

Austin Area Urban League
Annual Business Luncheon
Austin, TX

Katrina: One Year After

By

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Good afternoon. I am very happy to be able to join you today. As a former board member of the Urban League here in Austin, I fervently believe in the mission and the vision of the Urban League. I appreciate the work that the Urban League does every day to make our great Austin community a better community for all our citizens.

Jeffrey Richard asked me to speak a few minutes about our community's Katrina experience from the perspective of our schools. His request has led to some serious thinking in preparing my remarks.

Before I came to Austin in 1999, I was the United States Commissioner of Education Statistics. I can talk to you for days about measuring success. As an Associate Commissioner of Education in Connecticut, I created a number of tests. I'll probably be in Purgatory a long time for creating all those academic tests. But how do you test values? How do you test a community's resolve? How do you find out if your community really has strong civic values and acts upon them?

With Hurricane Katrina, our nation and our Austin community were put to the test. I am so proud that Austin came through with flying colors. As Superintendent of AISD schools, I am, of course, very proud of the academic progress our students are making. In case you haven't heard, our students were first or second in the nation among urban districts on the recent National Assessment of Education Progress tests. We were paired with Charlotte-Mecklenburg at the top of all urban districts. We beat the national average. Our Hispanic students were the best in the nation in Math and our African American students were second only to Charlotte-Mecklenburg in Math. I am so proud of this accomplishment by our students and teachers. And we are continuing to work to get better.

But I am even more proud of our performance as a community on a bigger test. Our Austin community and our school district—our teachers, students, principals, staff and parents—all showed what we're really made of when our neighbors from Louisiana were in greatest need. The tragedy of Katrina and our response to it have taught us all many lessons. It has made us a better community. It has made us a better, and more caring, school district. It reinforced the fact that we are teaching the whole child. We're not just teaching reading or math. We're teaching children. Our concerns don't end at the borders of the Austin Independent School District. They extend to the entire world because, as Katrina reminded us, we are deeply connected to everyone else on this planet.

As it happened, right before Katrina hit, our school district launched a two-year project to incorporate character education into our work in order to help teach the whole child. We began talking to our students about such values as Respect, Courage and Caring. As we talked with them about these values, they were seeing real life lessons unfold with the arrival of our neighbors from Louisiana. Over a two-year period, AISD is engaging our students and the entire AISD family—teachers, staff, parents, partners, mentors—in a

focus on a core set of shared values. We, the adults in our community and the role models for our children in our schools must commit ourselves to exemplary core character education traits including Perseverance and Responsibility, Integrity and Fairness, Honesty, Self-Discipline and Trustworthiness. In times of crisis, you test all these values. And we should be very proud that our community rose to the Austin rose to the challenge for our Katrina challenges.

I will never forget the first hours and days of the Katrina crisis. Those were some of Austin's finest hours. I will never forget seeing Mayor Wynn welcoming the buses of survivors or City Manager Toby Futrell's quick decision to open the Convention Center when we began to realize the magnitude of the exodus from New Orleans. Some other cities were reluctant recipients of the survivors. Austin received them with open arms. In those early hours, I found myself talking to a woman who had just gotten off the phone. She had one child with her. She told me, "It's a wonderful day. I located my other child." It puts everything in perspective, doesn't it?

And I am so proud of the quick and caring response of our school district. Thirty-five AISD counselors and community liaisons set up tables in the convention center while our technology staff set up on-site computers so we could begin to register the children into our schools. We wanted them to feel some kind of normalcy and safe harbor that school could provide. And, of course, our counselors were doing much more counseling with students and families than just setting up schedules. Our Student Support staff, our guidance counselors, our homeless office (Project HELP), and our parent support specialists put in countless hours above and beyond their normal duty time. Our teachers and principals worked closely with these displaced students and met with their families as they tried to reconstruct the students' past school experience and deal with the traumatic repercussions of Katrina in the students' lives. Our many partners, including Communities in Schools and the Urban League, provided crucial support in these efforts.

I am especially proud of our work to welcome students and their families into our schools. We sent buses to the Convention Center so that students and their families could visit the schools they would be attending. We anticipated the anxiety that the children and their families must have been feeling in this new strange city, with little word of events at home, and certainly worried about separation without transportation. So we brought the students and their families to our schools on special buses, accompanied by an AISD parent specialist to support their transition; we welcomed them, gave them a tour and lunch and answered questions they had. We saw this as an opportunity to bring some stability to their lives. We wanted them to know that these schools were now their schools, that they were important, and that we were here to serve them. As these families moved out of the Convention Center into our community, we tried to make the transitions from one school to another easy on the students and their families.

