A Community Plan to Transform HISD

- Parents
- Students
- Community
- Employees
- District

*Working together to improve student achievement.*

HOUSTON INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT

AUGUST 2010
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A Letter from Board of Education
President Greg Meyers

I have been a Houstonian since the age of 15 and am honored to serve as president of the Board of Education at this critical juncture for our district. Houston has long had one of the most innovative and forward-looking school boards in the country, which reflects the people of our great city.

It was in the tradition of being a national leader that the district brought in Terry Grier as superintendent. Dr. Grier has a track record of making tough decisions in the interest of providing students with the opportunity to succeed. I have every confidence that he will deliver for HISD and our children.

Our Board of Education is fully behind the Strategic Direction summarized in this document, and we believe that it provides the roadmap we need to accomplish the goals set out by the board. We have much to be proud of as a district, but as the data you will see in this report suggest, we have quite a way to go to ensure that all HISD students graduate ready to succeed in the college and career of their choice.

On behalf of the board, I want to thank all of the parents, students, staff, and community members who have contributed to the creation of this plan, and I look forward to continuing to work with you to create the best school district in the country.

Greg Meyers
President, Board of Education

A Letter from Superintendent of Schools Terry B. Grier

I am grateful to the Board of Education and the city of Houston for providing me with the opportunity to lead the transformation of HISD.

I am also committed, however, to maintaining and growing areas where we are already doing well. We have some outstanding schools with talented teachers and principals, dedicated employees across all functions, and committed parents across the district.

We have programs, like ASPIRE, that are receiving national recognition for being innovative. We will draw on all of these in our reform efforts.

At the same time, much work remains to be done to ensure that every HISD student has access to the education needed to succeed in the 21st century. I know that change is not easy. It requires tough choices and a willingness to take on things that have been done the same way for a long time. One pledge that I will make to you is that I will explain what we are doing differently and why we decided that a change was necessary.

It was this desire for transparency that led me to commission the Strategic Direction. It has allowed us to develop a plan for transforming HISD. The entire community has had a voice, and that is critical. This is our plan, and we will achieve success only by working together to implement it. Houston absolutely can and must be home to the finest public education system in the country. If we really come together as Team HISD, it will become a reality.

Terry B. Grier, Ed.D.
Superintendent of Schools
SUMMARY OF OUR STRATEGIC DIRECTION

On September 12, 1962, in a speech at Rice University here in Houston, President John F. Kennedy announced one of the most ambitious projects in human history—a journey to the moon. It is therefore appropriate, in this city with a tradition of making the seemingly impossible a reality, that the Houston Independent School District launches its own ambitious goal: to become the first school district in the nation to close its achievement gap.

The need for action is clear and compelling. Despite our adoption of some of the most innovative approaches in the country, our students are not consistently achieving at a level required to succeed in the 21st century. One measure of this shortfall is that, among our first-time ninth graders, only an estimated 15% will go on to earn a postsecondary certificate or degree in four years. That number is far lower for our Hispanic and African American students, and for our poor, special education, and male students.

The Board of Education, in its Declaration of Beliefs and Visions, has articulated a set of beliefs that will help ensure that every student, regardless of culture, ethnicity, language, or economic status, has both equal opportunity and equal access to high-quality education evidenced through results of growth and accountability ratings. Those beliefs are:

- The overall student-achievement level must be improved so that after each school year, every student makes, at a minimum, one year of instructional progress.
- There can be no achievement gap between socio-economic groups and/or children of ethnic diversity.
- Recruitment and retention of highly effective teachers are the keys to enhancing the quality of education and increasing student achievement.
- The dropout rate is unacceptably high and must be reduced.
- Our schools must be able to earn autonomy.
- The level of meaningful parental engagement must be increased.
- The community has a legitimate voice in reform, and responsiveness to community concerns must be improved.

Over a six-month period in 2010 we worked to develop a plan for transforming the district to align with the board’s vision and meet the needs of HISD’s students, parents, and the broader community. The purpose of this Strategic Direction is not to list all of our current activities or past accomplishments. Rather, it is to describe as clearly as possible the major areas of focus for HISD over the next several years. Thousands of people within the community have participated in the process, recognizing the stake that we all have in the success of the district. With your help, we have identified five core initiatives that will together enable us to transform HISD:

1. Effective Teacher in Every Classroom
2. Effective Principal in Every School
3. Rigorous Instructional Standards and Supports
4. Data-Driven Accountability
5. Culture of Trust Through Action

This document is intended to explain why we chose those areas to focus on, and what we will do to make them happen. For those who wish to see more detail than is provided here, we will soon be releasing additional reports that discuss each initiative in more depth.

The bottom line for the success or failure of this plan will be student achievement. More specifically, our goal is to ensure that all HISD students graduate from high school ready to succeed in the college and career of their choice. If we do that, we will become the best school district in America.
**Our Planning Process**

**HISD has a history** of being one of the most innovative school districts in the country. In the last few years we have launched several major new efforts aimed at improving the district, including the ASPIRE program and a deep partnership with The New Teacher Project. While each of these has had an impact, our stakeholders consistently comment that it has been difficult to understand how HISD’s many different initiatives fit into a broader roadmap for improvement. We also heard from the community that HISD in the past has appeared to lack focus. This perspective has been shared from all corners of the district, as the quotes to the right suggest.

