

**New Orleans Chamber of Commerce  
October 1, 2001 :**

When I was asked to be the Superintendent of AISD a little more than two years ago-in August of 1999-there were four overriding factors that drew me to this job like a magnet.

First, Austin ISD was unusual for an American urban school district in that it had a vibrantly diverse student population, representing all races, many ethnicities and religions and all sectors of the economy. What an opportunity!

Second, Austin is a wonderful place to live. My wife and I wanted to put down roots in Austin and make it our home.

Third, the potential I saw in the Austin school district made me think that this could be the finest urban school district in America. I knew there were big problems-with hovering indictments and horrendous data problems. But I also saw some wonderful schools, great teachers and principals and a number of schools that I believed could improve dramatically if they just received effective leadership.

Fourth, I saw a community that was deeply engaged in its schools. I saw that in the depth of knowledge and interest shown by the citizens' committee that interviewed the candidates. I saw it in the passion of parents. I saw it in the seriousness of the Board of Trustees. And I saw it in the commitment of Austin's business community to its schools.

Perhaps a fifth factor is that it's not too far from New Orleans.

I now know that everything I thought I saw in August of 1999 was no illusion. It has been reinforced ten times over. This is a wonderful place to live. I honestly do think that, if we keep pushing, this will be the finest urban school district in the country, serving the needs of its wonderfully diverse student body.

And finally, I am repeatedly blown away by the support this community shows for its schools. The Parent Satisfaction Survey conducted by the Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce with the University of Texas in the spring of 2000 showed overwhelming parent support. I'm sure this business community's support of schools in Austin is unparalleled in the nation. A couple of weeks ago, for example, we held a press conference with leading school architects, kitchen designers, construction contractors and the hotel and motel association, all of whom are donating their services to help us create a high school institute for hospitality and the culinary arts.

Our Partners in Education program may be the strongest in the country. This past school year, we had more than 1800 partners contributing \$4.3 million in in-kind services and another \$4.3 million in donations. We had almost 17,000 volunteers contributing more than 366,000 volunteer hours.

When I arrived in Austin, I set out three immediate goals:

- Better data.
- Better collaboration.
- Better student achievement.

**Better data**

With the backing of this community, the Board of Trustees allocated an extra 6 cents in the tax rate to address the serious problems this district was having with data. That was critical. When I got off the plane in 1999, we were given the scarlet "U" for unacceptable data to wear by TEA. We lost several major grants because we couldn't get our numbers straight. Well, now have the data systems in place to get the job done. This past year, TEA said we've met the highest standard for data quality. With our data improvement, national bond rating companies took us off their "negative watch" and assigned us a double AA bond rating.

It's crucial to submit accurate data to the state and to have accurate data for planning and scheduling and allocating resources. But I want you to know that accurate data directly affects children's lives. With our data systems in place

this year, we were able to track down a number of our students who had left school. For some, it was just a question of finding out where they went-to another school, into a GED program, to another state or country. We never did that before in any systematic way. But we also found a number of children and brought them back to school, put them in special programs that fit their needs, and got them back on track. Through our use of better data and the hard work of parent specialists, counselors, principals, and visiting teachers, we were able to reduce our dropout rate this past year by 35 percent. Four hundred fewer kids were out on the street last year than the year before. Instead, they were in school, working their way toward graduation. We are very proud of that progress. It's a battle we'll have to fight every year, but at least we now have the data capability to get it done.

### **Better collaboration**

We are working more closely with the community. Our citizens' dropout task force put together the plan we are now using to bring down our dropout rate. We have partnerships with local businesses, with UT, St. Edward's, Huston-Tillotson, Concordia, and ACC that are the envy of school districts across the state. These partnerships will be producing real returns for our students and this community.

### **Better student achievement**

We are also seeing steady progress in student achievement. This past year AISD seniors earned 151 National Merit Awards. AISD is home to five of Newsweek's top 400 high schools in the nation. Ten of the 19 Texas teachers receiving National Board Certification last year teach in AISD.

Last year we doubled the number of schools in our district earning distinguished recognition from the Texas Education Agency. Thirty-eight of our schools were named Exemplary or Recognized for their results on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills. We reduced the number of low-performing schools from nine to five. Our distinguished schools were in all parts of town. At 19 of the 38 distinguished schools, minority students were in the majority. Low-income students comprised the majority of the enrollment at 14 of the distinguished campuses.