As shown in the handout provided at your seat (page 2), at the height of the crisis, we worked with about 1200 students and their families. Not all the students attended AISD schools. Many enrolled in surrounding districts and with area Catholic schools. 891 Katrina students did register with AISD. Today, we still have 417 Katrina students in our

schools on 82 campuses, which amounts to about three-quarters of our schools. 188 students are in our elementary schools, 108 are in our middle schools, 118 are in our high schools, and three are on our alternative campuses. Of course, by now they are no longer Katrina students. They are AISD students and we are proud to have them and their families with us.

But you can't just start a new year and believe that the after-shocks of the past year will go away. Many of these students still experience a number of problems. We are fortunate in a number of our schools to have the Communities in School (CIS) staff helping us support these students and their families as they face these challenges. Some of the problems these children face are the results of economic challenges brought on by the loss of family income caused by Katrina. As a result of Katrina and the upheaval it caused, our teachers and counselors are seeing a variety of mental health issues—Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, anxiety, depression, grief—behavioral problems and academic problems. AISD staff and our partners have been providing individual and group counseling, student assessments, home visits, parent support, crisis intervention, connections to community resources, and basic assistance. However, as federal and other support ends, many of these families will continue to require assistance and we need to be sure as a community we can continue this supplementary support to these children and their families.

We believe these students and their families are making significant strides, particularly as they are able to find new stability in their lives. We have also been able to set up stronger support systems in our schools and ongoing connections with community service providers. While academic performance by the evacuee students was about two-thirds as high as that of the average AISD student, 81 percent of our current evacuee students have shown improvement in at least one area—academics, attendance or behavior. While many of the highest-level student needs have been addressed, our campus Impact Teams continue to address current needs of the individual students and their families.

We've participated in a needs assessment of all our evacuee students last spring. We've identified 200 students with the need for ongoing counseling services. As federal funding for the extra positions created by Communities in Schools goes away, our school and district counseling staff will have to take on more of this work. Our schools are also working diligently to help prepare these students for success with the higher Texas school standards so they are able to graduate prepared for college and careers. The good news is that AISD was reimbursed by FEMA for \$3.5 million in expenses supporting Katrina evacuee students last year. The less-than-good news is that the need for extra services remains for many of these students and their families without a resource base to meet those expanded needs. We are very fortunate to have caring partners, such as the Urban League, to help these families address the myriad challenges that remain, including finding gainful employment, decent housing and access to ongoing social and health services.

And how does all this tie into our overall work in the Austin School District? As we prepare our students for college and successful careers in the 21st Century, we recognize

that one size does not fit all. Just as we need to provide extra services and support for our students from Louisiana, we realize that we need to provide a number of options and opportunities for all of our high school students so they can all find a path to academic and career success. That's why we are redesigning all AISD high schools to better serve student needs. If you haven't heard already, you'll be hearing over the next few months how we are restructuring our high schools into smaller learning communities. Every student will be in direct contact with a teacher or counselor throughout his or her high school career. Students need to be engaged in their schools through these Relationships. Students will be able to choose a community of learners within their high schools that most aligns with their interests and college and career plans. That's what we call "Relevance." Every student will be preparing for college with capstone courses in their senior year that lead directly to a college curriculum. We call that "Rigor." And from these new high school configurations, we expect Results. We expect all our students to graduate well-prepared for college and career. We have high expectations for all our students.

In addition to these changes in our comprehensive high schools, we are also planning on adding new secondary opportunities for our students and their families to consider. One of these opens next year. In August 2007, we will open the Ann Richards School for Young Women Leaders. It will serve only girls in Grades 6 through 12. Next year we open with Grades 6 and 7, serving 115 girls in each grade level. We will add a grade level each year until we see our first graduates in 2013. The school's principal, Jeanne Goka, is holding meetings for 5th and 6th grade girls in every AISD elementary school and middle school, starting today through January. The deadline for application is February 7. Tell anyone you think might be interested that applications can be found on the AISD website and in the office of AISD elementary school and middle school counselors. This school will give priority to girls coming from economically disadvantaged families and schools. So, spread the word. Now's the time to apply.

You might ask: What about a school for Young Men Leaders? We are working on that as we speak. Well, we are looking for outside funding support for the research on best practices in order to put together a school plan.

And finally, I thank you for supporting the Austin School District as we move to the leading edge among urban school districts in America. We are showing continuously improvement in student achievement. We are providing exciting new academic opportunities to better fit the needs of our students. We are a dynamic, constantly evolving school district—adding new students from Louisiana and new students from Mexico to our happily diverse mix of some 82,000 students. We are so fortunate to have the support and partnership of the Austin community. With a partner like the Urban League and leadership of our great President Jeffrey Richard, we will continue to build a great platform for the future success of all Austin students.