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## ***Dr. María “Cuca” Robledo Montecel*** ***Intercultural Development Research Association***

By Robert H. Leos

*Intercultural Development Research Association, IDRA, was founded in 1973 by José A. Cárdenas as a non-profit organization dedicated to excellence and equity in education. For the past 15 years, Dr. María Robledo Montecel has continued the organization’s mission as its second executive director. Known to family, friends, and colleagues as “Cuca,” Dr. Robledo Montecel joined IDRA shortly after receiving her master’s degree from Antioch College and prior to enrolling in the doctoral program in Urban Education*



***Dr. María Robledo Montecel***

*at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee. During her tenure at IDRA, Dr. Robledo Montecel has served in numerous capacities: evaluator, cost analysis director, research specialist, dropout prevention director, training director, Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program director, deputy director, and executive director. She is author of numerous publications on issues related to educational excellence and equity and has been recognized for her leadership by organizations such as the San Antonio Association for Bilingual Education, Texas Association for Bilingual Education, and the National Association for Bilingual Education. In 1997, Dr. Robledo Montecel was named one of 100 Hispanic Influentials by Hispanic Business. She generously took time to discuss IDRA’s mission and her passion for excellence and equity in education. rhl.*

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**ROBERT LEOS:** *What were the events and circumstances in 1973 that led to the founding of IDRA?*

**DR. ROBLEDO MONTECEL:** Dr. José Cárdenas was superintendent of the Edgewood Independent School District in San Antonio. He became acutely aware that resources in the Edgewood school district were very different than the resources in other school districts. He realized the system of financing schools was not equitable and children in Edgewood were not receiving the benefits of resources that children in other school districts were receiving. Dr. Cárdenas left the superintendency to create an organization that would bring about awareness to the state. He believed that awareness of his concerns would bring about changes and that the organization would be short-lived. Now, 34 years and many court cases later, some progress has been made and some lost. However, there are still issues that concern us and motivate us to continue our mission in developing solutions to address these issues. Fair funding for the good of *all* our children has yet to be achieved.

**ROBERT LEOS:** *You mention IDRA's mission. Have the organization's goals changed since 1973 when IDRA was founded?*

**DR. ROBLEDO MONTECEL:** IDRA has had the same mission since its inception—to create schools that work for all children. We work to accomplish our mission through our research and evaluation efforts, materials development, training and technical assistance, and information dissemination. The best way I

can describe IDRA's work is to describe our goals and values: Excellence and equity for all children; quality early childhood education; quality teaching; valuing students and young people; and valuing families and communities.

We serve approximately 3,000 people across the United States each month. We also work internationally with the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program that we implement in Brazil.

**ROBERT LEOS:** *The Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program is recognized as a very effective dropout prevention program. How does the program work and what do you feel accounts for its success?*

**DR. ROBLEDO MONTECEL:** The Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program started in San Antonio as a pilot program and has been hugely successful across the country. The basic premise of the program is that teaching is the best way to learn. It's essentially about older kids tutoring younger kids. The program has shown that students who may have been considered "at-risk" students are valuable and can contribute when put into a position to do so.

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When the older students teach younger students, they learn what they didn't learn the first time around. You can see the difference in the tutors—they see themselves as teachers and mentors and they take that very seriously. Adults

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begin to see them in a different light as well and their perceptions of the students change.

**ROBERT LEOS:** *How does the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program in Brazil differ from the program here in the United States?*

**DR. ROBLEDO MONTECEL:** The problem in Brazil is that kids are not entering school. When I was asked to take the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program to Brazil, we first had to decide how and if an American project could work with Brazilian students. We spent a lot of time working to create the program as a Brazilian program. The elements are the same—older students teaching younger students.

**ROBERT LEOS:** *IDRA's methods for reporting dropout statistics have yielded different results from the methods used by the state education agency. What is the current state of the dropout situation in Texas, according to IDRA's studies?*

**DR. ROBLEDO MONTECEL:** We are encouraged by the attention that is now being given to these issues by the National Governors Association, a series of articles, and various research groups. In addition, Bill Gates presented testimony recently calling for high school graduation for all students.

When IDRA conducted the first dropout study, I was the principal investigator. We learned through that study the enormous costs to our society in lost taxes, increased criminal justice costs, welfare costs and numerous other issues. IDRA has

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**Dr. Robledo Montecel has been Executive Director of IDRA since 1992.**

continued to conduct the same study for the past 21 years, using the same methodology. Our most recent study shows that the dropout problem is even worse now than in 1986, particularly among Hispanic and African American students. A group of researchers meeting at Rice University verified that overall, 1 in 3 students in Texas will drop out of school. One of every two Latino students will drop out. The dropout problem continues to be a serious problem.

**ROBERT LEOS:** *What are some of IDRA's efforts to address the problem?*

**DR. ROBLEDO MONTECEL:** There are two important areas of work that I want to continue to pursue. We will continue to call for universal high school graduation. A few months ago, that might have seemed outrageous but since Bill Gates is now calling for it, it doesn't seem outrageous anymore. Universal high school education has to be the new minimum. The second

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effort is to continue IDRA's leadership in creating solutions. We want to assure that there are strong school-community partnerships at the campus level dedicated to changing this unacceptable situation. The dropout problem hurts the individual student and the family. It hurts the economy. It diminishes our civic participation and diminishes our ability to claim fair play.

**ROBERT LEOS:** *What advice do you have for high school students today in light of the serious dropout problem among Hispanic youth?*

**DR. ROBLEDO MONTECEL:** I advise students to go to school, stay in school, and complete school. I advise them to go to school for as long as they can and get as much education as they can. My mother used to say to me, "Eso te prepara para la vida (that prepares you for life)."

The second piece of advice would be: Find out what you feel passionately about—get to know yourself so that you know what really matters to you.

If you're fortunate enough to have a job come your way that matches your passion, then you will be the luckiest person in the world.

I feel so fortunate here at IDRA because my job concerns the things in life that I care most about.



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For more information about IDRA, visit their website: <http://www.idra.org>.

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