We listened to this feedback, and in response to it we launched a process to develop a Strategic Direction. The purpose of this process was to create a plan for transforming HISD that makes clear what we are going to do and why we are going to do it. More specifically, the Strategic Direction is designed to make the case for change by:

- Providing a clear picture of where we are today
- Developing a shared vision of success
- Outlining the core initiatives that will produce the changes needed
- Developing clear plans for implementation and communication

To inform the Strategic Direction, we have gathered input from a number of sources (summarized in the graphic). In addition to gathering input from our stakeholders, we have studied what is working within HISD as well as what lessons can be learned from other districts. Our strategy has also been informed by new data that help us understand better than ever before how our students are performing.

We are particularly grateful to the ideas provided by our stakeholders, who have actively participated throughout the process. In particular, we have:

- Held 50+ group and one-on-one discussions attended by 1,600+ participants, including students, parents, teachers, principals, community members, elected officials, philanthropic partners, nonprofit organizations, faith-based leaders, business leaders, early childhood education groups, and HISD staff members. We gathered almost 400 comment cards from these meetings.
- Hosted two live television shows, one in English and one in Spanish, that received 300+ incoming calls
- Launched two surveys, one with community members that received 780+ responses and one with our staff that received 350+ responses
- Received over 250 comments from the Strategic Direction website, which has been visited by 11,000+ users
- Shared updates on the planning process with 16,500 community members and 31,000 staff members through weekly eNews and Twitter messages to our more than 500 followers

This process has helped to develop a shared perspective on the areas of greatest focus for dramatically improving student achievement.
The fundamental purpose of the Strategic Direction is to map out a pathway to dramatically increasing the number of our students who graduate ready to succeed in the college and career of their choice. As part of the planning process, we studied the current performance of our students to develop a clear picture and common understanding of student achievement right now, and to highlight areas to prioritize within the Strategic Direction. A full report is available on our website; here we will cover only a few of the key points.

The results of this analysis are sobering: around 15% of our first-time ninth graders will go on to earn a college certificate or degree in four years, as shown in the chart below:

These data allowed us for the first time to look comprehensively at how our students were performing in postsecondary programs, and the picture is mixed: our graduates enroll in postsecondary institutions at similar rates as their national peers, but their overall graduation rates are substantially lower (≈30% vs. ≈50%).

The data analysis also found meaningful gaps in achievement across different subgroups within HISD. Although an average of 15% of our ninth graders will ultimately earn a postsecondary degree, that number varied substantially by:

- **Gender**—18% of women earned a degree vs. 11% of men
- **Ethnicity**—rates were 40% for whites, 38% for Asians, 11% for African Americans, and 7% for Hispanics
- **Socioeconomic status**—28% of nondisadvantaged students earned a degree vs. 11% of those who qualified for reduced-price lunch vs. 7% of those who qualified for free lunch

There are plenty of reasons behind the high dropout rates of our graduates in college. However, the data show that our students are not graduating ready to perform academically at that level. As the chart on the right shows, fewer than 20% of HISD graduates meet the criteria associated with college success. And while college may not be what every student chooses, it is important to note that these students are likely not prepared for a career, either. After researching this very question, the Apollo Consulting Group concluded, “Whether planning to enter college or workforce training programs after graduation, high-school students need to be educated to a comparable level of readiness in reading and mathematics.”

The bottom line is clear: new solutions are needed in order to ensure that all HISD students graduate with the skills needed to be successful in the 21st century.

The Need for Transformation

The strategic planning process revealed that many of HISD’s current practices and strategic initiatives are in line with leading approaches nationally, including the decentralization of decision-making to the school level and a focus on improving human capital that incorporates performance data. These elements—and many others—provide a strong foundation upon which to build.

However, it is not enough. Despite the best efforts of HISD, the achievement level in the district has not met the ambitious objectives set by the district’s leadership. At the same time, the bar for success has been raised, and HISD must evolve in order to meet the new standards of excellence.

For these reasons, transformation of HISD is required. What we mean by transformation is reinvention of the district based on identifying key barriers to significant improvement and implementing bold new solutions to overcome them. It is not a rejection of what HISD has accomplished, but rather a recommitment to doing whatever it takes to support its children and a new direction for the district to meet the needs of 21st-century Houston.
Our strategy for transformation is based on several principles that will guide everything that we do:

- We are committed to doing whatever it takes to support our children in being successful.
- Our comprehensive plan is based on extensive analysis and input from our constituents.
- We will build on past successes.
- We will prioritize what is most important.
- We will gather data along the way and make adjustments accordingly.
- We will continue to keep our public engaged through clear and frequent communication.

The remainder of this document describes our approach to transforming HISD.

