



## Focus: School Leadership

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# Superintendent Dr. Daniel King Describes How Strong Family Leadership Leads to School Innovation

by Aurelio M. Montemayor, M.Ed., featuring Superintendent Daniel King, Ph.D.

The school principal's way of working with families ripples throughout the campus. It influences whether the school welcomes parents or merely tolerates them.



Dr. Daniel King, superintendent of the Pharr-San Juan-Alamo Independent School District (PSJA), reflected recently on the climate he cultivates among the principals and other

faculty at PSJA.

"We work simultaneously with the children and the parents, respecting them and where they come from, respecting their voice and their opinion," he said.

Many schools have a corps of parent volunteers who may have a parent room where they prepare support materials for teachers and plan fundraising activities, parent nights and teacher recognitions. Like many districts, PSJA also has a vibrant parent education program that offers an array of adult education classes from parenting skills to self-development. But Dr. King wanted more.

"Each child has incredible potential," said Dr. King. "We don't know what that potential is. So our job is to continuously open the window to have that child look at all the possibilities, and we provide the necessary educational supports.

A lot of it depends on building on the strengths each child has. One strength, for example, is the home."

That belief in the potential in each child is the basis of IDRA's Education CAFE model. ARISE (a grassroots organization) in our network calls themselves *Padres Activos* [Active Parents]. Their common dream is the very potential to which Dr. King refers.

IDRA Education CAFEs are based in a community organization rather than in a single school, and their sole purpose is to collaborate with schools to improve the success of students in the community. They are independent and usually rotate their meetings in community centers and schools. Members set goals and lead projects to improve teaching and learning for all children. The essential parts of an Education CAFE are: rotating, independent and collective leadership; strong school connections; and family-leadership-in-education projects. The idea started as a pilot to create a non-traditional parent-school organization.

The meetings of these groups are usually inter-generational, with complete respect for the dignity of each home, each family and their traditions, values and home language. Dr. King's valuing lens for students extends to families in the Education CAFEs. These groups want school  
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*"Principals who foster culturally-sustaining instruction and welcoming school climates show the community, through concrete action, that they believe all students and families are valuable."*

— Celina Moreno, J.D.,  
IDRA President and CEO

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principals to see them just as Dr. King does.

Dr. King added: “We partner very well with our community organizations, where in some places people are fearful of them or close the door. We work with LUPE, our farmworkers union, Valley Interfaith, ARISE and our Education CAFEs.”

The Education CAFE pilot was a huge success, and the first groups continue to be active and expand into a network across Texas, with support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.

Dr. King has been a strong supporter of the approach. He actively models his welcoming of family leadership for all his administrators. Along with Dr. King’s monthly meetings with local Education CAFE members, many of the principals in the district enjoy comparable encounters. They do not perceive the families as volunteers or fundraisers, but rather as equal partners in creating excellent public neighborhood schools.

Supportive school leaders understand that the Education CAFE family representatives want to learn about and influence educational policy and practice in their schools.

“I like the [Education CAFEs] because these parents come in, and they set the agenda,” Dr. King explained. “Most of the time we, the schools, tell the parents what we need from them so that their children succeed. It’s also important that parents tell us what they need from us.”

School principals in partnership with one of these community groups can expect a committee to approach them early in the school year to introduce themselves and share the goals of their group for the year.

Principals can also expect, and benefit from, Education CAFE members leading one or several

family leadership-in-education projects throughout the year. Members will review actionable data, brought by an intermediary group at their request, and develop a project based on what they learn from the data.

For example, one group wanted to assess the strength of the dual language program in the upper elementary grades. Another group decided to find out how well the school was preparing elementary students in math. Those families periodically review the state data on student achievement in math in their neighborhood schools.

Families in the Education CAFE through the ARISE *Padres Activos* meet regularly with their superintendent and school principals. One regular question they discuss is: How are the students doing in reading and writing in Spanish?

“We may generate many ideas,” Dr. King added. “But many of the offerings in our parent involvement program come from what they need and what they want. We look every which way to do that. The home is an asset. So we ask, how do we build on that and how do we respect that?”

Some Education CAFEs hold yearly community events, called *Mesas Comunitarias*, usually held at schools with full support of administrators and staff. PSJA, ARISE and IDRA collaborate to hold one each year. Parents and students plan and carry out these local conferences to inform families about important school opportunities, such as K-12 biliteracy, dual credit classes, and dropout recovery programs that prepare students for college.

