



Superintendent's Public Engagement Committee
Meeting Minutes

February 11, 2009, 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
Rev. Leonard Barksdale
Ann Blackwood
Alton Crampton

Dale Davidson
Donna Shanklin Henderson
Arva Howard
Joyce Jacquet
Judy Long

Rev. Max Miller
John Robinson
Rev. Leslie Smith
Maggie Utter Solomon
Lillian Villarreal

INTRODUCTION

HISD Superintendent of Schools Abelardo Saavedra welcomed 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, South Region Superintendent Warner Ervin, Central Region Superintendent Adriana Tamez, Media Coordinator Norm Uhl, and the two newest members of the superintendent's direct report team: Deputy Superintendent for Human Talent Ann Best and Assistant Superintendent for Communications and Publications Lee Vela. Ann Best joined HISD in February 2009 after serving as the executive director of Teach for America–Houston. Lee Vela joined HISD in December 2008 after serving at both Clear Channel Communications and the Houston Port Authority. Following a brief introduction by Dr. Saavedra, both Ms. Best and Mr. Vela expressed their eagerness to engage the members of the PEC as reform efforts continue with regard to human capital and communications. Dr. Saavedra reported two major changes that have already been made with regard to HISD's communication strategy: 1) to make district leaders more visible and accessible to the community, and 2) the consolidation of all communications departments under a single division, led by Mr. Vela.

UPDATE

Dr. Saavedra began the meeting by sharing information about the Board of Education retreat held the last weekend in January 2009. Characterizing it as the best retreat in his five years as superintendent, Dr. Saavedra summarized the four major topics of discussion as being the district's strategic plan, human capital, communications, and the development of a differentiated pay system and career paths for teachers. The superintendent provided an overview of the concepts being explored for a differentiated pay system and career paths for teachers. Such a system would be based on performance metrics that would be used to support career growth for instructional professionals who demonstrate the highest levels of competency; projection estimates indicate the number of eligible teachers to be about 215. He went on to say that the highest performing instructional professionals in HISD could potentially earn 55 percent above their base salary if they choose particular work options, such as teaching summer school or providing training to their fellow teachers. The superintendent acknowledged that implementing such a system will be expensive and indicated that a variety of potential funding sources are being evaluated, including Title I and general funds.

DISCUSSION

Turning his attention to the issue of student dropouts, Dr. Saavedra stated that HISD has not made enough progress in this area and that the issue will be a central focus of his administration in the coming year. To promote a shared understanding of how dropouts are defined, the superintendent first clarified that the general public's definition of a four-year completion rate (tracking students who enter ninth grade and graduate four years later) is not the most accurate. This definition does not take into account students who graduate early or those who graduate with an associate's degree in addition to a high-school diploma five years after entering ninth grade. Dr. Saavedra also reported that among students who drop out of school, the majority are overage for their grade level. This is likely due in part to HISD's promotion standards, which are stricter than the Texas Education Agency's and are contributing to the number of overage students in HISD. He indicated that the administration is working to achieve a balance between HISD's higher standards and the unintended consequences that have contributed to the district's student dropout rate. Conversation continued on the issue of student dropouts, with PEC members stressing their confidence in the role career and technical education courses could play, as well as expressing concerns regarding the methods used to track students and the potentially deleterious impact of the current testing protocols.

The conversation then turned to finances when committee members inquired about potential layoffs within HISD. Chief Financial Officer Melinda Garrett indicated that the district's anticipated appropriations are expected to exceed estimated revenues for 2009–2010. While it will be necessary to reduce staffed positions, those staffing cuts are expected to come from central and district office budgets. Ms. Garrett then clarified a common misconception that increased property taxes in Houston result in increased money for HISD; this is not the case. Any increase in the amount of money generated by increased property valuations is offset dollar for dollar through reductions in state funding. Revenue generated from local property taxes is allocated by the state according to a funding formula established by the Texas Legislature. Under this formula, HISD receives \$5,102 per child, regardless of increases or decreases in local property tax revenue.

The role of the federal economic stimulus package was next discussed. It is likely that, like all federal funds, funds from a stimulus bill will be restricted in how the dollars can be spent. If the restrictions on Title I dollars are any indication, stimulus funds may be used to supplement professional development activities, extra-duty pay, parent-involvement activities, and/or efforts to support schools struggling to meet adequate yearly progress requirements under the federal school-accountability model.

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.

The next meeting of the Superintendent's Public Engagement Committee is tentatively scheduled for Wednesday, April 29, 2009, at 8:30 a.m. in the Board Auditorium of the Hattie Mae White Educational Support Center, located at 4400 W. 18th Street, Houston, TX 77092.

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