

Testimony on Urban Education in Texas To the House Public Education Committee

Good afternoon, I am Pat Forgione, Superintendent of the Austin Independent School District, and I want to thank the committee and Chairman Grusendorf for the opportunity to have a conversation with you today about the challenges and the successes of running a complex urban school district in Texas.

I will begin by sharing two documents with you. The first is a brochure entitled Challenge for Our Children that was developed in cooperation with the Texas School Alliance. I had the privilege last year of being the president of this organization of the 29 of the larger districts in Texas. The Alliance represents well over one-third of the entire public school enrollment.

The second document is a recent publication of Austin ISD entitled Success for Our Students. It will give you a more detailed picture of my district and our recent successes and significant challenges ahead of AISD.

I will speak to the urban education experience on two levels: (1) my personal 3 1/2 year tenure as Superintendent in AISD and (2) what I have observed about the other major urban districts in Texas.

As background, AISD is the fourth largest district in Texas; we have 78,000 students on 108 campuses with 5400 teachers and 5300 other employees. Over the last three years we have dramatically increased the number of recognized and exemplary schools in AISD from 16 in 1999 upon my arrival to 48 in 2002. We are most proud that the majority of the new high performing schools are majority-minority and majority-economically disadvantaged campuses. There can be no excuse for mediocre performances; we have the existent proofs of high levels of academic performances for all children across our district. Now AISD must go to scale to achieve equity of results for all children. Let me share eight issues that are affecting Texas urban school districts:

1. Texas education reforms are working, and our Texas urban schools are making outstanding progress. Texan African-American and Hispanic fourth graders, for example, are the tops on NAEP math.
2. Standards are rising very dramatically. Austin ISD supports the Texas school reform agenda and the rising tide of expectations. In fact, today, Texas third grade students begin the TAKS era with the reading test that they will have to pass to be promoted. The exit exams for the Class of 2005 will be even more difficult, with algebra, geometry, chemistry, and applied physics, and with predictions by TEA of high failure rates. What do the recent TAKS pilot results tell us? I fear that the achievement gaps between subgroups of students will reopen dramatically. We must continue to invest in public school students to close the achievement gaps - as the Texas legislature did in the 1990's. Resources do matter in a standards/results-based system of accountability.
3. Urban schools are serving a more diverse group of students. In Austin, we have over 60 languages spoken by our students, over 20% of our students are limited English proficient, and 52% of students are on free and reduced price lunch. We may be considered a wealthy district, but we don't have wealthy kids.
4. A significant gap felt by the Big 8 urban districts - from El Paso to Houston, from Dallas to Corpus Christi - is the growing English language learner population. We are all feeling the impact of the growing numbers of these students, especially immigrant students. Often they are not fully literate in their native language. Moreover, their unique educational needs are impacting dramatically on our middle and high schools that are not prepared for the literacy challenge these students bring to school.
5. It costs a lot more to serve kids in urban areas, not just because of their individual needs, but also because we have higher labor costs. It costs a lot more for teachers to live in the Austin area, for example, we must compete with private employers to recruit and retain teachers. Higher student and labor costs and a state school finance formula that hasn't kept up with these cost drivers may explain why urban and suburban districts are more likely to be at \$1.46 or higher on the M&O tax rate, while other types of districts are below this. AISD is now at the \$1.50 cap for M&O.
6. There are two initiatives, dropout reduction and attendance enhancement, that do require significant extra effort and cost for urban districts. We must continue our full-court press on reducing the unacceptable incidence of

dropouts. I am proud that for the second year in a row, AISD will have no schools rated low performing for dropouts - in contrast to 8 secondary schools being so rated upon my arrival in 1999. We have also cut our annual dropout rate in half, down from 3.7% to 1.5% last year. The second emphasis that does take extra time and energy of our scarce administrative teams is attendance. AISD must do better in getting our kids to come to school every day - certainly, we know that a student can't learn well if he/she is not in school; plus these absences cost us financially in lost revenue based on WADA counts.

I commend Texas - and now the nation under NCLB - for holding public schools accountable for both higher academic achievement of all children - "and all means all" - and for getting students back into school.

7. What do we need to do to continue this trajectory of success with an ever more challenging student population? On the funding side, urban schools need funding formulas that more accurately reflect our costs. We recognize that the state's budget picture this year is difficult and we appreciate the legislature's efforts to make sure public education does not get cut. Please honor the election pledge so often heard last fall: "Do no harm to public education funding."

8. Finally, I ask for your strong oversight and assistance in placing a moratorium on the ever-increasing data requirements on public schools. Upon my arrival in August 1999, AISD was given by TEA the scarlet "U" for Unsatisfactory data as a district. We have worked hard to meet the rigorous state data standards and to make our data systems more useful, timely and accurate. AISD is now rated Acceptable for data. However, we simply can't keep up with the ever-increasing demands for more measures and data elements in the accountability system, without additional state funds for this purpose. In addition, the TEA District Effectiveness and Compliance (DEC) System is outrageous in its "perfection" standards that are not fair, nor reasonable.

The Austin ISD Board of Trustees is clear in directing that all additional dollars must be directed to the classroom; we must increase our focus on quality teaching and student learning. Please declare an immediate moratorium on new state data requirements for accountability. I believe the TEA should be stronger in its negotiations with the feds on NCLB. Please don't allow state agencies to use this legislation as a cover for placing more demands on our ever so thin district capacity. Please stop such unfunded mandates in this time of scarce resources.

Summary

In summary, Texas reforms are working and standards are rising dramatically. This requires, as the Texas legislature did in the 1990's, that we make a matching investment of additional state funds to support our students and schools so that districts can provide the opportunity to learn at these new higher levels for all students.

This new state investment is needed so that our urban districts will effectively:

- Serve the growing and more costly to educate groups of students, especially the influx of immigrant and English language learners;
- Balance the higher labor and living costs in urban areas that increase the expense of educating students in urban school districts in Texas; and
- Continue the full-court press on dropout reduction and attendance enhancements.

To continue our positive trajectory of success with ever more challenging student populations, urban districts also ask the legislature to correct the current school finance formulas to more accurately match the real costs for doing business in Texas urban communities. And finally, please declare a moratorium on new state accountability data requirements unless the legislature can provide the additional funding to cover these additional costs. Every dollar is needed to support our needy students in their classrooms.

Thank you.

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