Other Education CAFEs brought families together to examine new education policies and their implications for access to advanced placement, dual credit and pre-algebra courses.

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Some Education CAFEs hold yearly community events, called *Mesas Comunitarias*, to highlight their projects to benefit education in their schools.

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

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Publication offices:  
5815 Callaghan Road, Suite 101  
San Antonio, Texas 78228  
210-444-1710; Fax 210-444-1714  
www.idra.org | contact@idra.org

Celina Moreno, J.D.  
IDRA President and CEO  
Newsletter Executive Editor

Christie L. Goodman, APR  
IDRA Director of Communications  
Newsletter Production Editor

# Five Best Practices for Effective Principals and School Leadership Teams

by Nilka Avilés, Ed.D.

Research shows that, in schools, the principal is second only to the teacher as the individual who impacts student success the most (Leithwood, et al., 2008; Wallace Foundation, 2013). Yet, the country is experiencing a serious shortage of expert principals in schools with diverse student populations (Theoharis & Brooks, 2012). In addition, schools face accountability challenges that require strong leadership with a commitment to address inequities.

As a catalyst for change, IDRA has developed best practices to improve effectiveness of principals and their leadership teams. We focus on equipping principals to be visionary leaders, student advocates, instructional leaders, collaborators and risk-taking innovators to improve student achievement. Coaching is the strategy that brings these practices to life.

The aim of leadership coaching is to assist educators to be more effective in transforming low-performing campuses into fully accredited, successful ones. Such leadership coaches embark on an exciting education journey that draws on the courage and character of administrators and leaders as compassionate and caring individuals.

For example, through IDRA's School Turn-Around and Re-energizing for Success (STAARS) Leaders project, we worked with a school district to overcome persistent hurdles in a set of turnaround campuses. After implementing these school leadership coaching best practices for three years, each of the schools succeeded in obtaining full state accreditation for meeting state standards (Avilés, 2018). Five such best practices are outlined below.

**I. Select, prepare and certify master teachers as principals of diverse campuses.** Master teachers have a proven record of success across student groups. They are ideal candidates to move into administrative roles where they can bolster the leadership competency skills of effective principals for struggling campuses (Wallace Foundation, 2013).

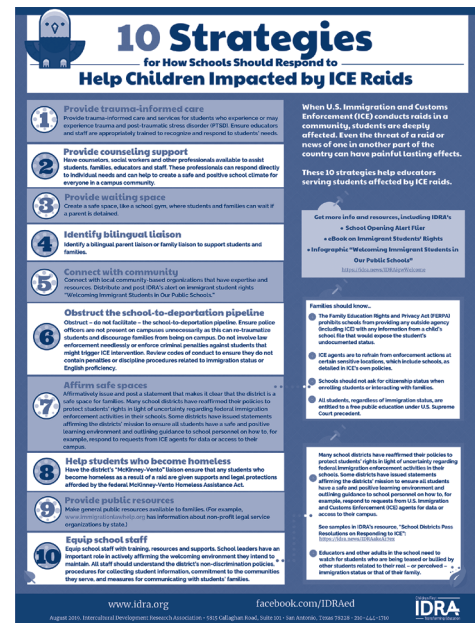
2. **Provide professional development for the principal and leadership team to share collective responsibility for systemic effectiveness and student learning.** Professional development should focus on underlying pedagogical and institutional changes required to reach equity and excellence and counteract a history of systemic inequalities and oppressive behaviors.

3. **Foster an environment where each adult can challenge the status quo and be an agent for social change when needed.** It should support leaders to actively interact and collaborate with each other, to implement equitable policies and practices, and to institutionalize curricula and support systems for those who do not have a voice or have been marginalized in decision making. For example, when schools in Mississippi were recently affected by ICE raids, school leaders took immediate steps to care for children and make sure they had a safe place to go after school. (See IDRA's related infographic "10 Strategies for How Schools Should Respond to Help Children Impacted by ICE Raids.")

4. **Actively support coaching leadership designed to improve systemic effectiveness among the school principal, leadership team and master teachers – individually and as a group.** A major responsibility of the coach is to integrate theory into practice by helping leaders with advice and providing alternative solutions for consideration.

