

DISTRICT ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES

November 19, 2009

Members Present: Teresa Arrambide, Johnnie Mae Carter, Tony D'Angelo, Roseline Emeghebo, Reba Goodman, Patrice Grovey, Mary Hacopian, Sydne James, Pamela Johnson, Carolyn Love, Dayna Michels, Mary Nesbitt, Ron Parnell, Ernesto Solorzano, Debbie Wright, Michelle Pola, Mark Smith, and Sylvia Valverde.

Mark Smith called the meeting to order at 3: 30 p.m. and reviewed the term limits for each of the DAC members. He explained that the committee members serve a calendar term (January to December) as opposed to a school-year term (August to July.)

Introductions of each committee member were made.

Mark then mentioned the following:

- Last month's DAC minutes were sent to each member and are also posted on the HISD portal.
- The school calendar is still in the process of being completed since we have a new superintendent and it needs to be aligned to his philosophy.
- GradeSpeed now has over 37,000 users and we will see a real surge at the end of the semester. The district hopes to have over 60,000 users by the end of the school year.
- The full Spanish-version of GradeSpeed is coming along. One part was created by the GradeSpeed company and the other part was created by HISD.
- New report cards won't change until after summer school.
- The district tries to resolve all issues with GradeSpeed as soon as they're received.
- Policy issues were going to be discussed at today's meeting but will be discussed after the district's reorganization takes place.
- The HISD grading policy will be discussed at the December DAC meeting.

Mary Nesbitt read Ericka Mellon's blog on HISD's reorganization that was posted today and that began the discussion of the agenda item on reorganization. Michelle Pola mentioned that Dr. Grier has sent e-mails to principals and regional office staff about the reorganization and she will make certain that this information is sent to all district employees.

Question: What is the role of the region office?

Mark defined the role of the regional offices as being a conduit of the Superintendent to supervise and manage what's going on in the schools. They serve as mini-districts. They oversee the hiring and supervision of principals, personnel at the school level, the instructional programs, budgets, etc. They're basically the first stop for schools needing assistance or when having a crisis. The regions are vertical in nature by feeder patterns but we don't have pure feeder patterns. Not all of the elementary schools assigned to a feeder pattern feed into the middle school nor do all of the middle schools feed into the high school. We're a district of choice so the feeder patterns aren't "pure."

Tony D'Angelo mentioned that the regional offices also handle problems that schools may have; they coordinate actions between feeder patterns, offer enormous loads of training in instruction, budgets, etc.

Patrice Grove mentioned that the Alternative/Charter School region is “unique” in that their schools are different and their Manager serves as the link between district and contract charter schools. They do the same thing as central office staff but with less staff.

Question: What measures are used to see how effective the regions are?

School achievement scores, staff evaluations and district/region surveys.

Michelle suggested that the committee members divide into small groups to answer the questions on the agenda about the regional office/central office reorganization. She also stated that the superintendent wants to learn from what we have and how we can improve. Some underlying thoughts to the philosophy of having a person oversee elementary schools, another one over middle schools and another one over high schools is that an elementary principal is better served by a person with elementary experience instead of a high school person overseeing K-12 campuses. This is about being thoughtful and doing what’s best for the students. The big picture won’t change immediately. It’s a phase-in structure that won’t harm or disrupt our schools. The change will take place in the spring semester. The regional offices, as they’re now known, will remain in place through June and then the redesign in structure will take place.

After 15 minutes of discussion, the groups reported the following:

- Special Education is a great support to the teachers at the campus level.
- It would be helpful if the role of the regional offices was to help communicate values, honor and respect to teachers to increase morale rather than undermine it.
- Schools use specialists a lot to run meetings, help teachers with strategies; they offer programmatic assistance.
- The Alternative/Charter School region office interacts with all of their principals because of their unique status with alternative schools and charter schools. Principals see the regional office as their supervisors and support---their first line of support.
- Communication. Principals in the past were the mid-managers and not the regional offices. What will be the role of the principal if the regional office is the mid-manager? Is the regional office threading into the principal’s role? Role clarification is needed.
- Consistency. There’s “politics” within the regions; not always consistent.
- Accountability. Principals need to be held accountable for their school’s instructional program. If a principal is not a strong instructional leader, they won’t be able to lead the school to higher achievement. It’s good if they have experience at all levels because they can then have fluidity.

Mark mentioned that the district has 0 unacceptable elementary schools but that’s not the case at the secondary level with dropout rates, low student achievement, etc. We need to take the “best practices” across the district and not just within the region.

- Need geographical consideration because the district is so big. The new structure needs to be accessible to the schools. Mark mentioned that Westside HS and Furr HS are more than 40 miles apart.
- Need high school managers to visit the high schools.

Question: How do we connect parents and communities if we have a different structure of three levels---elementary, middle and high school?

Schools need to take this role to be more “grass-roots” and connected. Parents don’t connect to the regional offices; they connect at the campus and district levels. The current structure doesn’t allow regional offices to be connected to parents. Patrice Grovey disagreed and stated that the Alternative/Charter School parents connect with their regional office. Their superintendent knows her community well.

Question: How would we know if we were successful with the parents/community?

Can we use the city’s multi-service centers to connect with our parents?

Could schools be grouped so that they’re not all grouped by socio-economic levels or race?

Question: If we change to a different structure and support comes from the regional office, what are the primary functions that need to happen?

Cross-training; because people pass the buck if it’s not their area of expertise.

Things that need to stop:

1. Professional development. Regions are forced to find someone that’s effective because professional development didn’t offer what was needed. Stop consultant contracts. Could do it cheaper if used inside personnel.

Mark then mentioned current research of the structure of large urban school districts. There are three basic models used:

1. Mini-district model – which is what HISD has used for the past several years. There’s a lack of consistency with this model and a sense of “territorialness.” In our current structure, one region may be doing something totally different from another and using a different system than if we were consistent, it would be less expensive. Schools get a lot of support from this model.
2. Department model – services are provided by departments which creates too many “masters.” Everything’s a priority.
3. Balance model – mid-level support but the main support comes from central office and it’s consistent. Philadelphia and San Diego use this model.

Central Office Reorganization

We currently have four chiefs that oversee 95% of the departments in the district. Looking at how departments interact with schools because it varies. Some have no contact with schools, some have contact with the regional offices and some have contacts with the schools.

What are some of the major things we need to do?

- stop duplicating efforts
- provide expertise
- base decisions on data
- have accountability

The core reason for central office to exist is to provide support for schools.

Communication needs to be disseminated to the campus level.

Need consistent structure across the district.

Need one-stop shop for schools to call when need assistance. Texas Instruments tracks requests from start to finish. The district needs to do the same thing and follow-up with a survey after the service is completed.

People need to be empowered to make decisions.

Everyone should get the same information.

Need to be strategic on how things are communicated.

The meeting was adjourned at 5:00 p.m. The next meeting will be held on December 17, 2009. Additional information on reorganization and policies will be discussed at this meeting.