

## **Address to the Nashville Chamber of Commerce**

Welcome to Austin. We have so many things in common. Both Austin and Nashville are among those places people most want to live. We both are located in beautiful settings. We both have strong universities in our cities. Our school districts are both relatively large and diverse. We both claim in one way or another to be “the music capital of the world.” And we both face many of the challenges confronting urban public education today. I thought, with so many things in common, that in our discussion today we may be able to learn some valuable things from each other.

I'm sure our Board President, Ms. Rider, will agree that recent movies provide us with a context for thinking about our experiences in contemporary urban public education. Some days it's like being in the movie *Gladiator*. Some days it's like *The Perfect Storm*. But then there are those days when you walk into a classroom and the boys and girls are deeply engaged in learning, and you can feel their energy and excitement, and then it's *As Good as It Gets*. That's why teachers teach, that's why principals run schools, that's why school boards govern, and that's why superintendents do whatever it is we do.

In talking about the challenges to public education—particularly in urban public education—I thought I'd first give you a profile of the Austin Independent School District. The Austin Independent School District serves 78,000 students on 106 campuses. These students come from homes in which 57 different languages are spoken and in which income levels range from among the highest in the state to among the lowest. Some of our students come from families that have been here for generations, including Native American and Hispanic families that have been here for centuries. Others come from families just arriving in the past year from the Sudan, Uzbekistan, Croatia and El Salvador. We embrace this diversity—both the challenges it represents for our schools and the opportunities it represents for our future. This is urban America. About 44 percent of our students are Hispanic, 37 percent are Anglo, 17 percent are African American, and two percent are Asian. About 52 percent come from low-income households.

Among our 106 campuses, we have blue-ribbon and exemplary schools and schools not performing as well. We have a number of students making 1600 on their SATs and still too many students dropping out, though our most recent numbers show that we are keeping more kids in school. In other words, we share many characteristics with many other urban school districts.

We also have some fairly unusual characteristics. A couple of weeks ago, we honored students winning 151 National Merit awards. That is a phenomenal number. We had five of *Newsweek's* top 400 high schools in the nation. We also have more than half of the state's National Board Certified teachers this year. There were 19 recognized in all of Texas this year, and ten of them were from AISD.

## **School Finance**

Something else that is unusual about us is that we are the only large urban district in Texas that is classified as “property wealthy” by the state. I noticed that a large percentage of your income comes from the state. Almost 88 percent of our revenue comes from local property taxes. Up until about ten years ago, the state provided about 60 percent of the revenue for school districts. Statewide, that number has dropped to 47 percent. Because we are now property wealthy, based on state equalization formulas, we end up sending much more money back to the state or to poorer districts than we receive from the state. This year we sent \$33 million to less affluent school districts. Next year we'll have to send about \$100 million. We are also the only property wealthy district in Texas to have such a large number of low-income students.

Local school districts in Texas have their own taxing authority. You might think that allows us a great deal of freedom. There are, however, limits on that taxing authority set by the state. School districts can only assess up to \$1.50 per \$1,000 of property value for taxes to pay for Maintenance and Operations. There are also, of course, limits placed on our taxing ability by our constituents. Despite widespread public support for our schools, we know that 73 percent of Austin's households do not have a child in school at this time. Austin is at \$1.41 now. In order to meet the requirements of the state formula, attend to our basic classroom needs, pay for buses, etc., and give teachers a small raise, we will very likely come very close to that \$1.50 cap over the next two years. So, if we are

talking about challenges for public education, having enough revenue to meet the needs of teaching and learning at high levels is right up there. Like every urban school district I know, we are always struggling to do more with less.

### **Data Integrity**

A major part of that effort has been to refocus our energy and resources on teaching and learning in the classroom. That seems like a no-brainer for a school district. But when I got here in August of 1999, this district was under indictment from the County Attorney for bad data. It had just received a "U" for Unacceptable Data from the Texas Education Agency. Our information systems were more a hindrance to our schools than a help. And we were about to be audited by the State Comptroller. In order to turn things around, we first had to stop digging the hole we found ourselves in. To do that, I recommended a significant tax increase, right after getting off the plane, to fix our data and information systems. And to their credit—the Board didn't blink. They knew what had to be done. It wasn't something any of us wanted to do, but it was something we quickly realized had to be done.