5. **Invest in human capital, providing support through a schoolwide professional learning community.** Participants can support each other in embracing critical elements of a shared vision and values, a mutual responsibility to professional growth, and a focus on student

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<https://idra.news/igHelpP>



(Superintendent Dr. Daniel King Describes How Strong Family Leadership Leads to School Innovation, continued from Page 2)

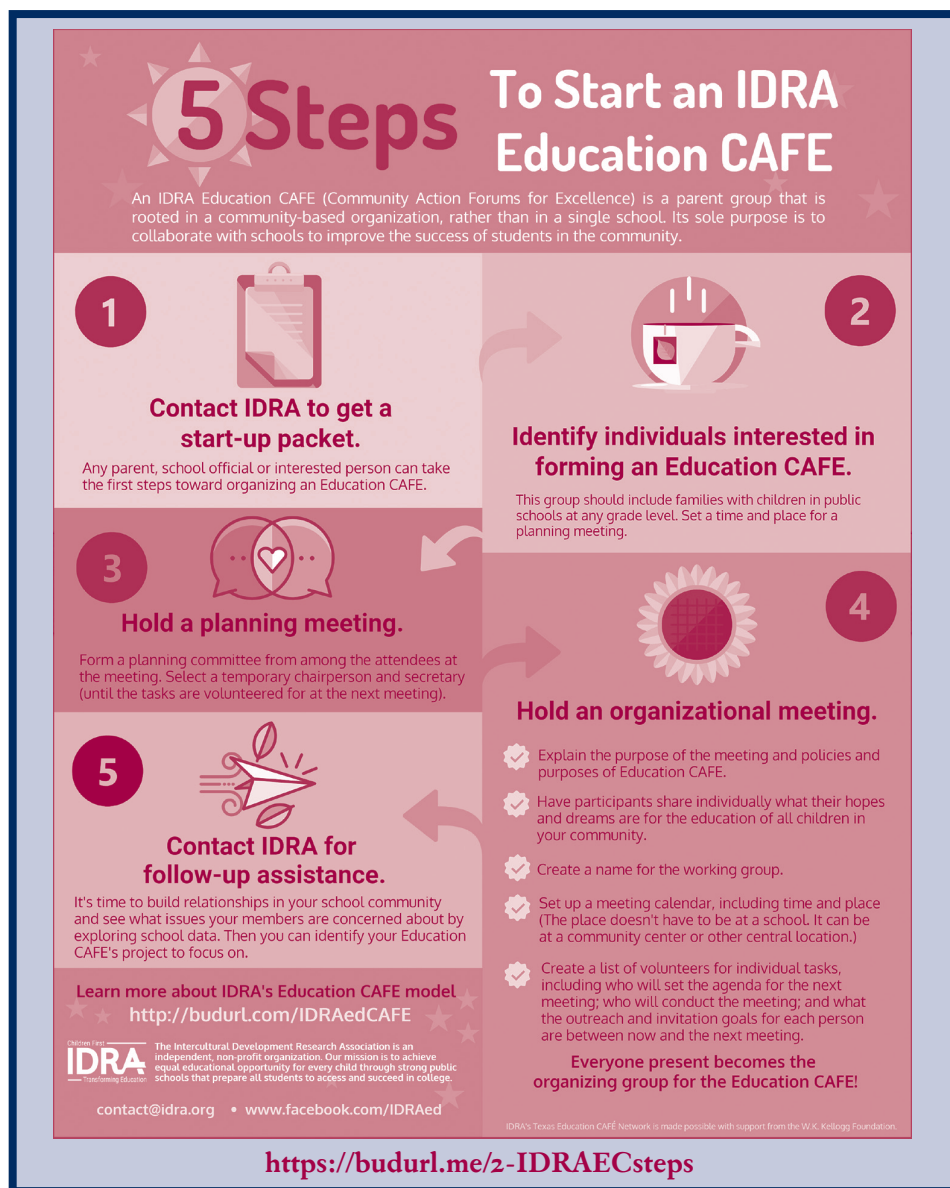
Another held open hearings with school board candidates. And several Education CAFEs in the Texas Rio Grande Valley surveyed 1,600 neighbors about how the state's new graduation plans were being implemented and their impact on poor students and students of color. When they presented their findings to school district leaders, the districts made changes to better inform families.

As a result, educators recognize how these family leadership projects benefit the school. And when carried out by the community, the measures help ensure that the schools maintain innovations even as administrators and staff change over time.

When understood and supported by a school principal and the superintendent, this kind of involvement strengthens the connection between school and community and bodes well for the future of the children at that school. These volunteers transform their neighborhood public schools as true partners with school administrators.

For more information about IDRA's Education CAFE model see our infographic, "5 Steps to Start an IDRA Education CAFE," or visit <https://www.idra.org/families-and-communities/education-cafe>. Also see our Family Engagement Online Technical Assistance package with five video chapters, one of which features Dr. King (see below).

