

## **School Redesign Network Presentation Opening Comments**

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Good morning. We're rounding the home stretch for this school year. There are, of course, a lot of hurdles to be jumped before we reach the finish line. Knowing that, I want to particularly thank you for devoting this day to this very important enterprise—Redesigning Our High Schools.

We have a very busy day ahead of us. We will be led by some very important critical friends. But first, before we dive headfirst into today's discussion—and I know most of you have already begun swimming—we all have to ask ourselves the critical question: Why Change?

Why do we need to redesign our high schools? Can't we just tinker a little here and tinker a little there instead of spending the next year trying to swim through the high waves and cold water of significant change?

I'll tell you what I'm thinking—then we can spend the rest of the day in conversation about changing our high schools. This is what I'm thinking: I am proud of the way this district has responded to the high-stakes and inadequately funded educational environment in this new century. We in AISD are seeing continuous improvement. That's across the district and for all groups of students. We are closing the achievement gaps. I thank you for your long hours and hard work. You should be justly proud of the continuous progress we are making.

At the same time, we're chasing a moving target. The state and federal accountability requirements keep moving up without providing us with the time or resources to move up with them. More important, the demands of our world and the world of work we see our students entering in the next five or ten years are also escalating. Unlike thirty or forty years ago, if you don't have some kind of post-secondary degree or certification today, you might as well kiss the middle class goodbye. You won't make it.

Let's look at an important number. The four-year high school completion rate for AISD in 2003 was 78 percent. That was an increase over the previous year. It's higher for some of our schools and lower for others. But it's only 68 percent for Economically Disadvantaged Students and 53 percent for our LEP students. A number of those students will take the GED or find another avenue to a diploma. But a number will also never finish high school. Unless they're incredibly lucky, they'll be consigned to a future with very limited economic prospects.

You might say, "But 78 percent of our kids are graduating on time. They must have been served well by our high schools." I looked through the student comments in our 2004 senior survey. And even many of those students feel their high schools weren't serving them very well. Of course, I found the usual complaints about parking and demands to bring back soft drinks. One student even wanted interscholastic paintball. But I also looked at comments from students who apparently were doing well in

school. And these comments came from every school in the district.

I was impressed that over and over students asked to be more challenged in their classes. “Evaluate teachers more carefully,” one wrote. “Stop making it easy to skip,” another said. In every school, students talked about cheating going on and teachers not being well prepared. These comments came from some of our highest performing schools: “The Administration knows all the bad kids by name, but the good kids aren’t recognized.” “It’s extremely hard to give any feedback to the administration. Teachers get away with a lot—never handing back tests, not coming close to preparing you for the AP test.”

I’m not saying we should expect to satisfy all the individual needs of 80,000 students. But you get the feeling that a large number of students and their families feel disconnected, lost in the system, not well served or not well taught. After more than a century of structuring our high schools in one basic way, it is time to look at other models

to better serve our students—to better prepare them for the future as thinkers and as well-rounded citizens.

We are having this district-wide discussion on High School Redesign in order to examine our high school structure and practices to see where we can improve them in order to improve academic achievement for all our students. We want the public involved in these very important deliberations. Who knows? These discussions may set the course for the design of high schools for the next hundred years.

Today we want to talk with you specifically about how each school can build public engagement in this critical process. Let me be very clear—we need your very earnest effort. We need our publics—plural—with us for this difficult undertaking. That means our students and their families, our teachers and staff, our taxpayers and community members. This means involving all your vertical team schools: your elementary schools and middle schools are very anxious and need to be brought actively

into your public engagement effort. We won't win them all over all at once. But we have to build fair and public mechanisms for holding real public conversations about high school redesign, both in the short term over the next six months and over the longer term over the next three years. Everyone in our community should feel touched by the process and believe it has credibility.

We are very fortunate to have some critical friends in this undertaking. They are probably the best in the country at assisting public school districts in going through this difficult and necessary process. I'd like to thank our colleagues from the Stanford School Design Network for their commitment to helping us make our work thoughtful and successful.

Next month the director of the Stanford School Design Network, Professor Linda Darling-Hammond, will come to Austin to lead a second set of conversations with community members and principals.