

AERA Annual Conference  
San Francisco, CA

A District-Wide Approach to High School  
Conversion:  
An Urban Superintendent's Perspective

By  
Pascal D. Forgione, Jr., Ph.D.  
Superintendent of Schools  
Austin Independent School District  
1111 W. 6<sup>th</sup> Street  
Austin, TX 78703-5399  
Telephone: 512-414-2482  
Fax: 512-414-1486  
Email: [superintendent@austinisd.org](mailto:superintendent@austinisd.org)  
Website: [www.austinisd.org](http://www.austinisd.org)

April 8, 2006

Thank you for asking me to join you. I wanted to start out by talking a little bit about outcomes. There's no real reason for you to listen to me about reforms if I can't show you positive results.

This school year my district received a very positive set of academic results. On the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Trial Urban District Assessment (TUDA), the Austin Independent School District (AISD) scored first or second with Charlotte-Mecklenburg among eleven participating urban school districts across the country.

Professor Uri Treisman of the University of Texas Dana Center conducted an independent analysis of the NAEP data. He found that out of 72 comparisons of Austin's performance on NAEP to large central cities, the State of Texas and the nation as a whole, Austin students' average scale scores were statistically comparable to or better than the other scores as many as 68 times. On the higher Proficiency level, our students scored at or better than Texas and the nation on 20 out of 24 possible comparisons. In mathematics at Grade 4, our Hispanic students scored at the top, some two grade levels better than their counterparts in other urban districts, and our African American students were second in the nation and well ahead of national and large city averages. Our Hispanic students were the top scorers on 8<sup>th</sup> grade Math and our African American students were second only to Charlotte-Mecklenburg. We still have a long way to go, but with this standard we think we now have the right to "TUDA" our own horn, and, most important, we have real evidence that we are moving in the right direction.

Professor Treisman made a compelling statement based on his analysis of the 2005 NAEP data. He pointed out that, in the 1960's, James Coleman's findings about non-school factors dominated the explanations for student achievement, but these new results show where you go to school does matter. Public schools can make a difference.

This work is representative of where we're trying to go as a school district. But if I'm going to talk about reforms that make a difference, I need to talk about what I believe to be the most important action that a school district can take so that you can make a long-

lasting and significant difference in student performance. That action is to create a strong, long-term foundation for change. That foundation must include a school district culture based on the right set of values and community trust; it must include a data-driven, long-term plan of action, in which change is scaffolded so that it doesn't overwhelm your teachers and schools; and it must include the ability to adapt and adjust to a changing world.

Rome wasn't built in a day. A school district can't be turned around in a day. Uri Treisman told our Board that you can't get the Queen Mary turned all the way around in a day, but every small change you make to get you going in the right direction will produce positive results. At the same time, parents and students can't wait decades for you to make their schools better. Every student goes through the first 18 years of his life only once. We have to get it right for that individual student as we work to make it right for all students.

To do that, we need to make continuous progress in a stable environment. If you look at the TUDA results for Austin, Boston and Charlotte-Mecklenburg, you see stability in district leadership. When I was hired in August 1999, I was the seventh Austin superintendent in ten years. No wonder Austin was falling farther and farther behind. It had no direction. Or it changed direction every year. The teachers and principals would just hunker down and wait for the next superintendent. I'm now in my seventh year in Austin, and I'm signed up for four more years. People know we're not going away. Our 5500 teachers and 5,000 other district staff members know we intend to follow all the way through on the changes we are making. Our parents and grandparents and community members know that as well. That makes a big difference.

But you have to be ready for change. As Hamlet said, "Ripeness is all." In Austin, we are making major changes in our schools today. We would not have been ready for these same changes six years ago or even three years ago. But all the scaffolded changes we did undertake over the last six years have been necessary to get us to this important moment in the education history of Austin. I want to talk briefly about how we've now

arrived at this point. And then I want to talk about lessons we've at this stage in our development.

### **High School Redesign: Setting the Stage for Change**

The day I stepped off the plane in August 1999, I was greeted by a newspaper headline announcing that my district had been declared unacceptable by the Texas Education Agency due to our bad data submitted to the state. We had been placed on the “negative watch” by the national bond rating companies. I also found out that, in the middle of this high-technology capital, our information and financial systems were outdated and dysfunctional. From that first day, I decided the best approach was to drill down until we got to the bottom of our bad news. We shared everything we learned with the Austin community. In that way, we developed public trust, which we would need as we rebuilt the district from the ground up. Within that first month on the job, the public backed our call for a three-cent property tax increase to create the information infrastructure we would need. We set up a new accountability department to scrupulously oversee our use of data. These were the relatively easy reforms. I knew our greatest challenge would be to reform teaching and learning in our more than 5,000 classrooms.