As a result, over the past 20 months, we've re-established our accountability with the state and with the public. We now have an "A" for Acceptable Data from the state and information systems coming into place that will serve our teachers, principals, and campuses next year by making their lives easier rather than more complex. All that is extremely important. It will save us money in the long run. And it will allow us to concentrate more fully on the classroom.

I also surveyed all our campus principals, asking them what works in the district and what needs fixing to allow campuses to concentrate on teaching and learning. They gave me a laundry list of things that needed to be fixed, including our hiring process for new teachers, our purchasing process and support from central administration. We went about methodically analyzing and responding to those suggestions. As a result, a survey I conducted at the beginning of this school year showed much greater principal satisfaction.

### **Focus on Teaching and Learning**

But as important as these things are, the most important thing we've accomplished is focusing our entire district on teaching and learning. We are all speaking the same language. We are engaged in conversations on our campuses and with the central administration about teaching and learning. It is permeating our culture. And the bases for this conversation are: high expectations for all children, high standards for all children, and continuous improvement in teaching and learning.

This is exciting. We are now concentrating all our time and energy as a district on teaching and learning. With a grant from the local RGK Foundation, we are training all our teachers, principals, curriculum specialists, and area superintendents on how to evaluate and improve teaching and learning in every classroom in this district. We're doing this in partnership with the Institute for Learning at the University of Pittsburgh. Through the Institute we are also working with several other high-performance urban districts around the country, learning from each other about best practices. Our teachers and principals are learning 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've taken part in the training and it's powerful. For the first time since we were a one-building school district, we are all speaking the same language about teaching and learning.

We are combining our Principles of Learning training with staff development for all teachers and principals on the TEKS -- the 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. Two months ago we published "Family Learning Guides" in English and Spanish and sent them to every elementary school family in the district. These guides help families become engaged in their children's learning about the TEKS. The first guides were about the language arts and math standards. Next we'll publish guides on the science and social studies standards. Next year, we'll be publishing guides on the standards for secondary schools. To supplement that, we're also going to run programming on the school district's cable station, Channel 22, featuring teachers at each grade level discussing the standards, so we can grow a community-wide understanding of these standards.

We are seeing immediate results of our efforts in the classrooms. Teachers are buying into the new Principles and are doing things differently, guided by the standards. It may take a few years to see dramatic changes in student performance, but we all believe we are laying the groundwork for long-term and deep school improvement.

As part of our re-emphasis on teaching and learning, we are also working to build school leadership. We are very fortunate in Austin to have a great partner in the University of Texas. Through that partnership we have created the AISD/UT School Leadership Academy. 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're taking classes from UT in the evenings and working as interns on our East Austin campuses in the mornings. This summer our next cohort will begin working their way through as the first group becomes assistant principals on some of our most needy campuses. We know the best way to build future school leaders for our community is to grow our own.

We're also working more closely with other local colleges and universities, including St. Edward's University, Huston-Tillotson College, and Concordia Lutheran, all of which have good education programs. Last week, we were very excited to announce a new agreement with the Texas Education Agency and our local colleges and universities that will help generate a number of new teachers in areas Texas schools are having difficulty staffing. As a property-wealth district, this new agreement allows us to keep a couple of million dollars in the county that we would otherwise have sent away to other districts. It will be used to fund scholarships at our local colleges and universities for students studying to teach science, math, bilingual education, foreign languages, special education or technology.

With our local Community College, we've identified 52 courses 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 into 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.

These initiatives are designed to build a strong foundation to prepare the students of Austin to make the most of their future. These aren't quick fixes. They will take several years to become deeply ingrained in our school cultures. The Principles of Learning, for instance, are a series of scaffolded steps for teachers and their students to take them to a deeper and deeper understanding of their subject matter. It provides a way for teachers to build their teaching skills and students to improve their performance. But it requires time to pervade our school district at all levels. In the same way, teachers will need several years to integrate a thorough understanding of all the TEKS standards into their classroom work. So to succeed over the long term, we have to stay the course.

