culturally-relevant practices as critical components to school district and campus health. Based on research, IDRA recommends the following alternatives to state takeover policies.

- States should adopt community-based turnaround efforts – instead of state takeovers or private partnerships – that support holistic, wraparound services to support schools that face multiple challenges. Community-based approaches enable grassroots changes to educational improvements (Oakes, et al., 2017).
- School districts are democratic entities, and states should treat them accordingly. In the event of corruption or malpractice, districts can hold special elections to remove individuals from school boards. In the case of multiple special elections, a community advisory committee can help restructure and retrain new board members and district administrators.
- Families can join coalitions across school districts to advocate for new strategies and appropriate implementation that support their schools, maintain local governance and incorporate communities in district decision-making.

Struggling districts or school boards should be addressed through community-driven democratic processes and with state supports, not by removing local governance.

Resources

- Barnum, M. (2018). "When states take over school districts, they say it's about academics. This political scientist says it's about race and power," *Chalkbeat*.
- Greenblatt, A. (2018). "The problem with school takeovers," *Governing*.

Meet Dr. Chloe Latham Sikes – IDRA Deputy Director of Policy

Chloe Latham Sikes, Ph.D., is IDRA's new deputy director of policy. She first worked with IDRA as a policy intern in 2017, and is overjoyed to have officially joined its Policy, Advocacy, and Community Engagement team this January.

She became inspired to pursue educational policy and advocacy in 2009, while working as a volunteer English teacher and nursery assistant at a center for young women and their children in Costa Rica. After graduating from Grinnell College with a degree in anthropology and global development studies, she worked with high school students applying to college as an AmeriCorps college coach, and later as a college admissions counselor. Through working with students transitioning from high school to college, she witnessed the multiple policy barriers that students faced to access higher education, from not having rigorous college preparatory coursework in high school to difficulty securing financial aid.

As one of her favorite authors, James Baldwin, wrote, "The paradox of education is precisely this – that as one begins to become conscious, one begins to examine the society in which [s]he is being educated."

These experiences pushed Chloe toward a graduate degree in education to become a better advocate for students. She graduated from the University of Texas at Austin with her doctorate in educational policy and planning in May 2020. Her dissertation examines how school district leaders respond to the effects of immigration policies on their districts, and how race plays a role in their responses. In her doctoral work, she has participated in research teams focusing on the effects of gentrification on schools; community-based equity and school leadership practices; school finance; service-learning and student engagement; and policies for full-service community schools. She is driven in her research and policy work to understand how social and political contexts influence educational policies, politics and racial equity.

Chloe's main hobby is reading, which explains a lot about her. She wishes she were a Ravenclaw but consistently is sorted as a Hufflepuff. When not nerding out about education policy, she enjoys spending time with her family, friends and dog, June. Her happy place is a backyard barbecue with loved ones and dogs running around.



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Implications of Texas SB 1882 Patchwork of Partnerships

by Chloe Latham Sikes, Ph.D.

Three years ago, the Texas legislature passed Senate Bill 1882 to incentivize school districts to relinquish local control over campus operations, governance and budgets to an external partner presumably to lead to school improvements. Eligible external operating partners include charters, private schools, private childcare providers, non-profit organizations and institutions of higher education.

School districts with even one campus that receives low accountability ratings must choose to either suffer state sanctions or relinquish local control to an outside entity.

Here is how it works: If a district has low school or district accountability ratings for two years (or three, if it already has an accountability turnaround plan), SB 1882 incentivizes it to forsake local control through a contract with an external operating partner. The policy offers the “carrot” of additional per-pupil funds and a two-year reprieve in accountability sanctions in order to avoid the “stick” of state-mandated school closure or takeover. The partnership stops the campus accountability clock and potentially provides additional money if the state’s charter school funding formula yields more than the particular school district’s formula.

