



Superintendent's Public Engagement Committee
Meeting Minutes

July 21, 2010, 8:30 a.m.–10:30 a.m.
Hattie Mae White Educational Support Center

Terry B. Grier, Ed.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

Leonard Barksdale
Beth Brown

Arva Howard
David Jaroszewski

Judy Long
Laura Richardson
Lillian Villarreal

INTRODUCTION

Chief of Staff Michele Pola welcomed members of the Superintendent's Public Engagement Committee (PEC) to the Hattie Mae White Educational Support Center, then turned the meeting over to Dr. Grier, who introduced the Houston Independent School District's (HISD's) new chief communications officer, Aggie Alvez.

DISCUSSION

Dr. Grier began the discussion by summarizing efforts currently under way to gear up for the 2010–2011 school year, including the launch of an improved process to identify and hire principals, which has resulted in the hiring of 40 new principals, all of whom were vetted by their respective school communities.

Below, grouped by topic, is a summary of the issues discussed.

- **Advanced Placement:** Dr. Grier reflected on the 2009–2010 school year, citing the number of HISD campuses making Newsweek's list of [America's Best High Schools](#), which he attributed to increased student participation in Advanced Placement (AP) exams. As a result of increased emphasis on AP testing among students enrolled in AP courses and the use of Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test (PSAT) scores to identify AP students, approximately 1,500 more students scored 3* or higher on AP exams, resulting in significant cost savings by earning [college credits](#).
- **Grad Labs:** HISD's online credit-recovery initiative features computer labs, called [Grad Labs](#), in every large, traditional high school in the district, where struggling students receive supplemental learning opportunities through online coursework and tutoring on state tests and college entrance exams. Launched in February 2010, HISD's Grad Labs helped at least 400 students graduate on time in May 2010, and approximately 200 more students are now on track to graduate in August 2010.

* Each AP Exam score is a weighted combination of the student's scores on the multiple-choice section and the free-response section. The final score is reported on a 5-point scale: 5 = extremely well qualified, 4 = well qualified, 3 = qualified, 2 = possibly qualified, 1 = no recommendation.

- [Apollo 20:](#)

Dr. Grier and the committee discussed, at length, the district's bold effort to turn around the district's 20 lowest-performing schools. The Apollo 20 project's mission is to improve teaching and learning at the district's highest-need campuses. Dr. Grier acknowledged that the plan is controversial, but essential to transforming HISD into the best school district in the country. He countered accusations that a focus on the district's lowest-performing schools will come at the expense of its highest performers by citing efforts such as district-paid AP exams and district-sponsored meetings with representatives from Ivy League universities to help more HISD students gain acceptance to top-tier universities upon graduation.

In response to members' questions about how Apollo 20 is being funded, Dr. Grier stated that funding is coming from left-over stimulus dollars and external donations. To sustain Apollo 20, the district is raising \$10 million per year for each of the next five years from external donors.

In response to members' questions about what makes Apollo 20 different from previous turnaround efforts, Grier referenced [empirical evidence](#) upon which Apollo 20 is structured and its partnership with Dr. Roland Fryer through Harvard University's Education Innovation Laboratory ([EdLabs](#)).

Lastly, in response to questions about displaced teachers resulting from staffing changes at the Apollo 20 schools, Dr. Grier stated that principals have the choice to retain a displaced teacher by paying 50 percent of the cost to do so for the first year, after which that teacher's performance will be reevaluated. Otherwise, displaced teachers who are under an employment contract will be used in other capacities, which are yet to be determined.

- Advanced Placement: Requested data for AP exam results by school are available [online](#). Dr. Pola stated that the report is used in variety of ways, including more in-depth examination of classes at campuses where AP exam performance is not up to par.

- [Principal Selection:](#) Questions were asked about the extent to which principal selection was based on candidates' performance on the Haberman Questionnaire. Dr. Grier stated that the Haberman Questionnaire is one of several tools used to evaluate principal candidates and that if strong evidence exists (e.g., data available at [schooldigger.com](#)) about a candidate's qualifications despite performance on the Haberman Questionnaire, such a candidate could still be considered for a principal position.

- Staffing: In response to questions about staffing, Dr. Grier stated that the approximately 200 teaching vacancies will be filled before school starts in August; on the 16th for Apollo 20 schools and on the 23rd

for all other HISD schools. Dr. Grier went on to say that efforts to “[right-size the number of Special Education teachers](#)” are under way and that some Special Education teachers may be utilized in different capacities, such as staffing a twilight school or as tutors. He stressed that right-sizing will not result in any cuts to Special Education services provided to students.

- Budget Issues:

Dr. Grier addressed rumors that principals are being forced to account for district budget cuts from campus budgets by stating that schools have not been asked to pay for anything new out of their budgets this year. Specifically, he refuted rumors regarding summer-school funding by reiterating that while there will be fewer federal dollars available for summer school next year, HISD is designing a new, more cost-effective summer-school model and will redirect any unused budget dollars and additional federal and state funds received to pay for summer school. Principals have been advised to prepare now in the event that they may have to pay for some 2011 summer-school costs out of their school budgets, but it will not be anywhere near the \$19 million being reported in the media.

Other topics of discussion included the use of school open-houses to recruit parent volunteers and a request that HISD support its PTAs by providing fund-raising tools.

CONCLUSION

In closing, Dr. Pola invited committee members to attend the meet-and-greet receptions held at 4:00 p.m. just prior to each board meeting; the next board meeting is August 12, 2010.

In addition to encouraging others to [subscribe to HISD eNews](#), members are encouraged to share HISD communications with colleagues, neighbors, family, and friends.

The next meeting of the Superintendent’s Public Engagement Committee is tentatively scheduled for Wednesday, October 20, 2010.

**Chief of Staff Michele Pola serves as the liaison to the committee.
Contact information: 713-556-6011; mpola@houstonisd.org**