

First Presbyterian Church Men's Group Address

Contrary to what you see on the evening news, I thought I'd start with the good news about AISD. For instance, this year we had 124 national merit finalists, semifinalists and commended scholars. LBJ High School with its Science Academy was rated 17th among the nation's high schools by Newsweek. Four other AISD high schools were also in the top 400. No other school district in the country had that many.

And, as you may have read, we experienced substantial TAAS score increases this year. More than two-thirds of all AISD students passed all the tests they took. All grade levels improved and all grade levels scored between 66 and 79 percent passing all tests taken. With the exception of a one-percentage point decline in 7th grade reading, we increased our percentages of students passing in each subject area in each grade.

If you look at the five-year trends, our test scores have been continually rising. In 1995, our scores for all grade levels ranged from 41 percent passing to 63 percent. This year they range from 66 percent to 79 percent. Just as exciting is the fact that the gaps among Hispanic, Anglo, African American and Economically Disadvantaged students have been narrowing, as the scores of Anglo students remain stable while all other groups' scores have been increasing. These gains are based upon a rock-solid instructional foundation in our classrooms that has high expectations and clear objectives for all students.

Our principals and teachers deserve great credit for bringing in these increases against all the background noise of indictments, data problems, and budget constraints. They remained focused on teaching and learning, and the results speak for themselves. Our District Mission — to educate every child, every day — is being realized.

Of course, we aren't satisfied. Many challenges remain. We have to keep improving. There is no reason Austin can't be the premier urban district, not just in this state, but in the nation. This test helps us identify and address specific areas of concern. For instance, we need to pay extra attention to reading in grade 7 and writing in grade 8, as those percentages for passing lagged behind other grade levels.

These TAAS results can't be used to predict accountability ratings because the results don't include scores for students who took the Spanish TAAS or who attend the 11 year-round schools in our district. Accountability ratings are also determined by other factors, such as student attendance and dropout rates. The state's accountability ratings are due to be released on August 17.

But this is a good benchmark. I'm a little worried about it. It's kind of like Mack Brown coming in and winning the Cotton Bowl in his first season. The next year people expect the national championship.

I think we can get there. Not next year. But if we are given time to rebuild this district, we will once again be among the nation's elite urban public school districts.

Having time to rebuild requires strategic long-term planning. And we have already begun to implement some of those plans that I'm convinced will pay off in the long term. These include the following:

- With a grant from the RGK Foundation, we are training all our teachers, principals, curriculum specialists, and area superintendents in how to evaluate and improve teaching and learning in every classroom in this district. We began this spring with principals and area superintendents. In August we will train all our teachers. This is in conjunction with the Institute for Learning at the University of Pittsburgh. It teaches teachers and principals how to structure their teaching around key principles of learning and how to evaluate themselves and each other against those principles on an ongoing basis. I took part in some of the training and it's powerful.
- We are combining that with training for all teachers and principals on the TEKS--Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills. These are the standards every teacher and every parent will know and use. They are high standards, and they will drive this district. We are working closely with the Dana Center at the University of Texas, which is providing our principals with the structured training they will take back to their teachers and parents.

- I'm also pleased to say that our strengthened partnership with the University of Texas will result in the first class of teachers entering the AISD/UT School Leadership Academy in June. We've taken 15 of our best teachers and, with the UT Department of Education Administration, we are developing them to become some of our best campus leaders--as assistant principals and then principals. They'll take classes from UT in the evenings and work as interns on our East Austin campuses in the mornings.

We're also working more closely with Austin Community College. The recent controversy over scheduling has helped us see the value of a new articulation agreement we've drawn up with ACC. We have identified 52 courses offered by ACC that conform with our classes. Our students can, therefore, get dual credit for college and AISD by taking these ACC courses, and at no cost to the students. Many of these courses translate as honors credits for our high school students. And some of them will be offered on our high school campuses after school hours. It's exciting to see us keep pushing up the bar on high school performance so that the line between high school and college work is no longer that easy to see. Instead, it's a continuum of learning.

Chapter 41

Of course, with these successes, we have a number of challenges. As you know, we are faced with major budget constraints beginning next year. These are brought on by the fact that we are becoming a Chapter 41, or property wealthy, district.

On May 2, I posed four critical considerations for the Citizens Budget Review Committee to ponder:

1. We need a four-year perspective to drive our budget recommendations.
2. We need to recognize that our Chapter 41 status will remain in place for at least the next four fiscal years.
3. We should come up with the best plan for using our remaining 11.14 cents available in the tax rate over the next four years--keeping in mind the need for teacher and staff salary increases and the necessity of balancing the budget through reductions.
4. We need to rebuild the Reserve Fund balance over the next four years.

All this means that we will have difficult choices ahead. We cannot expect much to happen in the Legislature to ease our pain in the next four years. So we have to prepare for it. Our new assumptions, based on new estimates of AISD property value, point to our returning \$35 million to the state for recapture this coming year. Then the next year it's \$93 million after this new increase in property values. After that, we estimate giving back \$129 million in 2002-03 and \$169 million in 2003-04. That's the reality we're facing. Given that reality, I want to put together a budget that preserves the essentials and guarantees our teachers a job for the next few years and all our employees a 3 percent pay increase each year. That's not easy.

I had one parent tell me a few weeks ago that this was the beginning of the end for this school district. You know, I just don't agree. In fact, I believe this may be the end of the beginning--the end of an era in which AISD experienced unprecedented growth in student attendance and in property wealth, an era in which the district never really had to be accountable but could just add new programs to meet new demands. Some of these programs were the seeds for important new initiatives. Others were never adequately evaluated, didn't seem to serve any real educational purpose, but were allowed to continue simply because they were there. During this same period, our low-income and minority student population grew, and we became less segregated by where we lived. All this I regard as the beginning of this school district's life as a complex urban American district.

But now we're entering a new era. I guess we could call it a more mature era. While our property wealth continues to skyrocket, our student enrollment is not growing nearly as fast as it once was. And, most important, these factors together have led us into the world of Chapter 41, where we can no longer do everything we want, but instead need to figure out what we really need. Within this new era of budget constraints, we have to consolidate our gains, cut our losses and begin to understand ourselves as a mature, complex urban American school district.

We may find some relief four or five years from now in the State Legislature. They may adjust formulas, as more urban districts with large low-income populations become property wealthy. But we can't count on that. Education equalization is here to stay in Texas, and it's important. We simply have to work with the Legislature over the next few sessions to make sure the burden of equalization doesn't fall unfairly on the children in districts like ours.

It is our responsibility to work within our budget parameters to build an outstanding school district. Our job is to determine what is essential for the Austin Independent School District. This will be a community effort. It will

involve teachers, principals, parents, students, community members, and businesses. We're all in this together. We need your support and we need your ideas.

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