The amount of additional funding depends on the district’s tax rate and student population compared to the charter school funding level, based on a statewide flat rate. For instance, San Antonio Independent School District’s (ISD) per-pupil funding is below the state’s charter school per-pupil funding level, since charter schools receive funding based on the state average. Thus when P.F. Stewart Elementary School in San Antonio ISD entered into an SB 1882 contract in 2018, and it received an \$888 per student increase, from \$9,479 per student based on district funding to \$10,367 per student based on the state’s charter funding formula.

Tempted by the lure of additional funds, some schools opt for these partnerships even though they were not facing sanctions. Despite financial and accountability incentives, the implications of SB 1882 remain high stakes for schools and communities.

A Patchwork of Partnerships

SB 1882 creates a patchwork of private-public partnerships in districts with schools under different contracts with different operating partners. Research demonstrates that the success of private-public partnerships in schools depends on the nature of the agreement, the ensured level of public accountability (Horsford, et al., 2019) and the level of family engagement (Henderson, 2011; Preston, et al., 2012).

But the Texas law does not require SB 1882 partnerships to ensure specific levels of accountability and family engagement. Each partnership offers its own arrangement with schools based on the terms of the contract. For example, some exclusively provide early childhood education, while others focus on college preparation or special technology programs. This limited intervention can lead to a failure to identify – and can actually exacerbate – existing problems in a district.

Charter management organizations hold 40% of the 77 campus partnership contracts across the 16 Texas school districts that currently have SB 1882 partnerships (TEA, 2020). Several non-profit organizations also facilitate the transition of district schools to in-district charter schools, although the district retains oversight of the campus operations.

Community Concerns

Many community members and advocates opposed the law, arguing that it invites privately-managed charter organizations to operate public schools. This major implication of SB 1882 has led to contentious school board hearings (Erickson, 2019; Malik & Torralva, 2020). For instance, in Dallas ISD, adamant community opposition

(cont. on Page 6)

Many community members and advocates have pushed back against the law, arguing that it invites privately-managed charter organizations to operate public schools... Charter management organizations hold 40% of the 77 campus partnership contracts across the 16 Texas school districts that currently have 1882 partnerships.

(Implications of SB 1882, continued from Page 5)

compelled the district to back away from several proposed SB 1882 partnerships that would have transitioned some campuses to charter schools (Ayala, 2019; Erickson, 2019).

Implications of SB 1882

New rules from the Texas Education Agency, effective March 30, 2020, expand the commissioner of education's authority in SB 1882 partner application decisions and change the application rules to grant even further control to the operating partners over public school campuses. The original law and new rules have several implications:

- More charter organizations and private educational management organizations could enter into various SB 1882 partnerships with districts and control public school funds. New rules require that partners have governing boards independent of the school district's board and maintain full control of the school campus budgets.
- Challenges to transparency and public oversight will grow because of the variety of partnerships and contract arrangements over operations, governance and funding of SB 1882-contracted campuses.
- Funding inequities within districts will arise between charter-managed and district-managed schools since SB 1882-contracted campuses receive the greater of charter or district-level funds. Charter schools on average receive greater funds than districts entering into these partnerships based on a flat statewide rate instead of specific district rates. Also, changes made during partnerships with the benefit of additional funds will be hard to sustain, especially during likely COVID-19-induced cuts.
- School districts could enter into more multi-year district contracts with private partners even without supporting evidence of academic improvements.

IDRA believes that public funds for public schools should stay publicly accountable. While the full implications of SB 1882 partnerships remain to be seen, it is clear that the policy has opened the door for public schools to be privately-managed. Several local and systemic changes can be made:

- Districts can adopt community-based approaches that evidence shows support school improvements, such as community schools.
- TEA can offer supports to districts with turnaround plans instead of sanctions.
- The state can replace the A-F accountability

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IDRA Provides Bilingual Books to Young Learners to Diminish Digital Divide Effects Exacerbated by COVID-19

IDRA has long worked with schools and communities to close the digital divide for the most vulnerable students. With assistance from the San Antonio Area Foundation and the United Way of San Antonio, IDRA is now providing its popular Semillitas de Aprendizaje bilingual storybooks to families who have no access to online education during the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to the Digital Inclusion Alliance San Antonio, one in four households in San Antonio does not have internet access. Students from low-income households without devices or connectivity are most at risk for interruption of their schooling that will have long-lasting impacts on their futures. Nowhere is this trend most worrisome than with pre-K and kindergarten students who thrive on solid educational practices and culturally-sustaining resources.



