



Superintendent's Public Engagement Committee
Meeting Minutes

June 25, 2008, 8:30 a.m.–10:30 a.m.
Hattie Mae White Education Service Center

Abelardo Saavedra, Ph.D., Superintendent of Schools

The purpose of the Superintendent's Public Engagement Committee (PEC) is to support public-engagement outreach for the district's efforts in providing high-quality education, communicate critically important information, and gain valuable input from key community members.

IN ATTENDANCE

Burt Ballanfant
Rev. Leonard Barksdale
Ann Blackwood
Dale Davidson
Marcario Garcia
Donna Shanklin Henderson
Arva Howard

Elsie Huang
Joyce Jacquet
Judy Long
Linda Mercer
Sandie Meyers
Shawn Raymond
Laura Richardson

John Robinson
Francisco Rodriguez
Rev. Leslie Smith
Maggie Utter Solomon
Melva Thornton
Lillian Villarreal

INTRODUCTION

HISD Superintendent of Schools Abelardo Saavedra welcomed the members of the Superintendent's Public Engagement Committee (PEC). Also in attendance were Chief Academic Officer Karen Garza, Chief Financial Officer Melinda Garrett, Chief of Staff Michele Pola, Press Secretary Terry Abbott, North Region Superintendent Cynthia Wilson, and East Region Superintendent Thelma Garza. Following introductions of all attendees, Dr. Saavedra reviewed the meeting agenda and began a discussion of the 2008–2009 recommended budget.

In addition to a meeting agenda and feedback survey, folders containing detailed information regarding facilities and program design plans, including possible school closures and consolidations, were provided to each committee member.

DISCUSSION

Dr. Saavedra began by sharing highlights of the 2008–2009 recommended budget, which includes \$36 million for across-the-board raises, with all employees slated for at least a 3-percent increase. On average, teachers would get a 4-percent raise, principals would get an 8-percent increase, and assistant principals would earn an additional 7 percent. Also, the district's lowest-paid workers would get a one-time \$250 bonus to help offset rising gasoline prices. The proposed budget also includes fall-out money from the 2007–2008 budget to be shared among the schools: \$10 million for library updates; \$10 million for fine-arts programs; \$20 million for computers, furniture, and other capital items; and \$10 million in extra per-pupil funding. Dr. Saavedra emphasized that all of the proposed budget items are recommended without a tax-rate increase. In response to committee members' requests, a breakdown of how principals spend fall-out money is forthcoming.

This led to a discussion regarding Texas school finance, specifically the impact of the "Robin Hood" provision and the "hold-harmless" clause. Dr. Saavedra recounted that last year, the state would have recaptured approximately \$128 million from HISD for redistribution to other school districts across the state. However, because the hold-harmless clause protects school districts from a loss of local revenue or state aid, those funds were not recaptured. The superintendent emphasized the importance of legislative advocacy and the power of joint efforts

with other large urban districts to encourage responsible legislation that protects school districts' ability to rely on state funds that help provide students with high-quality facilities and programs.

Dr. Saavedra then opened floor for budget questions from committee members. Most questions centered on three primary themes:

1. What was the source of the \$40-million fall-out from the 2007–2008 fiscal year?

Answer: Job vacancies are the largest source of fall-out funds resulting from salaries not paid while positions are unfilled. In a large district such as HISD, that results in a seemingly substantial fall-out. However, in the context of HISD's overall operating budget, \$40 million represents less than half a month's salary expenditures.

2. How did HISD determine the best way to spend the \$40-million fall-out?

Answer: The administration's commitment to put as much money as possible into HISD schools means that fall-out funds go directly to schools. Spending guidelines, based on priorities and needs, such as libraries and fine arts, are provided to principals. However, principals may submit a waiver request to spend fall-out funds in the manner that best meets the needs of their particular students.

3. How have increased energy costs impacted HISD's recommended budget?

Answer: An increase of \$3 million is proposed to compensate for rising energy and fuel costs.

Following a question regarding Magnet- and special-program funding, the discussion turned toward school closures and consolidations. Dr. Saavedra stated that his decision to postpone making any recommendations regarding closures/consolidations was made primarily on the basis of his desire to deal more holistically with the issue of providing equal access to high-quality programs and facilities to every HISD student. He elaborated on this decision by expanding the discussion of school finance. He explained that because HISD is a decentralized district, money is allocated on a per-pupil basis, also known as a "per-unit allocation" or PUA. Currently, HISD's PUA is approximately \$3,300 with additional money for students with special needs or limited English proficiency and those who are gifted/talented or socioeconomically disadvantaged. These additional general funds are allocated to schools offering special programs or those needing small-school subsidies; however, in contrast to the PUA, these fund allocations are *not* based on a funding formula. This results in funding inequities and presents an opportunity for the administration to reexamine this practice to determine its impact on all schools. Dr. Saavedra emphasized that no promises are being made regarding schools' futures, only a commitment to examine relevant factors more closely and further engage the community before making any recommendations to the board. A report reflecting the community input gained through the recent outreach efforts conducted by the consulting firm of McConnell, Lanier, Jones & Murphy LLC will be distributed to committee members and shared publically on the HISD Web site.

Next, Dr. Saavedra and Dr. Garza provided clarification on a policy change allowing tuition-free enrollment. Specialty schools, defined as those without attendance boundaries where competitive application for admission is required, are excluded from the tuition-free policy. With that exception, students who do not reside within HISD attendance boundaries will be allowed to transfer into HISD schools on a space-available basis. This means that any student who resides within HISD's attendance boundaries is given priority for enrollment over any student from outside HISD's attendance boundaries. "We will serve our own children first. If after doing so, there is space available, then out-of-district transfers may be considered by the campus principal," said Dr. Saavedra. Consideration, although not a matter of policy, includes factors such as academic achievement and disciplinary history.

Returning to the topic of Magnet programs, discussion ensued regarding funding and transportation. The superintendent and committee members concurred that costly transportation of students to attend Magnet programs must be balanced by the desire to retain HISD's system of choice. Approximately 40 percent of students transported are those attending Magnet programs rather than their zoned school. Zoned-school transportation accounts for less than 23 percent of the total number of students who ride HISD buses. Several committee members suggested a partnership with METRO to provide transportation. Melinda Garrett indicated that a partnership has been previously evaluated; however, safety concerns for elementary students and lengthy ride times made it an inadequate solution. The administration will revisit this suggestion and provide a follow-up at the next committee meeting.

CONCLUSION

It was agreed that the district's efforts to create a college-bound culture and the provision of skilled-labor courses will be explored at the next committee meeting.

Dr. Saavedra acknowledged the members' commitment to helping HISD improve the quality of programs and facilities available to students. He further affirmed the value of the work that this committee has undertaken. In closing, committee members were asked to complete the feedback survey before leaving.

RESPONSE TO DISCUSSION

Senior staff members are considering the committee's input as well as that of the community at large regarding the issues of Magnet programs, transportation, and school closures and consolidations. An update will be provided at the next PEC meeting.

The next meeting of the Superintendent's Public Engagement Committee is tentatively scheduled for Wednesday, August 20, 2008, at 8:30 a.m. at a location to be determined. Complete information is forthcoming.

**Dr. Michele Pola, chief of staff, serves as the liaison to the committee.
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