

December 6, 1999

**Teaching and Learning**  
Small Middle School

Thank you for inviting me to meet with you tonight. I would like to thank Mrs. Olga Garza for setting up this opportunity for us to get to know each other. I view this as the first of many conversations about AISD and our children. I want to start off by telling you a few ideas I have and what I believe.

But what would help me most and probably help the children of this district most are your thoughts and your concerns based on your collective years of experience with Austin's schools.

We need to recognize that the past few years have been rocky ones for our district. But I am convinced and committed to the proposition that AISD can be one of the premier urban school districts in this state and nation. To accomplish this, we need to stabilize this district. We have 60 new principals over the past two years. We haven't been competing for the best teachers because of personnel policies that put us last in line behind other districts.

We have to get good principals in place and keep them there. We have to make sure they are not just managers but are curriculum and instruction experts. We're talking with the University of Texas about creating a principals' academy in some of our East Austin schools, so we can nurture and train a core of future principals from within our district who will know our community and our expectations and can serve as resources to other schools while they are being developed.

We have to recruit, retain and recognize good teachers and give them high-quality staff development and do a lot of it in the classroom with the kids. We have to monitor and assess their performance and provide them with access to the best models for teaching and the resources they need. That's what I mean by stabilizing our schools. Thus, my three priorities are quality leadership, quality teaching and quality curriculum and instruction.

Teaching and learning must be the focus of this district. I know you've heard a lot from me about the failures of our information, technology and business systems. You've probably experienced some of those failures at your end. Our failure to count accurately has cost us millions of dollars. But those data systems are not what I'm about. I'm about teaching and learning. We have to get those other systems in place so they form the seamless infrastructure that enables us to concentrate all our energy on teaching and learning.

What else do I believe? I believe we have to meet the academic needs of all our children. We must have universal understanding that content matters, that standards must be constant, while teaching strategies can vary, as long as a campus is held accountable for high-quality student learning.

All our teachers and principals have to understand the standards and how to reach them. And that information has to be shared with all our parents, so they know what our expectations are. Parents must be partners in their children's learning process. We should have examples of student work meeting the standards posted all around this district and on our web site, so everyone knows what a good essay for 5<sup>th</sup> graders looks like or an exemplary social studies research paper for 7<sup>th</sup> graders or a high quality biology project for 9<sup>th</sup> graders.

I believe in magnet programs. I believe one size does not fit all students and one size does not fit all schools. I'm sending out a letter this week to all principals directing them to make sure all campuses welcome representatives from magnet programs and that all children and their parents have access to information about magnets.

But we can't stop there. By my calculations, our two high school academies do not begin to serve all the high school students identified as gifted and talented. We have to make sure all our high schools have AP programs that are properly taught and rigorous honors courses. Beyond that, I've begun conversations with our area colleges and universities so we can draw on them for courses that go beyond AP. If there are two students in Crockett and two at Bowie and two at Travis who all are ready for an advanced science course that those schools don't offer, then we can work with one of our post-secondary institutions to provide that course for dual credit. President Faulkner at UT is talking about K-16 education. We don't have to let the traditional framework of a high school stop us. Let's push this envelope if that's what our kids need.

In that same regard, I want to re-invent our middle schools. I want to start doing that by revitalizing our math, science and technology curriculum. UT has agreed to help us in this as a partner. UT has about a dozen National Academy of Sciences Fellows. We want to bring them into our discussions about what a challenging, world-class middle school math, science and technology curriculum should be.

I also want to strengthen the bilingual education in our schools. We should accept no less than having all our students coming out of middle school fluent in both English and Spanish. Austin is perfectly situated for that. For decades, Americans have moaned about the fact that Europeans speak several languages. Let's stop moaning and do something about it. Why shouldn't we lead this nation in bilingual fluency for our students?

Finally, I have to add this. Most of you know that beginning next year we will be a Chapter 41, or Robin Hood, school district. While we have only been receiving about 7 percent of our budget from the state this year, next year, based on our property values, we will have to give back to the state up to \$30 million. And the year after that it could be as high as \$60 million. So we have a lot of hard choices ahead of us.

Some of the issues before us today require us to do our jobs better. We can use the same resources to do better jobs. But some of the things we might consider require additional money. We can't add on one side of the ledger unless we subtract on the other side. This won't be pretty or easy.

That's why I appreciate the opportunity to meet with you today before we get into budget deliberations. I want to hear what you think -- not so much about the past, because there's not much we can do about the past. But I want to hear what you think we should be doing and can be doing in the future to serve all Austin's students.

Thank you.

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