

**Invited Testimony
IDEA Public Schools**

**Senate Education Committee
July 20, 2010**

[REDACTED], Director of Talent Development

I am pleased to give testimony on behalf of IDEA Public Schools. IDEA Public Schools is a network of charter schools in the Rio Grande Valley. In August, we will have 16 schools serving 6,600 students in eight communities. IDEA has graduated four classes from high school and every single one of those students has gone on to a four-year college or university, with 95% of alumni on track for graduation with a bachelor's degree. This is in a community where only 13% of adults obtain a college degree. Further, each of our schools is poised to achieve an exemplary rating from TEA this year, making IDEA an exemplary district. IDEA is home to IDEA College Prep in Donna, Texas, ranked the 13th best high school in the country by *U.S. News & World Report*. We serve a student population that is low income and most of our students will be first generation college graduates. By 2015, IDEA will be sending 1,000 students to college each year. We are proud about how these students will be able to break the cycle of poverty in their families and transform the community of the Rio Grande Valley.

The success of IDEA is built upon the hard work of our students and teachers. Our teachers, even those new to the profession, make a significant impact upon their students' academic progress. Our teacher corps is young and relatively inexperienced, yet makes great strides with their students and in their teaching practice. This includes teachers like [REDACTED] who, in his first year of teaching, achieved a 97% passing rate on the 10th grade science TAKS, the highest in the district, far exceeding the state passing rate of 74% on that test. Another outstanding teacher is [REDACTED], who has achieved 98 – 100% passing on the 8th grade social studies TAKS every year since she started at IDEA, while guiding the 8th grade team to success as grade team leader.

How do our teachers and students achieve these results? They work hard and make “no excuses” for academic achievement. IDEA carefully selects teachers who will be able to maximize student learning and then trains them specifically for that purpose. We do whatever it takes! In order to develop our selection process, we studied our best teachers and determined ways to differentiate them from the rest. We based our selection tools on knowledge of those characteristics and our core values.

Teacher training starts before the school year begins and revolves around our Guideposts for Excellent Teaching or GET tool. This framework, drawn from sources including Texas's Professional Development and Appraisal System (PDAS) and Teach For America's Teaching as Leadership rubric, articulates high leverage practices for teaching in a common language. The five Guideposts are:

- 1) Sets ambitious goals and invests students and families
- 2) Creates a powerful learning environment
- 3) Plans powerful, rigorous instruction
- 4) Delivers purposeful, rigorous instruction
- 5) Analyzes data to intervene and adjust instruction

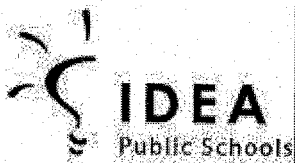


In addition to “IDEA Core Values: Seeks excellence as a practitioner and IDEA team member,” which references our seven core values that guide the organization. We have identified these five areas as being the most powerful levers for producing student achievement and have elaborated on what each area looks like in practice.

The GET tool is both diagnostic and evaluative in nature. It focuses teacher and instructional coach attention on high impact areas for improving student achievement. Every teacher learns the GET model at the beginning of the year and continually reflects upon how to grow in the areas it indicates as being most important to increasing student achievement. Having the common language of the GET tool allows us to diagnose teaching problems in an understandable way that puts everyone on the same page so that solutions are clearer and easier to implement. For example, at the beginning of the school year, first-year teacher [REDACTED] was struggling with his 7th grade English students. Although he had a big goal and clear rules and procedures, something was not going right in his classroom and weekly assessments in August showed it. With his instructional coach and the GET tool, they were able to identify that [REDACTED] challenge was in Guidepost 3 -- the planning of his daily lessons. Given that diagnosis, [REDACTED] worked with an experienced teacher at his school to develop his planning ability and within three months saw dramatic improvements in his students’ performance. We monitor improvement on the GET tool not only in classroom observations and reflection conversations, but more importantly in improvement on weekly assessments and district-wide benchmarks. We have confidence that the GET tool has successfully diagnosed teaching problems and solutions when we see student achievement rise.

We diagnose problems in the classroom and our organization using the “Outcomes – Causes – Solutions” model. When we identify something that needs improvement, we first articulate what is happening. Then we trace that outcome back to its possible cause and assess the most likely source. Based on that cause, we determine the most appropriate solution to achieve the desired outcome. For example, algebra teacher [REDACTED] was having trouble with student behavior. Given the outcome that students were off-task during independent practice, she and the math coach identified a variety of causes including the students didn’t understand what they needed to do; the students were not challenged by the assignment; the students didn’t connect completing the assignment with meeting their big goal of passing the end of course exam; and so on. They assessed that the most likely cause was that students didn’t understand the assignment and then went to the GET tool and found where in Guidepost 4: “Delivers purposeful, rigorous instruction” she needed to improve. Using this “OCS” model and the GET tool, we are able to diagnose and solve teaching problems that affect student learning with greater precision and speed. It also focuses attention on the outcome – increasing student achievement and closing the achievement gap – instead of on the actors, which is apt to occur otherwise in the highly personal practice of teaching.

Teacher training at IDEA starts during teacher in-service in August and continues throughout the year. Each teacher works with an instructional coach, whether that be the principal or another member of the school lead team, or a master teacher who splits time between teaching and coaching others. Teachers across the district who teach the same grade or subject gather several times throughout the year to engage in common planning and best practice sharing. Schools also carve out regular professional development time. Our newest school this past year has piloted the



Teacher Leadership Network, a structured system of peer observation and coaching in which teachers participate by grade team. Principals and instructional coaches meet monthly to develop their practice. At IDEA, we spend a great deal of time engaging in and developing professional development. All of this professional development is not for its own sake, though, but in order to increase student achievement.

To retain these teachers who are doing so much and in which we invest so heavily, we have worked this year to develop and clarify our teacher career progression plans. We want ambitious teachers to know they have the opportunity to build a career and learn and grow as professionals at IDEA. We want to emphasize the knowledge and skills they will need in order to make the transition from teacher to teacher leader to school lead team to principal or from teacher to teacher leader to master teacher. This school year we are working to ensure that each group in this continuum has differentiated professional development that targets relevant areas for growth. We see this as both a necessary means to develop internally the leadership capacity IDEA will need to grow and thrive and also as a means to retain the top performing staff that we will need to produce student achievement.

It has been my pleasure to offer this testimony and I am available to answer any further questions from the committee.