Very important to us is the fact that we are closing the gap in TAAS achievement with all levels showing improvement. African American, Hispanic and Economically Disadvantaged students are improving in reading and math at faster rates than Anglo students, while all students are improving. If you look at improvement rates in this district over the period from 1996-2001, we are making significant improvement in all areas. In math, the passing rate for all students improved by 19.1 percentage points in that period, while our Hispanic students improved by 27.2 percent, and our African American students improved by 28.7 percent. In reading, we improved by 9.1 percentage points overall, while Hispanic students improved by 14.3 percent and African American students improved by 16.8 percent. We aren't in any way satisfied. There is a lot of room for improvement. But we are moving in the right direction. And, just as important, we are all moving in the same direction.

### **Continuous Improvement**

Our mantra is continuous, system-wide improvement. To do that, we've focused on new and innovative thinking and practices that will serve every child in every classroom in the district. Our most important district-wide initiative-one we are using to build the foundation for teaching and learning in this district for years to come-is our partnership with the Institute for Learning at the University of Pittsburgh. Thanks to two years of grant support from the RGK Foundation, this partnership has provided professional development for all our principals, instructional specialists and teachers in the Principles of Learning. It is being led by our Area Superintendents. These Principles of Learning provide the infrastructure for deep learning tied to the state's TEKS standards. Using the Principles of Learning and the TEKS mandates high expectations and clear expectations for every classroom in this district. It has focused the entire district like a laser beam on teaching and learning.

This is the heart of our district improvement plan-integrating the Principles of Learning and the TEKS in everything we do. For schools that are not doing well or that are on the borderline we are providing a number of extra resources, including instructional specialists.

We also want our parents involved in this process. So we sent Family Learning Guides to every parent of elementary school students-in English and Spanish-to help parents understand the standards for each grade level

and what they can do to help their children learn. We sent out the guides on Math and Language Arts last spring. This month they will receive the standards for Science and Social Studies. Next spring, middle-school parents will receive Learning Guides with the standards for secondary subjects.

We also understand the crucial role school leadership plays in the student success. We, therefore, are growing our own leaders in partnership with the University of Texas. The first class of our School Leadership Academy will become resident assistant principals in East Austin schools next year. Our second class has begun taking classes at UT this summer. We want to develop a highly trained corps of future school leaders, building some of our best teachers into some of our best principals.

## **Budget Implications**

All this is being accomplished against a background of tightening budget constraints. The Austin Independent School District is considered a property-wealthy district by the state's education equalization formulas. That means that, instead of getting large state support, we are sending money away to less affluent districts. Last year our "recapture" payment was \$34 million. This year it's up to \$93 million. Projections for next year are around \$150 million.

Ninety-six percent of our district's revenue comes from property taxes. The rest comes from federal, state and other sources. At the same time, we have the second lowest tax rate in Central Texas and have maintained our rate at \$1.5486 for three years running. But with increased health insurance costs, the need to fund teacher salary increases and other mounting costs, we are stretched to the limit.

We found \$27 million in reductions in our operating budget for this year. That's a 5.2 percent cut. I'm pleased to say that we've done this without layoffs or increases in class size. In fact, none of these cuts are affecting campuses directly. The cuts enabled us to give all employees a 4.6% salary increase.

The current tax rate at \$1.5486, that means \$1.1375 is spent on instruction. That's because 25 cents will be spent on our recapture payment, 9 cents on debt service and 6 cents on Social Security. That still compares favorably with the state average and with comparable urban districts.

We are now approaching the state limit for taxes to pay for maintenance and operation. We are also faced with a number of structural issues, such as leaking roofs and mold, which has forced us to close one school for a year and parts of schools for long periods of time. We will go to the voters of Austin for a bond election in February in order to address these structural issues while maintaining what remains of our M&O capacity for classroom instruction. Probably most critical to us will be the state of the economy in the coming year. A school district and the community's economy are intricately tied to each other.

American public school districts are complex organisms impacted by complex social and economic factors far beyond the control of local school boards or superintendents. But we are dedicated to high standards of teaching and learning for all children. Even in the most difficult times it is our job to make sure that the children entering our doors are given the tools to emerge as successful, productive young adults. With the support of this strong Austin community, we know we can accomplish this job.

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