But even more serious as we transitioned to the 21<sup>st</sup> century was the declining academic performance of many of our students and the large achievement gaps between groups of students. Without stable leadership, this district had no proven system to support increasing student achievement for all students. I've often said, our district was all *e pluribus* and no *unum*. Our schools were peacocks on the prairie, strutting off in different directions because they'd had no district leadership for so long. In public education leadership, you cannot “run in place” if you expect to progress over time.

The first thing we did was to establish the state's Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) standards as our content standards. These standards became our first non-negotiable—the “unum.” We will have the same high standards for all our classrooms. It doesn't matter what part of town you grow up in—we'll have the same high expectations and high standards for you in every classroom. The second non-negotiable was a core

belief in an effort-based education system. We teamed with the Institute for Learning at the University of Pittsburgh to develop a professional development program for all our administrators and teachers so that we would have a common language of teaching and learning. In this way, we became an effort-based, standards-based school system. We believe that effort creates ability. You become smarter by working harder in a system set up for high achievement. This is our responsibility as a public school system.

We were also becoming data-driven, using data to guide instruction and to focus interventions on targeted student needs. Our results began to show progress early on. Between 1999 and 2002, every group of students showed significant gains in Reading, Math and Writing on the TAAS test. Our number of exemplary and recognized schools tripled from 16 to 48. For the first time they included schools from neighborhoods in which the students came from low-income families. Our number of low-performing schools declined from 14 to 3.

So what happened? Texas moved forward to upgrade its state accountability system to incorporate more rigorous academic content and harder passing standards.

In 2003, AISD entered a second stage of development. Our data systems were now in place. Our bond rating had risen from Unacceptable to AA. We were making academic progress, but it was time to shift to the next gear. Our students were also facing the high-stakes consequences of the new, more rigorous Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) tests. To strengthen teaching and learning, our curriculum and instruction department teamed with master teachers to write Instructional Planning Guides to guide the curriculum in the core academic areas based on the TEKS standards. Like the districts around us, we lose about 14 percent of our teachers (one in seven) each year for various reasons. The Instructional Planning Guides (IPG's) are crucial for teachers in their first five years and serve as an additional resource for our more experienced teachers. We have now also developed Advanced Planning Guides (APG's) for our pre-AP and AP courses and Magnet Planning Guides for our Magnet secondary schools programs.

We also decided it didn't make much sense to wait until the end-of-the-year TAKS tests to find out if our students had learned to the more rigorous standards. We developed Beginning-of-the-Year and Middle-of-the-Year benchmark assessments to help us monitor student achievement growth. These benchmark tests, as well as formative six- and nine-week tests (made available to teachers for their use) provide the basis for data-driven professional development and intervention with struggling learners. We now have a three-tiered system to support our struggling students in class, outside the classroom and after school during the summer. In addition, we are bringing rigor and consistent delivery to our bilingual instruction, requiring knowledge of Academic English and Academic Spanish for all our English-Language Learners.

Once again, the results show that we are moving in the right direction. Between 2002 and 2005, our student achievement on the TAKS test has increased for all groups of students as we continue to close the achievement gaps. For example, our Hispanic students gained 16 points in Math, our African American students gained 24 points in Science, our Hispanic and African American students gained 16 points each in Reading and 15 points in Social Studies. Other indicators mark our progress as well. Our four-year graduation rate for the class of 2004 increased by more than ten percent between 1999 and 2004, rising from 72.5 percent to 80.1 percent. Simultaneously, we have increased our high school students graduating on the State Recommended Plan—the good stuff—from 24.1% in 2000 to 73.6% in 2005! And then, of course, there are the NAEP scores I talked about earlier.

### **High School Redesign: First Steps**

With this foundation to build on, we are now ready to move into a third stage of district development. It is only possible because we have built an education infrastructure that is effort-based and standards-based and has penetrated every classroom. It is only possible because we are involving our community in the redesign process. Once we had a strong foundation, we knew we could take important risks to better our schools. We recognized that we needed to make major changes, which would require us to be brave enough to look squarely at the problem of redesigning our traditional American public high school.

So, where do you begin if you are a standards-based, effort-based and data-driven school district? Three years ago, we asked the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) to help us look at our strengths and weaknesses by analyzing all eleven of our comprehensive high schools. This analysis produced a report showing a common set of challenges for all our high schools. This soul-searching led to district-wide discussions and conversations within each high school. The SREB report showed us change was absolutely necessary. It might be different in kind or degree in each school, but change would be necessary at every one of our eleven comprehensive high schools. While our high school graduation rate in 2004 was 80 percent for all students, it was only 72 percent for Economically Disadvantaged Students and 53 percent for our LEP students. Thus, we knew we needed to change how we are doing education in our comprehensive high schools.

