

## Transcript of 2010 State of the Schools Speech by Dr. Terry Grier—February 19, 2010

Good afternoon, and thank all of you for coming here. I hope you are as excited about being here as I am. I know you enjoyed these young people as much as I did. And thank you for that wonderful introduction. I'm always going to remember that young kindergarten student and their quest for teacher appreciation and wanting a better teacher and another good teacher next year. And our goal of course is for the next year, and the next year and the next year...right on through their entire HISD experience. I know that's what all of us want. I know that's what we need. I know that's what we're going to work together to make sure it occurs.

James, thanks to you and the Foundation. It's good to have the kind of support that you bring to our school system.

I wanted to begin today by letting you know how much my wife Nancy and I really, really love Houston. Nancy is with us here today. She hasn't been introduced, so I want her to stand and let you guys get to see her. (applause)

As my grandfather used to say, you really outdid yourself. So I did. I'm very, very lucky.

You know, back when I was first approached about this position in HISD, I asked myself, Why Houston? We had been in San Diego about 18 months, loved living there. The district was making some significant progress academically and in spite of our cutting \$150 million out of our budget and facing another \$50-million shortfall, we really thought we were moving in the right direction. But when I reflect back on Why Houston, ultimately the decision for me was based on a document that you have at your table. It's HISD's *Declaration of Beliefs and Visions*. All of you have it with you. It's a declaration that the Houston Board of Education many years ago developed back in the days when Rod Paige was superintendent, and since that time it has been adjusted and reaffirmed by the Board of Education on a number of occasions. Frankly, I was struck by its thoughtfulness and its focus on children.

My decision to come to Houston for my very first interview with the board was really driven by curiosity, a curiosity of whether or not the Board of Education that was a big part of constructing this document actually lived by this document and operated under its contents. And I've got to tell you all. They did not disappoint me, and immediately I felt a connectedness to this group of people who continue to this day to serve as champion visionaries for the children of Houston. And I would like to say again a special thank you to the board and hope that you will join me in letting them know how much you appreciate their dedication, hard work, and courage. (applause)

I hadn't been in Houston very long before I learned that besides its great people, its wonderful food...this is really a sports town. I've been an Astros fan for a long, long time. And living downtown we can see the top of the Toyota Center from where we live, we can look the other way and see Minute Maid Park, and of course you all know where Reliant Stadium is. We really love athletics, and we love the teamwork that comes with athletics. And I like to use that analogy when I talk about all of us who are committed to working for the children of Houston, as you can see, as "Team HISD." Because like the great sports teams, you can have a lot of individual greatness around you, but if everyone is not focused on a singular purpose, if you are not focused and dedicated to working together, you can have a lot of great individual players but you're never going to win that championship. Let me tell you, what we are about here at HISD is making sure that we win that championship for every boy and girl in the Houston Independent School District. Team HISD is everyone who's willing to work together to help our students win.

Several weeks ago, Nancy and I attended the musical production *Wonderland* in downtown Houston. It's based on the Lewis Carroll children's book *Alice in Wonderland*. In the book, Alice has an interesting discussion with the cat. Alice said to the cat, "Would you please tell me which way I ought to go from here?" The cat said, "That depends a great deal on where you want to get to." Alice said, "I don't much care," and the cat said, "Then it doesn't matter which way you go." Alice said, "As long as I get somewhere." "Oh," the cat responded, "you should surely do that if you just walk long enough." There are several important lessons we can all learn from a children's book, just like children learn lessons. First of

all, you have to know where you are before you can determine where you want to get to. I'd like to take a few moments to briefly share with you where we are with HISD. This is a phenomenally good urban school district. In fact, it may be one of the best in the entire country. (applause)

This past year under the leadership of former superintendent Abe Saavedra, the schools in HISD reported a record number of Exemplary and Recognized schools, TAKS scores increased, 89 percent of the schools made adequate yearly progress, we had more students taking dual-credit and Advanced Placement courses through our community colleges and local universities that in any other time in the history of our district. One of the nation's top Title I schools, Energized for Excellence, is one of our schools. Lamar High School, one of two high schools in HISD that offer International Baccalaureate courses, awarded 116 IB diplomas, the most diplomas of any public high school in America. Seven of our high schools made *Newsweek's* list of the nation's best: Carnegie, Bellaire, Westside, DeBakey, the High School for Performing and Visual Arts, Lamar, and Austin.

