

August 1, 2001

Operations Meeting - Welcome Back

Welcome to the new school year. We don't plan to keep you long today, but there is some business we have to cover before school gets started.

As I mentioned at the start of the Institute for Learning training a couple of weeks ago, we made great progress last year. Our TAAS scores are improving. In a few weeks we're going to announce a large increase in the number of recognized and exemplary schools in AISD. Almost all our schools showed marked improvement. We did an analysis of our TAAS scores in all grades and all subject areas. What may be most exciting is that in almost every cell we are improving our scores and closing the gaps between students at the same time. That's tremendous progress. Everyone is moving up, and our minority and low-income students are moving up at a faster pace. That's a great story. We need to get that story out into our communities. In addition, our dropout rate was cut by 35% last year. We had 143 National Merit scholars who earned 151 awards. We are all talking about Clear Expectations and going on Learning Walks. Of course, there are bumps in the road, and certainly there are budgetary challenges, but we are all moving forward. I want to thank you again for your work and your leadership in making that happen. And I want you to thank your teachers for me when they return next week.

I look forward to our continuing this great momentum in the year ahead. As you'll be hearing this week and next, changes in our revenue projections for the next two years-as a result of changes in the economy and in state law-will require us to pull our belts a little tighter.

The Board and I are determined to keep this ship stabilized, protect our campuses and continue to provide salary increases. We will keep the systems we've established in place. As these systems mature, they'll bring us better and better returns. I'm talking about systems like our dropout recovery processes and our campus impact teams. I want to thank you for your work on our crisis management systems. That's very important. We're making new investments in the ASAP program. We're working closely with the county to process these cases quickly. ASAP is crucial to our renewed focus on attendance. We're not just working to prevent dropouts. We're also working to promote and increase attendance. As you know, you can't learn when you are not in school, and attendance means more funding for the District.

As we begin the school year, I do want to discuss with you something very important. Our core values are implicit in all we do, particularly in our embracing the Principles of Learning and high standards for all kids. But I've come to the realization that we have to be more explicit about our belief in the value of every single child in our schools. We have to be more explicit as a district-and that starts with me-and as campuses about the fact that we have high expectations for all our students. We have to be more explicit about the fact that we respect every single one of our students, that we respect their families and their backgrounds.

This respect and belief in all our students is what drives our dedication to the Principles of Learning and high standards. And every day we've got to be mindful of that and communicate it to our teachers, our school communities, and-most important, to our students. As district and campus leaders, we have to model this respect in everything we do.

We can model this by taking very concrete actions on our campuses. They include making sure there is someone who is bilingual and available to talk with parents at all times. They include reviewing discipline referrals, special education placements and gifted and talented designations to make sure there is no race or class or gender bias involved. They include making sure all our families feel welcome on our campuses, that they are kept informed about their children's progress and about our district-wide instructional agenda.

I know many of you did this last year, but I would ask you again this year to have a school-wide meeting with all your parents to talk to them about our high expectations for their children, about the Principles of Learning and about the standards. You remember we will be sending out more Family Learning Guides this year-with the standards for Science and Social Studies for the elementary grades and with a discussion of the standards for our secondary grades. We're all going to have to pay more attention to Science and Social Studies, particularly in the elementary grades. These guides will be in English and Spanish. I expect every one of you to have a school community conversation around these standards and that you encourage each of your parents to discuss the

Principles of Learning and the standards with the parents of their students. We will also have the new TAAS 2001 profile and an updated "dashboard" for every school to discuss with its community.

We all know that so many times the community only hears bad news about our schools. Any isolated incident gets blown way out of proportion. Meanwhile there is so much good that is taking place in our schools. Well, it dawned on me a few weeks ago that every one of you has a bully pulpit. Every one of you has a natural community and constituency of families in your schools. The most effective way for us to build a constituency for what we are doing in our schools is for you to talk to your families. We have a great story to tell about student achievement. Tell them about the Principles of Learning. Tell them about your successes. Listen to their concerns and work together to resolve them. Some of our Alliance Schools have Neighborhood Walks early in the school year, in which teachers and school leaders visit the homes of parents to talk about their school. That's a wonderful idea. You may not want to have a Neighborhood Walk, but you should plan ways throughout the year to build a community of support around your school.

I'm meeting with the officers of the [ACPTA](#) this week to give them the same message. We may not own the daily paper or commercial television stations, but we have a network that includes the families of 78,000 students. If we can build understanding among those families about the good work of our schools, then we will have a base of support that will carry us through any hard times ahead of us. And the good news about AISD will be emerging from so many different directions that the Statesman and TV news will not be able to avoid it.

I look forward to a great year ahead and working with you to make that happen.

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