



Superintendent's Public Engagement Committee
Meeting Minutes

June 24, 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
Martin Cominsky

Arva Howard
Judy Long
Carmen Nuncio
Francisco Rodriguez

Melva Thornton
Maggie Utter Solomon
Lillian Villarreal

INTRODUCTION

Dr. 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 West Region Superintendent Barbra Thornhill, Assistant Superintendent of Communications and Publications Lee Vela, Chief of Staff Michele Pola, and Director to the Chief of Staff Susan Kaler.

DISCUSSION

After welcoming the group, Dr. Saavedra restated his formal announcement that August 31, 2009, will be his last day as superintendent of the Houston Independent School District (HISD). He provided an update on the board's search for a new superintendent, stating that a short list of candidates is likely to be identified this summer and he is optimistic that the new superintendent will be named by the end of August.

Dr. Saavedra then recapped some of the major accomplishments of his administration and discussed the district's future challenges and opportunities. The two primary accomplishments recounted include:

- Significant improvement in state accountability ratings with the number of schools ranked as exemplary or recognized projected to exceed 200 for the 2009 school year, up from 84 in 2007, and 157 in 2008.
- Secure financial health as evidenced by growth of reserve funds from approximately \$98 million in 2004 to approximately \$300 million in 2009, achieved without a tax rate increase since 2002. Careful financial planning by the district has resulted in an estimated \$18-19 million that will be rolled forward from the 2009 budget into the 2010 budget.

The superintendent then turned the discussion to his perspective regarding the district's greatest opportunities for improvement, citing the following student-specific challenges:

- improving the high school graduation/completion rate;
- reducing the student dropout rate; and
- continue to create a college-bound culture.

Dr. Saavedra emphasized the need to focus on positively affecting student outcomes in these areas. This was echoed by several committee members who stressed the need for alignment between high school graduation requirements and college entrance requirements.

Following this recap, Dr. Saavedra thanked the committee for their continued service to this committee and to the advancement of student achievement in HISD, then he opened the discussion to questions and comments from committee members.

The questions below, organized into topic themes, reflect the inquiries posed and responses offered.

Theme: Academic Achievement

Q: How is the dropout rate measured?

A: It is measured differently based upon how “dropout” is defined. For example, some formulas count a student as a dropout if they do not graduate within four years after beginning the ninth grade. Among the flaws in this definition is the fact that students enrolled in early college programs graduate from high school, by design, in five years with an associates degree in addition to a high school diploma. This definition incorrectly identifies such students as dropouts. Moreover, this definition incorrectly identifies students who complete high school in less than four years as well as those who are retained but go on to successfully graduate, as dropouts.

Q: What are some ideas about how to address the high rates of remediation among college freshman?

A: Early college and dual credit programs offer high school students the opportunity to gain the skills needed to succeed in a college learning environment. In addition, there are three Houston area P-16 Councils, whose mission is to create and sustain a college-going culture that prepares all students for the academic rigor and discipline needed to enter and successfully complete a higher education.

This issue highlights the need for alignment between high school graduation requirements and college entrance requirements.

Q: When did HISD begin offering full day kindergarten?

A: Although state law does not require full day kindergarten, HISD began offering it in 2004. Continuation of this offering is supported by strong empirical evidence that prekindergarten and kindergarten participation has a long term positive impact on students’ academic success.

Theme: School Finance

Q: To what extent is reform of state recapture laws (i.e. “Robin Hood”) a priority on HISD’s legislative agenda? How is HISD working to reform school finance at the state level?

A: Since the first school finance equalization bill in 1994, a lack of political will among state legislators has resulted in unfair allocation of tax dollars to Texas public school students. It remains a legislative priority for HISD.

Q: What is the latest information regarding stimulus funds?

A: The Texas Education Agency (TEA) has proposed to pass \$1.9 billion in federal stimulus funds to Texas school districts. However, TEA has proposed to use these funds in lieu of state dollars, which TEA hopes to redirect to their reserve.

Stipulations regarding the use of federal stimulus dollars include the ability of state education agencies to use these dollars to cover certain financial deficits, as in the case of California where a pre-existing deficit exists. However, Texas Education Commissioner, Robert Scott, is proposing to *create* a deficit at the state level and send stimulus funds to school districts in the place of state funds that Texas school districts would have otherwise received.

Q: How can school finance be made more efficient?

A: Although complex and often controversial, there are several options that must be considered in order to optimize the use of available funds. Options include, but are not limited to, school consolidation and establishment of fair funding formulas for magnet schools.

Theme: Organizational Readiness

Q: What is likely to happen to the position of Chief Academic Officer under a new administration?

A: The new superintendent will determine the role of this position in his/her administration. It is not likely to be dissolved and may be split into multiple roles, however, the new superintendent will make that determination.

Q: What advice does Dr. Saavedra have for the next superintendent?

A: Be mindful of the time window that exists to influence real change and be mindful of the need to balance talk and action with regard to the politics that come with this position.

Additional dialogue was had regarding the pursuit of equity in the quality of education provided at all district schools and investigation into the factors that drive associated perceptions. This led to a discussion of the role trustees play in these matters, including the pros and cons of single-member versus at-large positions on the Board of Education.

CONCLUSION

The committee thanked Dr. Saavedra for his service to HISD and wished him the best in his future endeavors. Dr. Saavedra concluded the meeting by expressing his appreciation for the committee members' dedication to helping HISD improve the quality of education provided to its students.

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, August 26, 2009, at 8:30 a.m. in the Board Auditorium of the Hattie Mae White Educational Support Center, located at 4400 W. 18th Street.

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