The SREB report produced a set of recommendations applicable to all our high schools and generated serious discussions in each high school about change. The seven major SREB recommendations were:

1. Give all students access to a rigorous academic core curriculum and a focused area of in-depth study.
2. Improve transitions from middle grades to high school and from high school to college and careers.
3. Improve the quality of instruction and raise classroom standards and expectations.
4. Expand career/technical education offerings aligned to post-secondary programs, industry standards, and labor-market demands and enroll more students in these programs.
5. Create a strengthened education and career advisement program through a teacher advisement system.
6. Strengthen the support system to help struggling students.
7. Develop strong building-level leadership teams involving principals, assistant principals, and teacher leaders.

These seven challenges represent what our “4R’s”—rigor, relationships, relevance and results—of our AISD high school redesign initiative. (We’ve added the Texas results orientation to the 3R’s of the Gates Foundation.)

We took every one of these to heart. Then we asked our high schools to begin thinking about different ways of working to address the challenges identified by the SREB report. Last fall, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation recognized the potential for dramatic change for student improvement in Austin and awarded us a \$1.5 million public engagement and planning grant for our high schools.

AISD has committed itself to building a portfolio of high school options as the core reform strategy for our high school redesign initiative. Our lowest performing high school received special funding from the state and already began this year to launch three distinct small academies on its campus. We are examining, through an individual campus redesign planning process, how we can convert our large comprehensive high schools into smaller learning communities, or in a few cases, new small schools. Each high school is developing its own campus redesign plan, which is to be finalized by April 2006. The Stanford School Redesign Network (SSRN) is serving as our intermediary partner. SSRN’s role is to support and challenge us to be innovative and true to our data and vision to change our current high school processes to better meet the needs of our students. Thus, this focus on conversion and simultaneously going to scale (with all 11 high schools) presents a significant reform commitment for our district. In addition, we are planning to create several new small high school models in our district. Our Board of Trustees has approved a Young Women’s Leadership School for Grades 6-12 to open in August 2007 and dedicated to serving girls from low-income families. We are also working with the Asia Society to open a Global Studies High School. We want to create a portfolio of secondary school opportunities so that all our students become engaged and successful in their academic careers.

If the Gates Foundation likes our plans, it will consider supporting a much larger grant to implement these plans over the next four years. This is an exciting opportunity. We could

be a district that redesigns all its middle and high schools to better serve students, and in the process redesigns the central administration to better serve our schools.

The Michael and Susan Dell Foundation is also offering major support. It annually funds an extra college counselor at every high school and extra teachers to act as tutors for struggling Algebra students. Next year, for instance, it will also provide staff development and incentives for teachers and students in seven of our high schools that haven't had many students taking and passing the Advanced Placement exams. We believe this will dramatically increase student AP enrollment and student performance on AP exams.

These changes would not have been possible without our development of the strong foundation to stand on. Our continuous improvement has made believers out of our teachers and our community. Both are ready to support further change because they've seen the results of earlier reforms. Success breeds more success.

I do want to mention that we have made this progress despite the fact that we are looking at our fifth year with no new revenue. Our legislature will grapple with school finance in a special session this spring and in future sessions. To continue our progress, we do need more resources. That's why the Gates and Dell foundations have been so important developing new initiatives. But we've squeezed all the blood we can get out of the state school funding formula. We've set the stage for reform, but in order to play upon that stage and to make sure all our students are reached by reform, we need adequate resources.

### **High School Redesign: Lessons Learned:**

#### **Lesson One: It Takes Time**

As we all know in the school business, we feel a great sense of urgency to solve problems quickly so that challenges we've identified as having an adverse impact on current students are addressed in time to help those very students and not the cohorts coming

after them. Also, as the debates about school performance grow more heated, pressure increases from parents, from the community, from local state and national governments, from taxpayers and from businesses.

The difficulty we find is that in order to fix the problem as a system, we have to take the time to become smart and be flexible. The genius of successful school reform lies in the system's capacity to be flexible, responsive, and data-driven. This requires a great deal of time to begin the change process on our campuses. This process requires hard conversations around student performance data and classroom practices. It requires building the understanding on campuses around the need for change.

You also need time to develop leadership at all levels. The Superintendent's role is to jumpstart and steer the work, keeping it on course. Then you need to develop leadership for redesign in your central administration and, of course, on your campuses. You have to engage your principals before they engage their teachers and parents. And some of these principals are fairly certain that they are doing a pretty good job already. In the same vein, many of your central administrators think all the change has to occur on the campuses but not in their support for the campuses. They're convinced the campuses are just not making the right decisions with the resources they've been given.