Aurelio M. Montemayor, M.Ed., is an IDRA senior education associate and directs IDRA's Education CAFE work. Comments and questions may be directed to him via email at [aurelio.montemayor@idra.org](mailto:aurelio.montemayor@idra.org). Daniel King, Ph.D., is in his 12th year as superintendent of PSJA. He retired in September 2019.



## Family Engagement Online Technical Assistance

### Available now free!

The IDRA EAC-South's Family Engagement Web-based 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 web-based package includes literature reviews, articles, podcasts, and five learning chapters, each with a video and supporting resources.



<https://www.idra.org/eac-south>

# Mexican American Studies in All Grades – Administering an Innovation

by Aurelio M. Montemayor, M.Ed.

The effort in Texas to establish the new Mexican American Studies (MAS) course generated a flurry of activity that goes beyond a single school course offering. Innovative educators are looking for ways to infuse MAS into all content areas and in multiple grade levels – both a challenge and an opportunity for school administrators.

MAS is a multidisciplinary academic field of study that examines many facets of the Mexican American/Chicanx people, including their contributions to history, language, literature, sociology, math, science and fine arts.

Since the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, MAS Chicana programs were offered primarily at colleges and universities across the nation. Within the last five years, there has been a more intensive effort to implement MAS courses and lessons from pre-kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade.

IDRA assists by providing policy advocacy, planning, training, technical assistance and networking for MAS implementation. In our work with states and school districts to carefully analyze their curricula and programs to eliminate bias, we emphasize culturally-sustaining instruction that can act as a gateway to a more inclusive, challenging educational experience for students of all backgrounds.

## Why MAS for K-12 Schools?

Research shows that MAS courses lead to improved standardized test scores, graduation rates, college attendance rates and academic mindsets (Maxwell, 2014). MAS courses help students succeed in school (Cabrera, et al., 2014). Students who took MAS courses, regardless of their ethnicity, scored higher on standardized tests, graduated at higher rates, increased their attendance, and were more academically engaged and did better in their other courses as well.

“Administrators who implement Mexican American Studies and culturally-sustaining pedagogy

show the community, through concrete action, that they believe all students are valuable,” said Celina Moreno, J.D., IDRA President & CEO, at a recent MAS Summit at the University of Texas – Rio Grande Valley. “That is critical, especially in a time of unprecedented attacks on the Mexican American, immigrant and other underrepresented communities.”

MAS brings ideas to education that provide students rich and layered opportunities to learn and give new motivation because these opportunities connect to their culture. MAS encourages students who are not Mexican American to acknowledge the dignity, richness and value of this identifiable group with much to offer and provides a more complete perspective of the relevant content area.

## Community of Teachers

The approved State Board of Education course in Texas is a high school elective, but the MAS community works to expand and extend learning of Mexican American contributions and culture in other classrooms as well. It is already happening among a growing community of teachers, from kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade, who implement some form of MAS in their teaching. MAS teachers and professors in Texas have participated in convenings held by the National Association of Chicana and Chicano Studies (NACCS) and professional development sessions hosted by Somos MAS SATX, IDRA and the University of Texas at San Antonio. Educators created curriculum and pedagogy that inform, inspire and fill a long-felt void in education.

IDRA also facilitates a MAS online Community of Practice; leads professional development events for educators, students and the community; and maintains a website with a Texas crowd-map that pinpoints where MAS is being taught in Texas schools (see box at right).

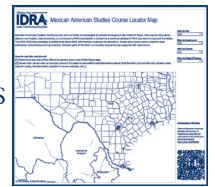
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## IDRA Resources for Educators and Community Advocates

### MAS Course Locator Map

Visit the IDRA MAS Map to search MAS courses by teacher, topic, district or city.

<https://idra.news/MASmap>



### Online Community of Practice

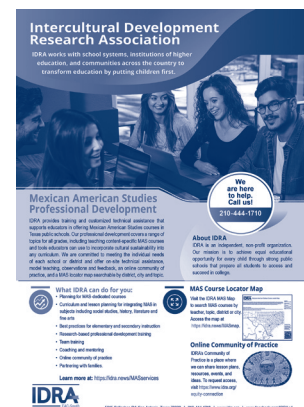
IDRA's Community of Practice is a place where members can share lesson plans, resources, events, and ideas. To request access, visit:

[www.idra.org/equity-connection](http://www.idra.org/equity-connection)



### Professional Development

IDRA provides training and customized technical assistance that supports educators in offering Mexican American Studies coursework.