In operations, our 2009–2010 budget included pay raises, more school funding, and no tax increases. Last year, we saw the sale of \$405 million in bonds at the lowest cost since the 1960s. We saw a reaffirmation of our high bond rating and exemplary financial ratings by the state. We are also very lucky here at HISD, because I believe we have America's finest chief financial officer in Melinda Garrett. (applause)

There are more details about these achievements and many others in the State of the Schools Annual Report at your table. While we should reflect on our success and give praise for these accomplishments, that's not the only story of the Houston Independent School District. We are also a school district that for years has had problems with schools that aren't performing even at minimal levels. Some of our employees really aren't aligned with our core beliefs and values about education. More than 70,000 students are not reading on grade level. Our graduation rate is too low, and our dropout rate is too high. Frankly, our expectations are not what they should be, particularly our expectations for our brightest and most gifted students. You see, it's just not good enough to go to one of our high schools and take regular courses, record grades of As, and then go on to colleges and universities and struggle. We have to push every student in our school district to reach their maximum potential. (applause)

We know our curriculum is not rigorous or engaging enough, and we have not provided every student with a quality teacher in their classrooms. So, returning to Alice's conversation with the cat, do we know which way we ought to go from here? The answer is YES. We do know. We are currently engaged in a process of developing a strategic direction based on the Board of Education's six goals and objectives. However, a bigger question might be, is it possible to get there, or would we have to be in Wonderland for that to occur?

You see it's a hard job. And we have a long road ahead of us. But there is no question in my mind it is possible. But where we want to be at HISD is to become the nation's premier school district, not the nation's best urban school district or the largest school district, the best school district in America. And that is where we are going. (applause)

But to get there we have to have the courage we see from the Board of Education every time they meet. And it also takes the leadership necessary to take a different path. A path that will require us as a team to rethink what we've been doing, to put the interests of children first in every decision we make, and to have the courage to transform education in HISD. Rather than incremental results from piecemeal reform measures, we must undertake a transformation of our educational culture—literally a sea change in the way we operate, and a shift to a culture of openness and accountability for positive student results at all levels.

Our first transformation strategy will be to implement a new structure that uses three chief school officers, one for elementary, one for middle, and one for high schools, to lead a comprehensive districtwide accountability and reorganization plan for supporting our school improvement efforts in HISD—a plan that favors coaching and mentoring over the micromanagement of principals. This realignment will reduce

central-office positions and generate savings that can be redirected towards improvement strategies or fill potential budget shortfalls.

This organization also addresses another long-standing issue. For too long, we've engaged in practices or used materials without a great deal of thought about their effectiveness. Therefore, I am pleased to announce that we are creating a new Office of Innovation and Research. We plan to conduct a national search to find a leading expert to lead our efforts to determine whether our programs are helping close the achievement gap and improving student academic performance. We hope to find local, state, or national research partners within and outside the field of education to aid us in our efforts.

Based on the analyses, tough decisions will be made to eliminate programs that are not serving our students well and are draining our scarce resources. In addition, we have implemented a new interview and selection process for administrators and teachers. All candidates will be required to participate in "situational" interviews that are similar to those used in the business world and designed to identify the values and beliefs of our candidates to make sure that they are congruent with the values and beliefs of Team HISD. Candidates will not be selected based on who they know, their political affiliations, or whether or not they were just there at the right time. (applause)

All our policies and practices should be driven by the realization that our teachers and school leaders are the solution, pure and simple. If we provide our students, and I mean all of our students, with effective teachers and leaders, then there's almost nothing anyone can do to prevent them from succeeding. On the other hand, if we don't provide them with effective educators, there's almost nothing we can do to keep them from failing. And just as we cannot tolerate ineffective programs, we surely must not tolerate ineffective teaching or poor school leadership.

