



Superintendent's Public Engagement Committee  
Meeting Minutes

**August 20, 2008, 8:30 a.m.–10:30 a.m.**  
**Hattie Mae White Educational Support 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  
Ann Blackwood  
Martin Cominsky  
Dale Davidson  
Eliot Gershenson  
Ginny Goldman

Mary Scott Hagle  
Joyce Jacquet  
Judy Long  
Linda Mercer  
Sandie Meyers  
Shawn Raymond

Laura Richardson  
John Robinson  
Melva Thornton  
Maggie Utter Solomon

**INTRODUCTION**

HISD Superintendent of Schools Abelardo Saavedra welcomed the members of the Superintendent's Public Engagement Committee (PEC) to Robert E. Lee High School. Also in attendance were Chief Academic Officer Karen Garza, Chief of Staff Michele Pola, Press Secretary Terry Abbott, and Lee Principal Steve Amstutz. Dr. Saavedra then invited Principal Amstutz to give a brief history and overview of Lee High School.

**DISCUSSION**

Principal Amstutz highlighted the original school-within-a-school newcomer program at Lee, now a separate high school known as Liberty High School. Its purpose is to provide nontraditional students an opportunity to attend and graduate from high school while taking into consideration their outside obligations that often conflict with enrollment in a traditional high school.

This led to a discussion regarding federal and state accountability systems. In response to a question regarding accountability requirements, Principal Amstutz emphasized the vital role of accountability and the need for expanded flexibility, recommending that accountability metrics be assessed at the end of each school year, thereby offering a more complete picture of students' accomplishments during a given school year. Dr. Saavedra reinforced this point and added that inconsistent accountability standards across the country obscure national comparisons of academic progress between states. He further articulated this point by reminding the group that 90 percent of public school funding in Texas comes from the state, while only about 10 percent comes from the federal government. The inextricable link between accountability metrics and funding further complicates the issue of varying accountability systems from state to state.

The conversation then turned to the issue of race and its impact on students and the schools they attend. Race was recognized by the group as a divisive factor requiring nonstandard solutions. The issues of gang involvement, equal access, and the role of parents and the community were discussed at length. Suggested interventions included mentoring, improved adult/student ratios, availability of counselors at the elementary grade levels, and expanding programs such as craft/trade internships and character education. Dr. Saavedra concluded this conversation by stating that academic success is a critical factor for all students, especially

those who are at risk. He expanded on this point by stating that the typical “troubled” student is not one who is experiencing success academically; students most at risk of dropping out are those who are failing academically and are overage for their grade level. The superintendent challenged the group to think differently about retention and stated that subject-specific retention may be a more beneficial alternative to whole-grade-level retention. Specifically, if a student fails second-grade mathematics but is passing all other subjects, perhaps that student should repeat second-grade math but be promoted to the third grade with his/her peers in all other subjects.

### **UPDATE**

Dr. Saavedra updated the group on HISD’s school consolidation efforts. He advised the group that the administration has chosen to slow the process in order to more fully consider the community’s input in making formal recommendations to the Board of Education. At the August 2008 board meeting, the following recommendations were approved by the board:

- Removal of Nathaniel Q. Henderson and William H. Wharton Elementary Schools from the current school closure list.
- Moving forward with consolidation plans affecting four elementary schools:
  - Douglas MacArthur and Lora Peck
  - Judd Lewis and Belfort Academy

The administration will continue seeking input from affected communities—the purpose of which is to give community members an opportunity to state their case and provide compelling reasons as to why the schools identified for closure should remain open. It is expected that further consolidation recommendations will be presented at the September and October board meetings.

### **CONCLUSION**

Dr. Saavedra acknowledged the members’ commitment to helping HISD improve the quality of education available to students in HISD. 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 issue of at-risk students. 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, November 12, 2008, at 8:30 a.m. at the Hattie Mae White Educational Support Center.**

**Dr. Michele Pola, Chief of Staff, serves as the liaison to the committee.  
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