## **Public Support**

We are fortunate that we have the public support to see this through. I am continually amazed that this community cares so deeply about its schools. Our business community and government agencies have helped make our Partners in Education program one of the strongest in the nation. A number of our partners provide multiple kinds of support. Dell, AMD, Motorola, Intel and many others are technology giants working closely with our district. We are currently revamping our school-to-career functions so that we can work more successfully with these partners, preparing our students for college and career through high-level career academies.

And our parents continue to support us. Last spring the University of Texas and the Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce conducted an independent and scientific survey to determine what the parents of our students think about our performance. This year's survey is being conducted right now. Last year's results were very positive. If we'd run the survey ourselves, nobody would have believed us. Last year, on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being very unsatisfied and 10 being very satisfied, 57.5 percent of all AISD parents registered their satisfaction at the high end of the scale, from 8 to 10. Twenty-six percent gave this district a 10 out of 10. Only 3 percent were very dissatisfied, and only 10 percent gave the district less than a 4. Those are incredible numbers. This poll was taken in April and May when I had a number of parents upset with me about scheduling for secondary schools. Other community members were upset about the removal of a principal. And other parents were angry because mold drove their children out of an elementary school. At the same time, parents across this district rated us an average of 7.3 on a 10-point satisfaction scale.

This customer satisfaction survey shows that parents really believe in their children's teachers and they are loyal to their children's schools. Those are the keys. What is important is that this survey shows that parents have not lost faith in this district. They have not given up. They are still working with us in our schools.

## More Challenges

I am very optimistic about the future of this district. But there are a number of serious challenges that we face.

As you know we are a high-stakes testing state. The test is called the TAAS. We test in grades 3-8 and then administer a TAAS exit test in 10th grade, which will be moved to the 11th grade in two years.. We've just received the data from the February TAAS exit tests taken by our 10th graders. They did not do as well as we'd hoped. There was a slight drop-off from last year. Still, these were the second highest scores for our district's tenth graders on TAAS. Over the past six years -- including this year's two percent dip -- we've seen a 20 percent improvement of TAAS passage for all 10th graders, a 30 percentage point increase for African American students, a 23 percentage point increase for Hispanic students, a 14 percentage point increase for Anglo students and a 24 percentage point increase for economically disadvantaged students. We have to make sure we continue that trajectory.

Last year our scores went up in every category, and our scores for Hispanic, African American and Economically Disadvantaged students increased dramatically. We are also closing the gap between our high-performing Anglo students and our other students. Three of our newly Recognized campuses last year have student populations that are more than 75 percent minority and low-income. Six low-income schools that were Low Performing the previous year on TAAS received Acceptable ratings after dramatic increases. At the same time, we are not satisfied. Some schools were low performing for the test or for dropouts. We have been targeting these schools for particular attention. And we know that in the coming years, the TAAS will test children more deeply on the TEKS standards. We are preparing for that. We also know the consequences for not passing in the future will be much greater.

We are working overtime to conquer our dropout problems. This is a major challenge for urban districts. Last summer we convened a citizens' task force on dropouts. They had a number of good recommendations that the Board of Trustees and the district have adopted. Beginning this past summer, we took our 8th graders who were identified as at-risk and had their ninth grade teachers working with them in summer school. They will stay with those teachers through 9th grade and then through the next summer, until they are safely deposited on the shores of 10th grade. We're doing that again with this year's incoming 9th graders. We expanded twofold our summer SOAR program for children in the primary grades who were identified as having reading problems. All our schools now have dropout IMPACT teams to work closely with children who are having problems in school. We're studying school districts across the state to find out who has the most success keeping kids in school and what they're doing about it.

We are working to meet the needs of our growing immigrant population. We are continually working in our devotion to equity and quality education at every school. The answers to many of our problems are not simple. They are as complex as modern urban society. But we do have to keep looking for ways to provide those answers. We know that standardized testing is not the ultimate test of the effectiveness of our schools. The ultimate test is whether these children will graduate with the skills and understanding they need to succeed as adults, whether they go to a college or university or directly into the world of work. For our pre-kindergarten students, the answer is at least 14 years away. Fourteen years is a long time for any enterprise to wait to be able to fully measure the success of its efforts. But it's also such a golden opportunity to make a difference in the lives of people.

Thank you.

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