The Board of Education took a bold first step last week toward putting a great teacher in every classroom when it approved a plan to improve the way we evaluate teachers. This vote paves the way for evaluations that give teachers an honest assessment of how much they're helping their students learn—the kind of feedback that will actually help them improve. While this vote was an important step, it was just the first one. Putting an effective teacher in every classroom requires a comprehensive strategy, not just piecemeal reforms. This is the key to making HISD the best district in the country. And it will require bold policies that a few districts have had the courage to implement. We need to make sure that the new teachers we hire are prepared to be successful in the classroom—and this means developing a comprehensive approach to recruitment, drawing only from the most-effective teacher-preparation programs across the region, the state, and the nation.

Even this week our Research and Accountability Department was taking a look at value-added test scores from across HISD over the last number of years. I want to know, I want to know... the teachers with the highest value-added scores, where did they graduate from college? And is there a correlation between how well they're doing and the teacher-preparation institute that they graduated from? Conversely, I want to know our struggling teachers. Where did they go to school and earn their certification? Is there a relationship? Is there a trend? We don't know, but we are going to find out, and we're going to pay careful attention.

I recently had a conversation with University of Houston Chancellor Renu Khator about the graduates we hire that become HISD teachers. I must tell you I was very impressed with how readily she was willing to work with us to ensure that University of Houston students graduate from the College of Education prepared to meet the needs of HISD students. That kind of can-do attitude is what makes Houston such a special place and makes me confident that the transformation we need to take place can happen and will occur.

And it's not enough to just recruit the best teachers. We also need to retain our best teachers—not necessarily those with the most experience, but the best. This last week, when I met with our principals, we talked about using value-added assessment and we talked about what it would look like if you took all the teachers in a school and you put the top teachers in a bucket, and the next 20 percent, and the next 20 percent, all the way down to our struggling teachers. They may be in a smaller bucket that has only 5

percent or 3 percent of our teachers. And I asked the question: Where do you think we really ought to focus our intention? And a few hands went up, and they said the lowest-performing. And my response was immediately no, we need to make sure that the best and brightest don't leave us and go to other school districts, other states, into other professions, or into private or charter schools around us because we are not providing the type of support and we're not showing the type of appreciation that our best and brightest teachers deserve. We must start there. (applause)

We also have got to change how we reward our teachers and recognize our teachers. We've got to be creative by giving them leadership positions from which they can guide their colleagues. We also need to ensure that we put our best teachers in front of the students who need those most—that we effectively address the diverse educational needs of our diverse community. And even though the vast majority of teachers in HISD are doing a great job, we need to be honest about the relatively small number of teachers who are not meeting expectations. They can't hide behind protection. They're front and center. We know who needs help. I can go into every high school in Houston; I can ask every high-school student, I can ask the teachers who teach in that high school. Are there teachers who are struggling and should not be here? And every person in that school who I talk to can identify that small group of teachers. It's our job to help those folks. We need to make sure they have the training, they have the attention, and they have some time to improve and get better. But frankly, if they cannot or will not meet the needs of our children, they cannot remain members of Team HISD. (applause)

I also want to say to you, as Larry Marshal routinely reminds me and other members of the Board of Education, his Board of Education, unacceptable is unacceptable. We no longer are going to ignore our failing schools. School improvement officers and chief school officers will focus their attention on schools not meeting standards. We are currently in the process of auditing our Special Education, Magnet school, and literacy programs. We are creating new opportunities for students who are at risk. These programs include credit recovery, graduation coaches, new career technology courses that are designed for 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills, and an optional extended-year program/calendar for schools who are failing.

