

**HousingWorks 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Summit**  
**November 10, 2007**

Thank you for asking me to join you this morning to discuss this very important—and sometimes overlooked—connection between housing and academic achievement.

In his 1937 inaugural address, President Franklin Roosevelt said that one-third of our nation was “ill-housed, ill-clad, and ill-nourished.” By the late 1960s, with the New Deal and Great Society programs in place, that number was reduced to about one-seventh of our nation. Recent estimates say we are, sadly, living in an economy in which that number has risen to nearly one-fifth of our households with children for the nation. In Texas, according to the U.S. Census—which uses a very low ceiling to determine poverty—nearly one out of four children lives in poverty and the numbers are even higher for our Hispanic and African American households with children.

What does this have to do with academic achievement? A great deal. Let’s face it—we do not live in a society in which people can follow the Horatio Alger story to become successful. If you ever could, you can no longer expect to leave high school without a diploma, work hard, begin in a menial job, and rise to a high-paying managerial position.

That does not happen without the credentials and skills to master the complex demands of today's workplace.

That means that education, with few exceptions, is the only ticket out of poverty to a successful, stable adult life. Public education is the cornerstone of our democracy because it provides the great majority of Americans with the capacity for full participation in the economic, social and political life of our country.

We all know that the past two decades have shined an increasingly intense light on public education. Many things about that intense scrutiny have been very good for us. Public schools need to be held accountable for enabling the academic achievement of all students. We need high standards to govern every classroom. We cannot afford morally or economically to leave any child behind.

But we must recognize—and many of our national policy makers find this difficult to admit—that many more challenges come into play when we are educating the children of poverty. Poverty destabilizes the lives of many families, having a direct impact on their children. That plays itself out in terms of housing and health care, in terms of resources to support learning, in terms of family educational background and family financial demands on older children, and sometimes in terms of basic childcare.

The Austin School District can sometimes be described as a tale of two cities. We have a higher percentage of middle-class students in our public schools than any other urban district in Texas and higher than almost all urban districts in America. But we have a number of students who come from families facing large economic challenges. More than 60 percent of AISD's 82,000 students (some 50,000 children) come from economically disadvantaged families. That's a 20 percent increase since 1999, when I first assumed the Austin Superintendency.

How does that statistic play itself out in terms of its impact on education? We have many students, for example, whose single parent works multiple jobs to put food on the table and, so, is not there to provide the basic nurturing that helps children thrive and nor for the basic problem solving that most of us turned to our parents for when we were kids. While almost every middle-class student in the school district has access to a computer at home, many of our lower-income students have no computer or Internet access once they leave school. They also have few opportunities to enhance their learning through travel or through access to cultural events. This is not a level playing field. We find that we have a number of high school students who leave school early each day to work in fast-food restaurants or on loading docks to support their families because housing,

food and other expenses have overtaken their family budgets. And we have many students whose parents themselves never finished high school and who cannot provide the academic support and academic role modeling at home that most middle-class students take for granted. In order for many of these families to break the cycle of poverty affecting them, as a society we need to support these families with extra resources to address the challenges they face.

We are proud that AISD supports the concept of equity and excellence for all children. This means we put extra resources in our schools with the greatest need. That means Blackshear Elementary School and Johnston High School receive nearly twice the funding per student that our more affluent schools, such as Casis and Austin High, receive.

As the chief mediating public institution in this country, all the major social issues end up at the schoolhouse door. In many instances, this has been a blessing. When this country finally decided to enforce integration, the public school became the most effective weapon for integration—bringing children together with a common purpose at very early ages. The effectiveness of schools in changing the attitudes of our entire society was probably a main reason that segregationists were so adamantly opposed to integrating schools. Similarly, when we began to address

childhood hunger as a nation in the 1960s, the federal school lunch and breakfast programs proved to be perfect venues to make sure the nation's children received at least two wholesome meals per day. And through working with the Austin Food Bank and Kid's Café, I might add, many of our AISD students get a third meal before going home in the afternoon. We even address some of the health-care issues facing children of poverty through the school nurse program and dental program we have established with Seton and St. David's to deliver quality health services to our children.