<https://idra.news/MASservices>

# English Learner Success Depends on Strong Principal Leadership

by Nilka Avilés, Ed.D.

Demographic changes in recent years have affected not just the numbers of English learners but also the communities where they reside. Many schools that once had few, if any, English learners, now have a sizeable English learner population. And other schools that had English learner students with a common home language now have a population speaking multiple languages.

As a result, many educators may feel unprepared to meaningfully serve English learner cognitive, linguistic and affective needs (Batalova & Alperin, 2018). This was the case in a South Carolina school district. Through the IDRA EAC-South, we developed customized online courses to prepare 1,800 teachers in 53 schools to serve English learners. We also worked with the district to build the capacity of instructional coaches and principals through onsite training sessions. This South Carolina district is just one example of leadership taking steps to ensure teachers are well prepared to work in diverse classrooms.

Principals need to play the role of change agents to prepare the school community to welcome and embrace these new students, who are eager to learn. This means principals innovate, inspire, empower and function as a servant leader to the entire educational community and the neighborhood served by the school (Avilés, 2016; New Leaders, 2013).

## The Innovative Principal

Innovative school leaders publicly support and value culturally-sustaining teaching practices that infuse cultural and linguistic attributes as assets rather than deficits (Khalifa, et al., 2016; Orosco & Abdulrahim, 2017). These principals declare through their vision, belief system and actions that English learners can succeed in learning challenging, rigorous content through appropriate scaffolding and aligned instruction, delivery and genuine support.

Principals can take advantage of external resources

and consulting available through universities, regional service centers and educational organizations like IDRA. Through collaboration with other stakeholders, principals can lead in identifying assets and needs of new populations and plan accordingly.

As innovators, principals lead their staffs to adapt existing curriculum and instructional materials to increase relevancy and effectiveness of English learner instruction (Avilés, 2016). Clearly, educators must develop students' proficiency in the English language. But students benefit even more with proficiency in both languages. Developing biliteracy requires precise design and intentionality (Escamilla, et al., 2013). Campus principals deliberately guide fidelity of implementation for their school's biliteracy program design as students learn academic content in both languages.

## The Inspiring Principal

As inspirational leaders, principals encourage teachers and other school staff to plan collaboratively to serve a more diverse student population. Planning must start with an equity-centered leadership by energizing school staff to create a positive culture of acceptance and respect for diverse cultural backgrounds.

Effective principals set expectations for teachers to plan lessons for any subject in ways that integrate cultural practices and norms reflected by the diversity of the class population. Teachers must ensure that students are equipped with the language structures and vocabulary essential to learn content that is expressed in academic language.

Principals also inspire students to welcome newcomers and promote the value of diversity as a way of life. Adopting the understanding that immigrant English learners bring a multiplicity of experiences from their respective countries enriches the fabric of the neighborhood and the

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*As inspirational leaders, principals encourage teachers and other school staff to plan collaboratively to serve a more diverse student population.*

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(English Learner Success Depends on Strong Principal Leadership, continued from Page 6)

school community. When principals advocate and sustain this truth, they create opportunities for students to engage in interactions where they learn about each other's cultures. This includes providing opportunities for extracurricular activities, so that students can develop language fluency while building confidence. Thus, newcomers can feel at ease and open to take risks in their learning as they build relationships with their peers.

### The Empowering Principal

Principals empower school staff by respecting and requesting their ideas. In collaboration with community and parents, equity-centered leaders set school standards for respecting diversity in the school. As a community team, they establish a culture of high expectations and create a safe environment that builds on neighborhoods as funds of knowledge, strength and creativity. This is critical, particularly for recent immigrant English learners, who are adjusting to a new environment and culture.

Empowering principals are aware of the expertise and experience of the teachers and ensure they have the knowledge and skill sets to teach English learners in their classrooms. To build capacity, leaders provide purposeful professional development for all teachers within different content areas. And they engage students in social language development supported by auxiliary, cafeteria and support personnel.

In professional learning community meetings, teachers, grade level leaders, administrators, and instructional facilitators and coaches should examine the data and determine if instruction has been aligned to the curriculum and assessments.

They also should review the progress or challenges immigrant English learners face and discuss how to resolve any gaps between English learners and other students. Principals and teachers must create opportunities for innovative practices, collaboration between district support personnel and school teachers to plan, coach and mentor teachers, and provide genuine support systems.