We also need to make sure we are serving our higher-achieving students by ensuring we have rigor in our curriculum and are providing the skills and opportunities so that our students can be successful when they compete internationally. And I am talking about students like Bellaire senior Li Boynton, who has already been accepted to Yale, won top honors at the Intel International Science Fair, and received over \$50,000 in college scholarships. Boynton's accomplishments in science have also earned her semifinalist status in the prestigious Intel Science Talent Search. Her accomplishments should be what we expect from all our students no matter which school they attend in the Houston Independent School District. (applause)

HISD students should be able to successfully compete with the best and the brightest. Not only here in Houston but in our state, in our nation, and across the world. And to our friends who are with us this afternoon from our charter schools, let us say to you, thank you. We're not afraid of your competition; we look forward to our continued partnership. Please rest assured, we will not sit idly by and watch our parents leave failing schools to go to charters in their neighborhood that are getting the kinds of results that our children deserve and that we are not producing. (applause)

And I don't want to seem too in-your-face to charters, because I will tell you what, once you get to know Chris Barbic, and you spend time around Mike [Feinberg] and other fine charter leaders, they will applaud the statement that I just made as soundly and more loudly than you did because they'll grin and look right back and me and say, When that day comes, we will have won. We will have won, and so will you, and so will the children of Houston. So get busy, they'll say. And I promise you we're going to get busy. (applause)

This year, we are implementing a policy that will require all students who take Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate courses to also take the AP or IB exams—at no cost to those students. (applause)

We have a vision that all students who graduate from HISD should take at least one rigorous course such as AP or IB. We are working with local businesses to establish a Cool to Be Smart program that will provide incentives such as a new car, college scholarships, and laptop computers for students who take five or more AP or IB courses and pass the accompanying exams. We want it to be cool to be smart at HISD. (applause)

And we know change is not easy. And I particularly want to talk about change with the teachers who are here today. Ultimately, this is about treating you with the respect all professionals deserve. The academic progress that you help your students make day in and day out deserves everyone's respect, and we intend to respect that progress by giving you the support you need to continue to do your best work. Students who come to our schools come with varying levels of accomplishment and ability. It's a talented teacher who can take a classroom of 25 or 35 students, regardless of that difference inside that classroom, and help each and every one of them grow at least one year academically. That's a special person, that's a special talent. That's a talent that deserves our appreciation and our recognition. I promise we are going to continue to appreciate you, recognize you, and provide you with the support you need to meet the needs of our students. (applause)

Now we need to learn from schools like Energized for Excellence so we can transform the district so that all of our schools and students are performing at this high level. We also know we need to do a better job of involving parents, the community, and all members of Team HISD in the changes we are making. After all, as team members you know better than anyone else what we need to do to improve our schools for our children. And we are going to work together as we shape our changes.

I just had the great opportunity to sit beside our new mayor, and we talked about how important it is for us to get to know each other not only on a professional level but also on a personal level. Because in the past we haven't always been as open or willing to work with the city and some of our other organizations as we're going to. I promise you we are going to be friends and strong working colleagues for the people and children of Houston, and Mayor Parker, thank you for being here today. (applause)

I recently met with City Council members, to discuss some of the beginning steps to transforming the district. We have several of our City Council members here, and I know from their comments at our meeting that they understand education is a quality-of-life issue for this entire city. They, too, must be involved in this process with us.

