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AISD getting schooled by business

Austin Business Journal – by Marcia Silverberg and Rick Burciaga

In the private sector, there is a widely accepted belief that innovation requires an investment of time and resources, and carries with it an expectation that failure will sometimes precede success. In the public sector, and more specifically public education, innovation is often expected to occur in the absence of these conditions. This is not surprising, given that conversations about our children's education require an urgency and attention that is different than conversations about new products or technologies.

For the past two years, a unique partnership has been forged between the Austin Independent School District and the Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce. This partnership couples best practices from the private sector with application possibilities within the public sector to develop and pilot an innovative set of incentive programs aimed at raising student achievement by recruiting, retaining and rewarding exemplary teachers and principals. More specifically, this partnership has centered around the district's Strategic Compensation Initiative, called AISD REACH.

One of the fundamental principles of the business community that is being used in AISD REACH is that an expectation for new levels of performance must be matched by commensurate new investments in the capacity of staff to achieve increased student performance. Of course, teachers and principals are not waiting for additional forms of compensation to be more successful; if they knew how to be more successful, they would be now. With this in mind, AISD REACH provides both supports and rewards to achieve success in the classroom.

Another standard element of business practices that has been largely absent from public education is the notion that an individual's performance should be linked to his or her compensation. What we have found in Austin is that teachers are not opposed to linking their work to results; what they oppose is doing so with simplistic measures that do not fully measure the

added value that teachers bring to students and the growth that students make as a result of their work. To this end, AISD REACH focuses on measuring student growth using multiple measures that teachers help select and develop, creating further ownership of this process and its results.

Finally, in the business community, successful companies are those that see emerging trends and develop proactive solutions to remain competitive in a dynamic marketplace. Central Texas has created one of the most competitive job markets in the country, due to the growth of its economy and population. The result is that AISD today competes for the best teachers and principals with many surrounding districts. At the same time, the era of the long-term, single-career teacher is over. Taken together, this means that school districts must adjust their strategies and consider ways of recruiting the best talent as early as possible and provide these individuals with high-quality support necessary to be successful from day one. AISD REACH is addressing this challenge in several ways.

While the success of AISD REACH can only be assessed once a multiyear evaluation is complete, this program has broken new ground in challenging some outdated practices and beliefs in education. We ask that you join us in supporting this initiative, which we believe has extraordinary potential to improve student achievement for all of the children of this community.

Marcia Silverberg and Rick Burciaga are local business managers who lead the Austin chamber's Strategic Compensation Task Force.

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