



Superintendent's Public Engagement Committee  
Meeting Minutes

**November 12, 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**

Reginald Adams  
Uranda Adigun  
Burt Ballanfant  
Rev. Leonard Barksdale  
Ann Blackwood  
Martin Cominsky  
Alton Crampton  
Dale Davidson  
Marcario Garcia

Mary Scott Hagle  
Donna Shanklin Henderson  
Arva Howard  
Joyce Jacquet  
Judy Long  
Sandie Meyers  
Rev. Max Miller  
Carmen Nuncio  
Laura Richardson

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

**INTRODUCTION**

HISD Superintendent of Schools Abelardo Saavedra welcomed the members of the Superintendent's Public Engagement Committee (PEC) to the Hattie Mae White Educational Support Center. Senior staff members in attendance were Chief Financial Officer Melinda Garrett, Chief of Staff Michele Pola, Interim Press Secretary Norm Uhl, West Region Superintendent Barbara Thornhill, and Assistant Superintendent of Research and Accountability Carla Stevens. Following introductions, Dr. Saavedra acknowledged the serious health condition of PEC member Linda Mercer and asked the group to keep Ms. Mercer in their thoughts.

**UPDATE**

Dr. Saavedra began the meeting by following up on feedback offered at the last PEC meeting, wherein it was requested that meetings begin with a brief update of hot topics concerning the district. Honoring that request, Dr. Saavedra informed the group that the Texas Education Agenda is considering changes to the state accountability system to include a growth model, thereby creating a more sophisticated accountability system for Texas schools. Such changes would be in line with the Houston Independent School District's (HISD) own focus on the use of value-added data to inform decision-making in areas such as human capital.

Secondly, Dr. Saavedra updated the group on the impact of Hurricane Ike on district operations. With an estimated \$35 million to \$40 million in damage as a result of the storm, the superintendent expressed pride in the fact that all facilities were operational within a few days following the storm. Lack of power was the primary obstacle; however, through the hard work of countless employees, even facilities without power were quickly brought online through the use of generators until primary power was restored. Also, HISD hosted a Hurricane Information Line that answered more than 14,000 storm-related calls in one week. In anticipation of future hurricanes, local elected officials are evaluating ways to help the Houston region be better prepared. Specifically, Dr. Saavedra provided testimony to the Texas legislature that schools should be added to the priority list for power restoration, behind hospitals and emergency municipal needs.

Last, Dr. Saavedra shared HISD's honor of being named Houston's Greatest Nonprofit Organization by the Greater Houston Partnership. A judging panel that consists of a representative from the Mayor's office, the County's office, and economic development professionals from the ten-county region voted to determine winners in several categories, including nonprofits, lifetime achievement, emerging leader, and economic development. This award recognizes HISD's contribution as a business magnet in the Houston region.

Before the meeting's primary discussion of Magnet-student transportation began, PEC members were provided an updated list of schools whose consolidations are already approved or are still under consideration for consolidation.

## **DISCUSSION**

Turning his attention to the issue of Magnet transportation, Dr. Saavedra provided an overview of a presentation previously provided to Board of Education members on the subject. He emphasized HISD's commitment to remaining a district of choice while continuing to improve neighborhood schools that are closest to students' homes.

Dr. Saavedra highlighted the financial factors that are being considered in the evaluation of Magnet transportation issues. HISD spends a total of \$26.4 million each year to bus all of its students to and from school. Magnet transportation alone accounts for 62 percent of that total, or \$16.6 million. That means more is spent to *transport* Magnet students than is spent on the Magnet programs they are attending (\$15.04 million). Closer examination reveals that the average cost of transporting a Magnet student each year is \$1,402, compared to \$221 for regular-education students. Most of that cost (\$8.9 million) is spent transporting students who live ten or more miles from their enrolled school. Dr. Saavedra delineated several options currently being explored and encouraged feedback from the group to broaden the options under consideration. He stressed that elimination of Magnet transportation was not an option.

The group was also informed that in the interest of transparency and consideration of community input, HISD is hosting several community meetings before making a recommendation to the Board of Education at the December board meeting. It is the administration's intention to implement an improved Magnet transportation system for the 2008–2009 school year.

Several committee members offered input regarding potential alternatives to the options presented. Suggested alternatives included partnering with Metro, co-locating HISD bus stops with other transportation providers, car/van pooling, etc. Members expressed concern for families without the ability to transport their child(ren) either to school or to drop-and-ride locations. Related issues raised by committee members included safety concerns, potential shifts in demographics at affected campuses, and the perceived impact on school choice.

The conversation then turned toward a more general discussion of the original purpose and current rigor of Magnet programs within the district. It was stated by several committee members that the Magnet program should be thoroughly evaluated and that transportation of Magnet students is one of many factors that need to be examined. There was a consensus of opinion that the rigor of Magnet programs varies widely across the district. Dr. Saavedra concurred with that opinion and added that the absence of funding formulas for these programs is unacceptable. At present, Magnet funding is determined on the basis of inception date rather than by a data-driven funding formula. District leaders are committed to examining the current practice. Committee members also articulated the importance of improving the rigor/quality of neighborhood schools so that parents are less likely to perceive Magnet schools as the only desirable options.

Committee members offered concluding remarks regarding the need to evaluate fiscal inefficiencies throughout the entire system without a focus on any individual area. Dr. Saavedra voiced his dedication to continued improvements in fiscal efficiency and asked Chief Financial Officer Melinda Garrett to share her perspective. Ms. Garrett reiterated the superintendent's commitment to fiscal responsibility.

### **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 Magnet transportation. 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, February 11, 2008, at 8:30 a.m. at a location to be determined.**

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