

January 4, 2000

## Alliance School Conference

I believe that we can start working together to rebuild the Austin school district to make it the premier urban school district in the country.

Austin has that potential. Look at us. We are still a viable urban district in which children of all backgrounds and incomes go to school. We have children coming from homes in which 57 languages are spoken. What a great opportunity we have as a community.

And I believe we can become a model for the rest of the country. But it can't just be Pat Forgione's vision. I had a friend once tell me that if you find yourself riding at the head of the herd, you need to take a look back every now and then to make sure the herd hasn't gone off in some other direction.

This community expects—and I join it in that expectation—high academic standards across all grades for all children. We can only reach our expectations for this school district by working together, by building a collective vision, a community vision for the future of our schools and our children. It includes a coming together of parents, teachers, principals, community members, churches, and businesses around a common understanding of what we want for our community's children and what our school district and other community institutions need to do to get us there.

That's why I'm impressed by what you are doing here today—bringing together the teaching staffs from 17 schools to learn from each other about best practices, working together to develop a common understanding of what our children need and how best to serve them.

I envision, in my role as Superintendent, having an ongoing dialogue about teaching and learning with the teachers, principals and parents of this community. Improving teaching and learning across this district will not be easy. But that's why we are all here. It requires all of us working hard, thinking deeply and working together.

We can begin this dialogue by my discussing with you what some of my priorities for this district are.

Initially, it was important to focus our new administration on addressing three critical issues that were challenging the vitality and viability of the Austin Independent School District (AISD). I immediately announced three priorities, namely:

- Better Data -- Integrity
- Better Collaboration -- Involvement
- Better Student Achievement -- Improvement

I think these priorities produced a renewed sense of purpose and short-term direction throughout the school district. Our priorities for the short term and the long term must focus this district on teaching and learning. To accomplish that, we need to stabilize this district. We've taken on 60 new principals over the past two years. We don't compete for the best teachers because of personnel policies that put us last in line behind other districts. We must pursue an aggressive campaign to build support across the grades for academic excellence.

I believe firmly that AISD must establish a clear mission that emphasizes the primacy of high academic expectations across all grades for all children. We can't shrink from our task. AISD must also do its educational improvement work in strong partnerships with highly regarded institutions of higher education and high-performing school systems across the country. We have to have high expectations for our students, ourselves and each other.

Last semester, we launched several initiatives to put us in a better position to address teaching and learning head-on, district-wide, beginning this year. These have included re-engineering the central administration and making data integrity a priority, re-examining the role of area superintendents, and establishing a drop-out task force.

Austin's challenges require dedicated and skillful leaders at all levels of the organization to implement the deep and complex changes that will be necessary set the ship of state aright in AISD. And given the funding constraints that

will be upon us beginning next year, what you and I will go through in making this a premier district will be something like turning around the QE 2 in a bathtub. But we can do it.

We are in the process of re-inventing the central administration to bring a student-focused, campus-focused and customer-friendly attitude that would be an asset to the campuses and district programs. We recognized that to make the best use of our resources to serve the students of this district we have to reorganize the central administration to operate effectively, efficiently and with total integrity in the service of our schools and students. Too often, the organization of the central administration proved to be a barrier to school operations rather than a facilitator. We've been fortunate to put together a first-class team in the central administration with the addition of Joy McLarty, Larry Throm and Ed Fuentes to the ongoing leadership provided by Darlene Westbrook. Now, working with the teachers and principals of AISD, we have an educational team second to none in Texas and across the urban landscape of our nation.

Under Dr. McLarty's leadership we are putting in place information and accountability systems that will not only address the data integrity problems we've experienced, but they will also set very high standards for our data to make sure the data is accurate, timely and useful to our principals, teachers and parents. In this way we can use our best data to work with our students for the best academic outcomes.

Reinventing Area Superintendents as Teaching and Learning Leaders. Currently our five Area Superintendents each oversee two vertical teams of campuses and find themselves spending a large portion of their time assisting campuses with functions other than teaching and learning. With the reorganization of support services to better serve the campuses, we will also be reinventing the job of the Area Superintendents so they can serve as the district's education leaders. They will be working directly with principals in assessing teaching and learning and working with teachers and principals in designing professional development and additional instructional resources to meet campus needs.