It's important that you have the time to sequence and stage your reform efforts so you don't overwhelm your campuses and your central support capacity. You can't outrun your principals and teachers. No matter how good your ideas may be, nothing will change if you don't have the support of your administrators and teachers.

That's why we've tried to pace the reform in Austin. To do this, we've created structures, capacity, and expertise so that we could be successful in undertaking major innovation.

### **Lesson Two: It Requires External Validation and the Capacity to Respond**

External events also helped drive significant change. During the winter of 2002-2003, AISD had to declare financial exigency due to a downturn in the projected revenues for

the following school year based on the state's school finance formula. This did, surprisingly, give us a unique opportunity to restructure. We commissioned a reorganization study, whose findings provided support for a more effective and efficient organization. This included cutbacks in our central office staffing and supported my vision of horizontally aligned supervision of schools. We went from five Area Superintendents to three associate superintendents, including one Associate Superintendent for High Schools. Previously, our five Area Superintendents had a span of control that included two or three high schools for each with all the middle and elementary schools feeding those high schools. Now we can get all our high school principals in one room and have deep discussions about high schools. That was my first step.

The reorganization study also recommended that we consider outsourcing leadership of our CATE program. It found that our CATE programs could not keep a critical mass of students in its program. Less than one-quarter of its students who entered a CATE strand at the beginning level finished that strand by the time they graduated. No one was getting the training needed to enter a trade or even to transition into a post-secondary program at a community college or trade school. Our CATE wasn't working. These data convinced us to dissolve our School-to-Career office as part of the \$42 million downsizing of our school district created by economic circumstances. This is one of those times when crisis creates opportunity. I asked our Board to give us the authority to go out for bid to secure expertise with the capacity to change the AISD CATE program, bringing us a new vision and alignment. Austin Community College won the bid to develop our CATE program in a way that would serve our students well and connect with real jobs projected for the future of Austin. We now have outsourced with the best experts on CATE in Central Texas. I also convinced the Board to put out for bid a district-wide audit of our high schools. Gene Bottoms of the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) thought that the Austin School District might be a place to expand the SREB reach. It had never looked at all the high schools in an urban district. SREB ended up winning the contract. It produced the recommendations and vision I mentioned earlier. I had a leadership team, a structure, and independent validation that we needed to change our high schools

dramatically. We used the data and recommendations from this external expert to jumpstart our journey to district-wide redesign. Even our most successful high schools were shown where change was needed.

### **Lesson Three: Mining the Expertise of Critical Friends**

We have been spending this school year seriously planning as a district for district-wide high school change. We convinced the Gates Foundation that we were serious about redesigning our entire district to serve high school redesign. At the same time, we asked Gates not for a five-year grant but for a one-year planning grant to see if we had the capacity to make real change and if Gates would want to invest in our plans once they were developed. We also wanted to use part of that money to build community engagement around the change process—including students, parents, teachers, and the greater Austin community. We looked at the experience of other school districts and knew from the outset that for change to be meaningful and long-lasting, it had to have teacher and community support. A crucial part of this Gates grant for planning and public engagement is our partnership with the Stanford School Redesign Network (SSRN).

This partnership has served us well. Stanford is our critical friend. Not only has it helped us develop our public engagement strategies, but also it has worked with every high school and the central administration to prod us to produce innovative ideas and push for significant outcomes. We need these critical partners to help us think through the challenges of redesign. These challenges include:

- Maintaining interdependence versus the desire to be autonomous;
- Sequencing change;
- Building deep and broad public engagement in our schools and in our community as a whole;
- Making the theoretical “real” through visits to best practices models around the country;
- The limitations of time and resources;
- Job titles and compensation levels for new high school leaders;

- Continuous use of data to guide reform, including mid-course corrections; and, perhaps most important,
- The most effective use of professional development.

### **Conclusion**

We have a long way to go. But with the help of Stanford, the work of our dedicated and innovative principals and staff, community buy-in, and support from Gates and Dell, we have stayed together on this journey. What makes Austin unique in this effort is our desire to go “wall to wall” with high school redesign, creating a portfolio of schools while emphasizing the conversion of comprehensive high schools. The Austin school district has four of the best high schools in America as well as an academic magnet that can compete with any in the country. We also have four high schools that need a big push and three others on the critical list. In each of these high schools are a number of students who won’t make it in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century economy if we don’t change our ways. That’s why we have determined to redesign all our high schools so we can better serve all our students. We can’t do any less.