Learn about Semillitas de Aprendizaje
<https://www.semillitasdeaprendizaje.com>

IDRA knows from its research on best practices in early childhood education that hard-copy books and interactive learning best build solid literacy foundations for young learners. IDRA is providing over 5,000 of its Semillitas de Aprendizaje bilingual books to families in the Southwest and Edgewood school districts through the districts' food distribution, communication and paper-lesson delivery systems. IDRA also will provide webinars, classroom sets and teacher's editions to districts for use with students once school commences in the fall.

"We celebrate the important role parents are playing to make distance learning work for children," said IDRA President & CEO Celina Moreno. "We are proud to partner with the San Antonio Area Foundation to counter the devastating digital divide that has left vulnerable populations in Edgewood and Southwest ISDs with little to no access to books or resources as schools scramble to find solutions."



"We are impressed by IDRA's commitment to meeting the educational needs of young children and their families during this crisis," said Marjie French, CEO of the San Antonio Area Foundation. "Good books and great stories inspire learning and hope, which are not only key ingredients for successful students, but for resilient communities."

Edgewood ISD Superintendent Dr. Eduardo Hernández said, "We value the collaboration with IDRA and are grateful for the support to our bilingual students through the Semillitas de Aprendizaje storybooks."

This distribution is made possible by a grant from the COVID-19 Response Fund, a community fund jointly managed by the San Antonio Area Foundation and the United Way of San Antonio. The fund is comprised of nearly 30 caring businesses, donor advised funds, philanthropic foundations, and government entities.

"This generous donation of books will provide parents an array of engagement activities for our prekindergarten and kindergarten students while enhancing learning opportunities for our young learners," said Southwest ISD Superintendent Dr. Lloyd Verstuyft. "Thank you to IDRA and San Antonio Area Foundation for their donation to SWISD."

With support from the U.S. Department of Education and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, IDRA developed the education materials, which have been in use in classrooms in Arizona, Texas and New York. Each set contains 10 books and a set of 20 letters, or *cartitas*, for parents with activities related to the stories. The *cartitas* include sections on celebrating heritage and culture with activities to do at home.

IDRA, Partners Provide South Texas Families Tech Support for Distance Learning During COVID-19 Crisis for Virtual Classrooms

IDRA launched a partnership with two community-based organizations in the Texas Rio Grande Valley to help Spanish-speaking families navigate virtual classrooms while schools are closed due to COVID-19.

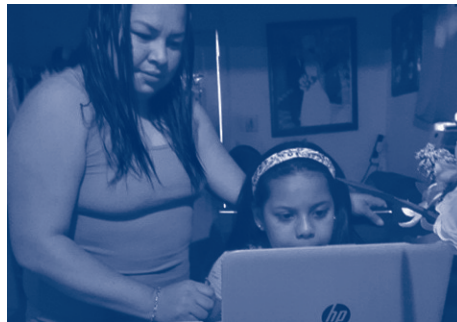
Mentors from the College Scholarship Leadership Access Program (CSLAP) provide tech support to members of ARISE, a grassroots organization that promotes empowerment through education and part of IDRA's Education CAFE network. ARISE volunteers connect families with CSLAP mentors, who are graduates of Pharr-San Juan-Alamo ISD with computer, software and technical expertise on online learning platforms. Each mentor holds office hours during which they provide support over Zoom or by phone.

