

January 10, 2000

**A WORKING PAPER ON
IMPLEMENTING AISD'S EDUCATION VISION
FIRST STEPS
TOWARD QUALITY TEACHING AND STUDENT LEARNING
by**

Pascal D. Forgione, Jr., Ph.D.

**Superintendent of Schools
Austin Independent School District
January 10, 2000
1111 West 6th Street · Austin, Texas 78703
Phone (512) 414-2412 · Fax (512) 414-1486**

e-mail address: superintendent@austin.isd.tenet.edu

A WORKING PAPER ON IMPLEMENTING AISD'S

EDUCATION VISION:

FIRST STEPS

TOWARD QUALITY TEACHING AND STUDENT LEARNING

A. THE BEGINNING

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). Thus, I immediately announced three priorities, namely:

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

These priorities produced a renewed sense of purpose and short-term direction throughout the school district. In a parallel fashion, immediate attention was given to recruiting and putting in place a first class senior administrative team. 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. Simultaneously, the central administration has to be reinvented to bring a client-focused and customer-friendly attitude that would be an asset to the campuses and district programs. With the recruitment of Dr. Forgione, Dr. McLarty, Mr. Throm and Ms. Westbrook, the Austin School Board has put in place an educational team second to none in Texas and across the urban landscape of our nation. Moreover, there is now the capacity in Austin to effect the new Superintendent's and Board's shared educational vision for AISD.

B. THE BELIEFS

I believe firmly that AISD must establish a clear mission that emphasizes the primacy of high academic standards across all grades for all children. AISD must also do its educational improvement work in strong partnerships with highly regarded institutions of higher education and high-performing school systems. A solid intellectual foundation must undergird the difficult reform work to be undertaken; a fundamental requirement for future success will be the

substantive rigor of the educational agenda to be pursued. I am committed to providing the leadership to effect high-quality teaching and productive student learning in all 5000 AISD classrooms and across some 100 campuses. We must pursue an aggressive campaign to win the support of our teachers, students, parents and citizens to raise the academic high bar for all our students across all the grades.

In December the School Board, working with the senior leadership of the District and drawing upon the recent work of a number of citizen and education groups, adopted new vision and mission statements for AISD, along with a set of core values and beliefs (see accompanying chart). These statements provide clarity of purpose and unity of direction for the AISD public schools in our educational journey toward excellence in teaching and student learning.

C. A KINDRED SPIRIT

When I read with sincere interest President Larry Faulkner's vision of a well-articulated K-16 educational system of quality public schooling, I was challenged to think more deeply about reinventing the ongoing relationship between AISD and the University of Texas at Austin. I realize that it is possible to think boldly and outside the traditional boundaries here in Austin.

When I learned of President Faulkner's absolute belief that education is at the heart of economic development for Austin, Texas and our nation, I concurred that the choice absolutely is one of high skills or low wages for our students. Moreover, I realize that the opportunities for doing some things well and together are uniquely possible here in Austin at this moment in time. Again, I recognize it is possible to think collaboratively to forge new arrangements for partnering here in the state capital. Thus, I look forward to developing a strong and vital partnership between AISD and UT.

D. A TRANSFORMING SET OF PRIORITIES

We are assembling a set of priorities for the short term and the long term that will 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.

Priority AISD Educational Initiatives

Four strategic priority activities are being launched to advance the educational agenda within AISD. These include:

- Reengineering the central administration to establish systems integrity and quality data;
- Reinventing the area superintendent capacity to lead campus teaching and learning reforms;
- Developing systemic approaches to prevent and reduce the unacceptably high incidence of dropping out by AISD students; and
- Building agreement among teachers, administrators, students and parents on challenging academic standards across the grade levels for all students.

Re-engineering Central Administration and Data Integrity. 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, therefore, first established a new Deputy Superintendent for Accountability and Information Systems, bringing in Dr. Joy McLarty to set very high standards for data integrity to make sure the data are accurate, timely and useful. While we eliminated one layer of bureaucracy by eliminating the Associate Superintendent positions, we re-organized the other Deputy Superintendent positions for greater effectiveness. We now have a Chief Financial Officer, serving as Deputy Superintendent for Finance, in the highly regarded Larry Thom, formerly of the Lubbock school district. Darlene Westbrook was elevated to Deputy Superintendent for Curriculum, Instruction and Professional Development. Dr. Ed Fuentes, currently head of the national Gear-Up program, will soon be our Deputy Superintendent for Human Resources, University Partnerships, Bilingual Education, Teacher Development and Construction Management.

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 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. The task force report 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; and 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.

Challenging Academic Standards. We will work with teachers, principals, parents and curriculum specialists to develop a set of benchmarked standards for each grade level that are understood by all District stakeholders. Beginning in February of this year, we will initiate a process to gain a universal understanding of the standards of student performance for all our students in all grades. Working with the Dana Center, we will convene a series of conversations and workshops, first with principals and teacher leaders and then with teachers and parents on every campus through next school year. Through this process, we will derive district-wide agreement on what students at each grade level should know and be able to do. 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.

Priority Ideas for Strategic Partnerships. We are looking for help in partnership with the University of Texas. In addition to the strategies discussed above, following find my ideas for four strategies that could be served by a partnership with the University of Texas. These ideas grow out of preliminary discussions I've been having with UT faculty members:

- Building a school leadership academy to enable the district to train a core of future principals from within our ranks.
- Re-invigorating bilingual education in our schools.
- Re-inventing middle schools.
- Focusing on Teacher Development.

E. ACCOUNTABILITY FOR RESULTS

To demonstrate the importance of management by fact, annually the Austin Chamber of Commerce and the University of Texas will produce a customer survey report on AISD. This will provide useful and timely information to guide the reinvention of AISD toward quality teaching and student learning.

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