



# PRESS RELEASE

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## **Over 700 Volunteers Participate in HISD's "Grads Within Reach" Walk *63 students re-enroll in school***

*September 10, 2011* – Hundreds of volunteers spent Saturday morning knocking on more than 1,000 homes across the city in an effort to re-enroll students who had not returned to school this academic year. Their efforts paid off with 63 HISD students re-enrolled today.

HISD Superintendent Dr. Terry Grier kicked off the eighth annual 'Grads Within Reach' walk at Wheatley High School motivating dozens of volunteers, educators and HISD administrators present.

"Today we are here to educate these students about HISD's unique programs that will meet their diverse needs to help them graduate, regardless of their circumstances. We want them to know we care and want them back in our schools," said Grier.

Grier was joined by former Mayor Bill White, who has participated in HISD dropout walks since they began in 2004. Today, White said, the concept has spread to dozens of other school districts across three states.

"You plant a seed in good soil, and it grows," White said. "HISD is now serving as a beacon for these other cities and school districts that are now taking part in this program."

Grier and White led the HISD team as they knocked on the homes of various students at Wheatley High School where volunteers made more than 40 home visits with very promising results.

Among their successful visits was 17-year-old Carmen Cepeda who promised the team of volunteers and her mother Claudia that she and her older sister Alicia Bernal, 18 years old, would report to school on Monday.

"We care about your daughters' education, and we want to help them succeed in school," HISD School Improvement Officer Richard Barajas told Carmen and her mother Claudia. "We have excellent services and unique flexible programs at HISD than can enable your daughters to earn their diploma and graduate."

Carmen has a one-month old daughter and her older sister has two young children, making it difficult for them to attend school while trying to raise their children. One of the reasons, Claudia said it's been difficult for them to return to school.

Today, both learned about HISD's Grad Lab program and Twilight High Schools that can help Carmen and her older sister Alicia complete their courses at their own pace while attending school during flexible hours in the evenings and on weekends.

Claudia thanked Barajas and David Edgerson, principal at Wheatley High School, for personally reaching out to her daughters and helping them get back in school.

"As I stand here talking to them as a high school principal, I reflect back on where I have been as a high school dropout. I will stop at nothing to help these young people. This is my way of not just giving back, but paying it forward," said Edgerson, reminiscing of the days when he dropped out of high school at 15 but decided on his own to return and went on to become valedictorian of his high school.

**Today over 700 volunteers spent the morning walking through Houston area neighborhoods knocking on more than 1,000 doors contacting students who had dropped out of school. As a result of their efforts, 63 students re-enrolled in school.**

Volunteers included HISD Board members Mike Lunceford, Greg Meyers and Manuel Rodriguez Jr. and HISD administrators and educators.

The volunteers were armed with information on exactly what each student needed to graduate and offered unique solutions such as the Grad Lab online credit recovery program and Twilight High Schools in seven convenient locations around the city that offer flexible night and weekend hours.

The Twilight High Schools offer alternative, non-traditional school hours for students who are unable to attend school during regular school hours and for those students who have dropped out of school. The Twilight High Schools are an outgrowth of the successful Grad Lab online credit recovery program. In 2010, more than 4,000 courses were completed through Grad Labs, putting students back on track for graduation.

HISD currently boasts its lowest dropout rate of 12.6 percent for the 2010-2011 academic year, a 3.2 percent decrease from the previous year. The goal of the Grads Within Reach Walk, the online credit recovery initiative, the Twilight High Schools, and other HISD efforts is to reduce that rate even further.

Other cities continue to replicate Houston's successful effort, which began in 2004. The "Grads Within Reach" walk has expanded and now includes 20 cities and 24 school districts.

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The **Houston Independent School District** is the largest school district in Texas and the seventh-largest in the United States with 281 schools and more than 200,000 students. The 301-square-mile district is one of the largest employers in the Houston metropolitan area with nearly 30,000 employees.

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