Dropout Prevention and Reduction. Working with a community task force of 55 Austin citizens, we are building a comprehensive approach to intercept students before they drop out and to bring students back into our school system who have left. This approach, to be presented to the Board in February, will include immediate action as well as long-term strategies. It will include recommendations for action in five areas: identifying and monitoring students at risk for dropping out and connecting them to needed services; preventing students from falling behind academically; helping students who have fallen behind to catch up; providing support services for students and their families; working with families and parents to provide a safe, nurturing school environment. We are also working diligently to restore integrity to our dropout information and will use it to measure against both state and national indicators in order to better understand and address the reasons students drop out.

These initiatives have set the stage for larger discussions we will have as a district in the coming months. They will include coming to an agreement and understanding as a district and on each campus of the expectations and standards of performance for our students on each grade level and in each course of study and how those standards relate to the entire curriculum, K-12. It should be an interesting and invigorating process involving all teachers, principals and as many parents as want to take part. Teachers will produce the best examples of student work based on these standards of performance and share them in their school across the district. We are working with the Dana Center to develop a process for bringing this discussion to every school.

Through this process, we will derive district-wide agreement on what students at each grade level should know and be able to do. Teachers in each grade on each campus will reach this understanding. These ongoing school and district conversations will focus the district's full attention on teaching and learning in the core academic areas of reading, writing, math, science and social studies.

Given UT President Faulkner's emphasis on K-16 education, we have also begun to work closely with UT in a number of areas. First among these are two initiatives.

Building on UT's current work developing principals, we are talking to UT about creating an AISD school leadership academy in several East Austin schools, both elementary and secondary, beginning this summer to enable the district to train a core of future principals from within our ranks. These individuals will come in knowing our community, our curriculum and our expectations. They could receive instruction during two summers, while during the school year they would act as extra resources for the schools in which they continue to receive training.

This process would bring extra resources to East Austin schools, while allowing the potential principals to receive both classroom and on-the-job training. The interns would also serve as a reserve force for the district when

temporary vacancies occur at district schools. The academy would provide a venue for the University of Texas to work intensely in school settings with principal candidates selected by the district for their leadership potential. It would also be a venue for current assistant principals, vice principals and principals to do advanced work to strengthen their abilities as well-rounded education leaders.

AISD is also talking to the University about building a partnership to redesign the middle-school curriculum, deepening the content of its courses. We would like to begin with Math, Science and Technology, drawing on the expertise of the University of Texas faculty specializing in these areas and in the College of Education. We will need to incorporate into this reinvention clearer and more viable "school-to-career" pathways.

We are also looking to work with UT to re-invigorate bilingual education in our schools. In partnership with UT, we could not only do a better job of recruiting the best new bilingual teachers, but we could also identify and teach the best practices for bilingual education.

Our newest deputy superintendent Ed Fuentes will make sure that bilingual education is a priority and not an afterthought in this district. We will work toward having all the teachers in our schools with high bilingual populations have some training in ESL strategies. And we could begin to move the district toward an emphasis on dual language, so that all our students coming out of middle school are fluent in both English and Spanish.

In order to build capacity, we have to look at teacher development from pre-service to master teacher. We have to provide the right kinds of support from teacher prep through induction through the first three years through the so-called "journeyman" stage and on to master teacher status with national board recognition. The greatest impact we can have on teacher retention is through enabling teachers to get a sense of their own effectiveness. In addition, we will establish relationships with high-performance learning school systems that focus on teaching and learning so that we can learn from each other.

So you will be hearing a good deal from me in the months ahead as we begin community-wide discussions to make this the most exciting place to teach and learn in this country. This is the place to do it. As you work together as Alliance schools, I look forward to having you help build this district, bringing parents and other community members into the core of this discussion.

As most of you know, we face difficult decisions in the months ahead, particularly in light of the fact that we will be classed among the state's property-rich districts beginning this fall. But I'm convinced that, working together, we can make the hard decisions as long as we are focused on what is best for our students, what is most important for teaching and learning in our classrooms.

Pascal D. Forgione, Superintendent  
Austin Independent School District  
1111 West 6th Street  
Austin, Texas 78703-5300  
Office: 512-414-2482  
Fax: 512-414-1486  
[superintendent@austin.isd.tenet.edu](mailto:superintendent@austin.isd.tenet.edu)