The principals who lead our schools are second in importance only to the quality of teacher that goes into every classroom. We have to have the type of leaders who respect our teachers, who value our parents, who have the ability to not only lead but to also manage the results—leaders who can use data, leaders who are not afraid to get outside the box to involve technology on a day-to-day basis in their schools. And I'm pleased to let you know we're creating a principal pipeline that will ensure that we always have a pool of quality candidates who have been through a rigorous selection process. For example, partnering with the Houston Endowment Foundation and Rice University, we now have school leaders graduating with an MBA from Rice University as an option for principals' certification. This is a unique program in the entire country. It's not going through the same university and going through the same program. This is going to Rice and earning a Rice MBA with a school administration certificate. Because, you see, what it takes to lead schools today is much different than what it took to lead school when I was a principal. You don't only need to understand education; you also have to be a business person. You have to understand change and marketing. Our neighborhood schools are having too many of their children leave their neighborhoods to go to other parts of the city when those neighborhood schools are doing a phenomenal job but the principals and our staff are not doing a good enough job marketing what they are doing to their community. And so the grass seems a little greener on the other side of the fence. If we marketed the good things we were doing, we would see our neighborhood schools take on a different demeanor and begin flourishing again. So we have to make sure our principals have that skill set.

My comments today I hope have one common thread, and that common thread, as Ann [Best] and Greg [Meyers] said, is that it really has to do with people. It has to do with human capital. We are a people

business. We are going to be no better and we're going to be no worse than the quality of the people we have serving our children. And that's what we together as a board and an administrative team are committed to doing—ensuring quality teachers in every classroom, quality leaders in every school. There can be no question about the sense of urgency in what we have to do. But we don't want to go so fast that we leave people behind. Because it is going to take us all working together. And we cannot be Team HISD if we are out ahead racing each other.

We have to make sure we communicate more clearly and more frequently than we ever have in the past. That is going to be the key. Change is painful. I told someone on my staff the other day that it's like going to the dentist and having a root canal. It's painful. We get comfortable being who we are. I saw one or two sitting around with their arms crossed like this. It is kind of interesting to just uncross them and do them the other way. It just kind of feels different. Now I didn't say it hurt or it was painful, but try it once and you can see what I mean. It just kind of doesn't feel like we want it to feel. Well, you take that and you just move it on up to my analogy of the dentist and trying a root canal with no novacaine. That kind of is what change can be like. Communications has to be to change what novacaine is to the root canal. We have to communicate with each other so that we can stay clear about the focus and the direction and the discomfort that come when you ask adults to do things that perhaps are a bit different than the way they've done it before.

So in closing, I have a question for all of us today. It's not the question that I looked at back in San Diego months and months ago. No, it's not Why Houston? The real question today for me, you, and everyone on Team HISD I think is a much better question. That question is Why not Houston? You see, many of us in this room and in this city still believe the day is before us when all our city's children are provided with an equal opportunity to the finest education this country has to offer.

No doubt, in this nation of ours, we still struggle each and every day to ensure that our public education system is meeting the needs of our diverse community. And, unfortunately, in city after city, we are still not getting it right in public education. However, there is absolutely no city better poised for success than Houston. So, yes, the questions should be WHY NOT HOUSTON? Why should Houston NOT be the first city in the nation to close its achievement gap? Why should Houston not be the first city in the nation that doesn't have a dropout rate? Why should we not be the first city in the nation that proves that the color of your skin or your parents' income level does not need to be a determinant of the quality of education you receive?

This unlikely city, built on a swamp by great adventurers, has always held special promise for those ready to take a risk and invest some sweat equity. People have come to Houston from around our country and around our world to make a name for themselves in a can-do city where opportunities are there for those ready to dream and ready to work. Houston is home to the finest medical center in the world, home to a cancer center that every day does the impossible by making medical history. Houston and its reaches are home to NASA, an organization that showed us that even the moon wasn't that far away. Houston is home to an oil and gas industry that has taken beatings and bounced back time and time again stronger than ever, with science and technology that are showing us every day how innovation and research can change the way the world works in tremendous ways.

So WHY NOT HOUSTON? Houston absolutely can and must be home to the finest public education system in the nation. The energy of this city and the energy of everyone associated with Team HISD do not make this just a possibility. I believe if we really come together as Team HISD, it will become a reality. Thank you for your time.