

## **WHAT I DID THIS SUMMER**

**By Dr. Meria Joel Carstarphen,**

**Superintendent, Austin Independent School District**

Austin's record-breaking 100-degree days this summer were just about as hot as my first 100 days as the new Austin School Superintendent. Good news: I grew up in the South, and I don't mind the heat.

The best part of this hot summer and fall is that I met the people, and felt their passion surrounding public education in Austin. What I've learned is: if you love working with kids, and you really care about public education, this is a great community to serve as school superintendent.

Austinites want excellence, rigor, and joy in every classroom, so I've found the right place. I've found great satisfaction in leading the Austin School District in its recommitment to excellence in all we do, to rigorous thinking and working, and to fostering the joy of learning.

When I became Superintendent, on July 1, I was faced with an immediate crisis — the impending closure of Pearce Middle School — along with the need to adopt the District 2009-2010 budget, reorganize central office, initiate the new strategic planning process, and build my core administrative team. All this occurred with the ongoing work of opening schools and managing an 84,000-student school district with more than 12,000 employees. Difficult, maybe. Challenging, yes. Impossible, no.

As a result of a lot of summer time 'sweat equity,' those issues have been addressed — thanks to dedicated staff -- and work is now well underway to restart the future of AISD.

During this time, I have visited almost one-third of our schools, and dozens of classrooms, on both struggling and successful campuses. The commitment and deep skill sets of campus leaders, teachers, and support staff are impressive. An All-Staff Convocation gave me the opportunity to meet directly with almost every AISD employee. Participation in high school advisory periods, attending Friday night football games, band concerts, and fine arts recruitment showcases, press conferences with student journalists, and other school-based activities, have all helped me connect more closely with Austin students and parents. In these settings, it's very apparent that our students' desire to succeed — in the classrooms, in athletics, in the arts — is among the greatest assets of our District.

My school visits have inspired me to become a classroom mentor — and I encourage other Austinites to do likewise — and I have quickly reached out to leaders in the business world, the faith community, and elected officials, as well as parents, students, and employee organizations, who have all been strong supporters of our District in the past. Today, we need their support more than ever before.

AISD has wonderful possibilities, but also significant challenges. This year, 99 AISD campuses, 87 percent, met or exceeded the state accountability standards. This includes 54 campuses – more than ever before – that earned *Exemplary* or *Recognized* ratings. Also, a record number of 102 campuses, but not the District as a whole, earned Adequate Yearly Progress on the federal accountability standards.

While there are academically strong campuses throughout the District, seven of the nine schools that are rated *Academically Unacceptable* are in East Austin, where many of our students face the greatest educational challenges. We must propel East Austin schools, and other struggling schools, to the same high performance level as campuses elsewhere in our community. On Monday, October 12, I will outline to the Board of Trustees the building blocks that I believe the District needs to have in place, if we are serious about bringing academic excellence to all our schools.

The challenge to reopen Pearce in just 45 days was my first-hand introduction to AISD's disparate history. For some parents, and in some parts of town, the history and perception of the

District are favorable. For others, the history of the District engenders resentment arising from trusts violated and promises broken.

One goal that I've begun to address (known in my world as a B-HAG, or Big Hairy Audacious Goal) is to repair the relationships with those who feel their trust in the District has been misplaced, while at the same time, continuing to nurture the trust and commitment of those who feel the District has done right by them. This must be done at a time in which difficult decisions lie ahead concerning equity of resources and making choices that are in the best interest of all Austin students.

The Board of Trustees is also working to establish its aspirations for the District, including having all students in AISD perform at or above grade level within three years, eliminating the achievement gap, and ensuring all students graduate college-ready. To improve its management efficiency, the Board of Trustees has also changed the structure and schedule of its meetings. While the number and structure of meetings have changed, the community can expect the Superintendent and Board to remain squarely focused on what counts most — student performance and wise use of tax dollars.

We have begun serious discussions about the upcoming budget decisions for next school year and will be providing a number of opportunities for the Austin community to join these conversations. As I mentioned earlier, the All-Staff Convocation was an excellent opportunity for District employees—teachers and bus drivers, principals and custodians—to provide me with direct feedback on what is most important to them, and for them to hear first-hand about my goals and expectations. I was encouraged, when AISD staff indicated they would support some of the difficult pending choices before us, given an anticipated \$15 million budget gap, going into the 2010-2011 school year. For example, a majority of staff said they would be willing to cover some of their health insurance benefit costs, as well as support consolidation of under-enrolled schools, in order to find efficiencies that will reduce the budget deficit, minimize layoffs, and keep cuts from the classroom. We are looking at ways to push more of our limited resources into classrooms across the District, even if that means cutting in other places.

I am moving quickly to develop the District's new Strategic Plan. For me, AISD must ensure excellence for all students, and certainly at schools where that hasn't been the case in the

past. The Strategic Plan is advancing in tandem with the budget process. As great as our education needs are in this District, our resources are finite. We must make strategic choices about spending, hiring, providing benefits, setting classroom size, and maintaining facilities.

As part of the process for finalizing, adopting and implementing the Strategic Plan, I will deliver the *State of the District Address* on November 17, from which Austinites can receive a better sense of our successes and challenges, and what we are doing to restart the future of AISD. The address will be at 7 p.m. at LBJ High School. It will also be broadcast on our website, [www.austinisd.org](http://www.austinisd.org).

After 100 days in Austin, I know that the parents of students in struggling schools have the same high expectations, hopes, and dreams for their children as the parents of students in our *Exemplary* schools. We honor those aspirations, and pledge nothing short of excellence for every student, in every classroom, in every school in AISD.

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*Dr. Meria Carstarphen began her job as Austin School Superintendent on July 1. Her 100<sup>th</sup> day on the job was Thursday, October 8.*

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