Empowering principals create a shared understanding of English learner needs and educator commitment to the asset-based practices that support them.

### The Servant Leader Principal

As servant leaders, principals gain the trust of the community and students. They can begin by getting to know each child, learning to pronounce their names and ensuring that "Americanizing" their names is not acceptable for school staff.

Servant leader principals also model for teachers a process for gaining trust with the newcomer community. This involves learning about the different cultures represented in the school, integrating cultural practices into the curriculum, and communicating regularly with parents in their native language.

Furthermore, servant leader principals actively welcome parents as partners. Principals lead in making parents feel they can communicate with the school staff in the language they understand. Any communication for parents must be in their language(s) so that can stay connected and well informed. And staff can help parents and newcomer students learn how to navigate their new U.S. school system that may be very different from their own.

Strong leaders understand that developing high levels of proficiency for English learners opens many doors to other ways of thinking about the world and the possibilities of being able to establish positive relationships with people from different parts of the world.

Great leaders build cognitive, cultural, academic and economic benefits for English learners to strive and make their communities a better place to live.

### Resources

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- Khalifa, M.A., Gooden, M.A., & Davis, J.E. (December, 2016). *Culturally Responsive School Leadership: A Synthesis of the Literature*. Review of Educational Literature.
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- Orosco, M.J., & Abdulrahim, N.A. (2017). Culturally Responsive Evidence-Based Practices with English Learners with Learning Disabilities: A Qualitative Case Study. *Educational Borderlands*.

*Nilka Avilés, Ed.D., is an IDRA senior education associate and co-directs IDRA's Re-Energize project. Comments and questions may be directed to her via email at nilka.aviles@idra.org.*

(Five Best Practices for Effective Principals and School Leadership Teams, continued from Page 3)

learning through reflective inquiry based on research and best practices.

The leadership team should embrace mutual trust, respect and openness to innovation and ensure leaders partner with students, parents and community stakeholders to embrace a shared vision of success. This requires listening and collaborating in new ways.

Many schools need to build leadership capacity and competencies for success that are congruent with a respect for social and cultural diversity, free

of stereotypical biases, and respectful of the civil rights of all students.

Contact IDRA for information on IDRA services to support principals and leadership teams as they transform their campuses to better serve all students in their communities.

### Resources

- Avilés, N. (September 2018). School Leaders Improve English Learner Literacy with Focus on Inferencing. *IDRA Newsletter*.
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*Nilka Avilés, Ed.D., is an IDRA senior education associate and co-directs IDRA's Re-Energize project. Comments and questions may be directed to her via email at nilka.aviles@idra.org.*

## Focus: School Leadership

(Mexican American Studies in All Grades, continued from Page 5)

### Administrator Support

A critical element for MAS success is administrator participation, modeling and support. For example, principals can lead critical dialogue with teachers on the content and process of instruction. And they can bring MAS experts and content to the school. Principal support includes facilitating communication and sharing among teachers to create a schoolwide MAS community of practice where they share their knowledge about a set of goals and strategies and help each other to solve problems.

Even though the field has had decades of development in colleges through Chicano studies programs, there is a dearth of material available in lesson-plan form for elementary and secondary teachers. IDRA connects teachers and adminis-

trators to the broader MAS-focused community of practice to help teachers attempting to teach MAS with minimal curricular resources.

Importantly, administrators can create an atmosphere of collegiality and peer-support by connecting teachers with MAS resources and strengthening the mutual bonds of their teachers in this new content. IDRA helps administrators connect to available MAS resources. IDRA's MAS locator dashboard, for example, is searchable by grade level, city, district and subject to help other MAS educators and community advocates (see <https://idra.news/MASmap>). We also offer training and technical assistance in lesson planning, best practices, coaching and mentoring, and family engagement (see <https://idra.news/MASservices>).

MAS integration is a great way for educators to instill culturally-sustaining pedagogy across content areas and grades. We support school principals to reduce MAS teacher isolation and foster peer connections.

### Resources

Cabrera, N.L., Milem, J.F., Jaquette, O., & Marx, R.W. (2014). Missing the (Student Achievement) Forest for All the (Political) Trees: Empiricism and the Mexican American Studies Controversy in Tucson. *American Educational Research Journal*.

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*Aurelio M. Montemayor, M.Ed., is an IDRA senior education associate and directs IDRA's Education CAFE work. Comments and questions may be directed to him via email at [aurelio.montemayor@idra.org](mailto:aurelio.montemayor@idra.org).*

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