While the public school has been a vehicle for addressing these challenges facing many of our families, our chief mission is educating children. AISD does not have the resources and capacity to solve many of the problems these children bring with them to our doors. We find ourselves constantly working, however, to mitigate their negative impact on the academic achievement of our students.

The state and federal accountability systems do not take into account these social and economic factors when looking at student achievement in our schools. Casis and Barbara Jordan elementary schools are judged by the same measures. We don't believe in lowering the bar for the students of Jordan. But we do think it's important to recognize that the journey to high performance requires

many more resources and much more work at Jordan than it does at Casis. And it requires other institutions beyond the schools to join with us to be accountable for addressing those factors of poverty that affect student achievement.

In fact, some new research on student achievement points out that non-school factors (such as family income) contribute to 57 percent of a student's performance in comparison to 43 percent for school-related factors. That's why we are very pleased that you are looking at the relationship of housing to student success. There is no question that housing has a major impact on student learning. Stability is so important in the lives of our students. Being secure in the thought that you know where you're going home to after school, that it is safe and that you will not be bounced around from one place to another—all these considerations are crucial to a child's being able to concentrate on school work. With the rising cost of housing in Austin and the decrease in affordable units, we are seeing the following four conditions disrupting students' lives and learning in AISD:

Mobility;

Uncertain enrollment projections;

School overcrowding; and

Housing safety.

High mobility is a fact of life in most urban school districts.

One out of every four students in AISD attends more than one of our schools in any given year. We are trying to address this by using the same educational standards and district-wide Instructional Planning Guides for every classroom and across all grade levels in AISD. No longer will a student get the unit on planets in October in one school and get that same unit again in February in another school, while missing out on the unit on water in both schools. Last year I learned of a student who took our beginning-of-the-year benchmark test at one school, our middle-of-the-year benchmark test in another school, and our spring TAKS test at a third school. At least we knew he wasn't running away from testing. All our fifth grade classrooms, for example, are now teaching to the same high education standards in the same nine-week period. We are trying, in this way, to mitigate part of the impact of mobility on our students' learning and progress.

We often share students with schools in Manor and Del Valle. That negates the approach we've taken with our planning guides when they come to our schools from other districts. Thus, making it possible for families and children to remain in place without moving often is so important to academic success.

A second condition that contributes to disrupting a student's life and learning is the uncertainty of our enrollment

projections in the face of rapidly shifting school populations. We plan for each new school year based on the previous year's enrollment. With the overcrowding around the Riverside area, for example, we arranged to send students along Lakeshore across the river to Sanchez and Metz elementary schools. When several of those apartment complexes off Riverside were closed down this summer to make way for condos, we found we had too many teachers and services at Sanchez and Metz and not enough at Linder, where many of those students ended up. We have now shifted those resources, but it makes planning and staff development difficult, and, of course, the students have to begin the year in an unfamiliar school without most of the friends they'd made in their former schools. We also don't know where many of these children have gone. They have probably moved east along Riverside to Del Valle or perhaps to Manor's schools.

A third factor is school overcrowding. As housing costs rise, we are also seeing a number of our students coming from families that double up or triple up in apartments or rental houses. This clearly causes tension and anxiety at home, probably does not provide the best environment for homework, and inevitably leads to short-term residence for many families. It also leads to school overcrowding, as facility planning is based upon living units in the school's attendance zone.

The fourth and final factor is housing safety. In looking at affordable housing, I would also like you to consider the quality of the housing and its management. There are subsidized apartment complexes in our school district that are managed well and provide children with places to study and to play. I know some of the people at this conference provide after-school and Saturday tutoring programs at some of these complexes. At the same time, there are apartment complexes in our district in which our students are afraid to go outside. Instead of tutoring, they have gang recruitment. So when we talk about affordable housing, we need to make sure that the housing meets the criteria that we all seek—that it be a safe, stable environment in which our children can thrive.

Again, thank you for your work in this crucial area. The lack of good affordable housing destabilizes the lives of many children in AISD, affecting their academic achievement and sometimes even destabilizing the classrooms they enter, if they are far behind in their academic work. We look forward to working closely with you to improve the lives of the children of Austin through safe, affordable housing that helps lead to academic success for our children, our community's most precious resource.

I also thank you for believing in and supporting public

schools, one of our nation's most important institutions to preserve our democratic values and to ensure civility in our society.

Thank you.

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