"We are proud that ARISE – the very first IDRA Education CAFÉ – is again innovating to help close the digital divide in a region facing some of the most troubling challenges with access to internet and computer devices," said IDRA President & CEO Celina Moreno. "Education CAFÉs support the leadership of parents, grandparents, siblings and neighbors – all of whom are critical custodians of children's academic success."

To request free tech support assistance, families and students in the lower Rio Grande Valley of south Texas may contact Vicky Santana, ARISE education coordinator, at 830-719-7273.

While families must stay home, IDRA is working to:

- Survey parents on their children's educational needs during this stressful and isolating period;
- Establish a phone network for parents to help reduce the sense of isolation with a focus on continuing the education of their children;
- Help organizations, who traditionally provide services through home visits, in-home meetings or meetings in community spaces, transition



tion to serving families with virtual and other tools they can currently access; and

- Assist parents sustain a virtual network through devices and apps available to the most isolated and underserved communities.

"At difficult times we are faced with all kinds of challenges," said Lourdes Flores, ARISE executive director. "We cannot sit back and expect that we cannot involve ourselves. Our children need our support, creativity and leadership to provide the assistance they need to succeed in school. It's time to make connections, build bridges and combine forces to make our community thrive."

ARISE (A Resource in Serving Equality) is a grassroots organization with locations in several South Texas *colonias* (unincorporated small communities) with staff and volunteers who work in their neighborhoods to better the community and support the emerging leadership.

"When communities work together to educate their children, we all prosper," said Thomas Ray Garcia, CSLAP executive director. "Connecting CSLAP mentors to families has enabled students' distance learning to continue unabated during these trying times."

CSLAP is a nonprofit organization that hosts college access workshops at local high schools and provides near-peer mentorship for graduating students.

A participant's mother, Regina Romero, said: "Agradecidas que se toman el tiempo y que le estan ayudando mucho y lista para conectarse con CSLAP. Agradecidos con ARISE que mi hija esta bien contenta recibiendo esta ayuda. Agradecida con Dios y ustedes que son unos angeles, mi hija se siente con mas confianza." ["We are thankful that they take the time and that they are helping us a lot and ready to connect with CSLAP. We're thankful for ARISE, because my daughter is very happy receiving this help. Grateful to God and you who are angels, my daughter feels more confident."]

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Focus: School District Health

(Implications of SB 1882, continued from Page 6)

system in favor of opportunity-to-learn metrics that identify areas for support instead of punishment in a school district. Removing the stick of state sanctions can encourage districts to engage in longer-term, sustainable community partnerships and family engagement rather than enter into consequential outside contracts.

IDRA is available to provide technical assistance and strategies for districts and communities to develop equitable plans for school improvement.

Resources

Ayala, E. (December 7, 2019). "Unexpected side effect of Texas school finance overhaul has Dallas schools nixing controversial charter partnership," *Dallas Morning News*.

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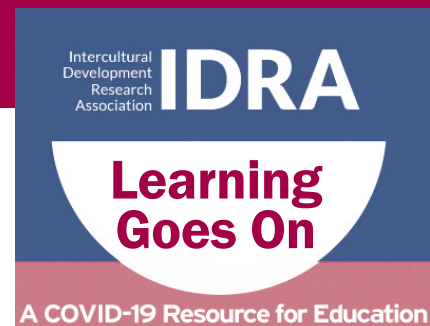
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See IDRA's Learning Goes On resource!

- ✓ Weekly policy updates
 - ✓ Free webinar series on equitable practices for online learning
 - ✓ COVID-19 Education News Dashboard
 - ✓ Data Map – Texas College Responses to COVID-19
 - ✓ Equity Connection – IDRA's free online community of practice
 - ✓ Online technical assistance academies for school districts
- The eNews and policy updates are available in English and Spanish.



<https://idra.news/LearningGoesOn>

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Chloe Latham Sikes, Ph.D., is IDRA's deputy director of policy. Comments and questions may be directed to her via e-mail at chloe.sikes@idra.org.

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