Our Strategy for Impact

The purpose of this process has been to identify the big new initiatives that will serve as the focal points for transforming HISD. This Strategic Direction is not intended to be a master plan that contains a comprehensive list of every activity that the district will take on. Instead, it is meant to describe a manageable set of major initiatives that will allow HISD to make dramatic improvement in student achievement. These initiatives will be:

- Focused on areas with high potential for impact and where there is clear opportunity for improvement
- Aligned with what is currently working now within HISD

After a thorough assessment of our district and deep conversations with our stakeholders, we identified five core initiatives that we are confident will allow us to transform HISD (see diagram below).

When we accomplish each of these initiatives, we will have ensured that our students are graduating from HISD with the tools to be successful in college and careers, and that HISD is positioned to become the best district in America.
Core Initiative 3: Rigorous Instructional Standards and Supports

HISD has a number of outstanding academic programs across the district. However, there is substantial variation in the availability of these programs across and within schools. In addition, while maintaining our decentralized model and continuing to be a district of choice, we believe it is essential that a common rigorous instructional foundation be put in place across all schools, with established, specific approaches for addressing underperformance so that every student has the supports required to achieve.

In order to ensure that there are rigorous instructional standards and supports, we will focus on the following key strategies:

1. Providing equity in access to high-quality educational programs and instruction
2. Developing and implementing an aligned standards-based curriculum and assessment system
3. Using the Response to Intervention model districtwide to provide early, effective assistance to children with behavior issues and/or who have difficulty learning
4. Launching the Apollo 20 project to transform the lowest-performing schools
5. Implementing a comprehensive literacy program in grades pre-k through 12
6. Implementing a comprehensive numeracy/mathematics program in grades pre-k through 12

Core Initiative 4: Data-Driven Accountability

The strategic use of data to track and monitor performance and hold leadership accountable to a set of objective standards has been a critical factor in the success of many education reform efforts across the country. HISD is far ahead of many districts in terms of the accessibility of information, but access to data is often difficult, data records can be incomplete or inaccurate, some end-users lack the expertise to use data strategically, and processes are not designed to achieve the most favorable results. Investing in new and more robust technology infrastructure, systems, and processes will be critical to addressing these issues and enabling HISD to use key data to inform its decisions and manage high levels of performance districtwide.

In order to increase the level of data-driven accountability, we will focus on the following key strategies:

1. Building better systems for collecting, retrieving, analyzing, and reporting data
2. Developing and implementing performance management tools and practices for decision-making
3. Designing effective and efficient business processes and procedures for optimization of resources and results

OUR GOAL

Every student will have the rigorous instructional program required for college and career success.

Every decision in schools and offices is made using real-time data to support student success.

HISD needs a measurement system in place to show if it is moving in the right direction.

– Business community member

They need a technology infrastructure that includes everything from administrative technology all the way into the classroom.

– Community member
Core Initiative 1: Effective Teacher in Every Classroom

One of HISD’s key priorities in its Strategic Direction is to ensure that there is an effective teacher in every classroom. The superintendent and members of the Board of Education have already made policy changes and taken action to increase the number of effective teachers in HISD, as well as to provide increased opportunities for our most-struggling students to be taught by a highly effective teacher. Foremost among these efforts is our groundbreaking and ongoing partnership with The New Teacher Project. Putting an effective teacher in every classroom is not an empty slogan for HISD—it is a core strategy that drives our policies and practices. And it is based on robust research that tells us that teachers are by far the most powerful school-based factor in a child’s academic success or failure.

In order to increase the number of effective teachers in our classrooms, we will focus on the following key strategies:

1. Strengthening teacher recruiting, selection, and staffing policies to attract top talent.
2. Establishing a rigorous and fair teacher-appraisal process to inform key decisions.
3. Providing effective individualized support and professional development.
4. Offering meaningful career pathways and differentiated compensation to retain the most-effective teachers.

Core Initiative 2: Effective Principal in Every School

HISD has a tradition of decentralizing decisions to the school level, which is emerging nationally as a best practice. However, our current systems do not support a consistent standard of excellence in school leadership. Many of our principals have excelled with little oversight and support from the central office, but many others have not. Our goal is to ensure that our principals are empowered instructional leaders and decision-makers with clear expectations. We know that with the right supports and standards, principals are best positioned to improve the quality of instruction within schools and strengthen parent and community engagement.

In order to increase the number of effective principals in our schools, we will focus on the following key strategies:

1. Designing and implementing a rigorous, fair principal appraisal system.
2. Creating clear standards and recommended practices to guide decision-making.
3. Instituting stronger principal-recruiting practices.
4. Implementing a more robust instructional leadership development program.
5. Developing standards and supports for safe, secure, and healthy school environments.

OUR GOAL

Every classroom in HISD has an outstanding teacher who strives continuously to improve student success.

- We need to focus on recruiting experienced, highly effective teachers to HISD, not just on hiring new teachers.
  – Principal
- There should be a clear plan for teachers not making the grade as well as for what happens if the teacher does not improve.
  – Parent
- We need more and better suited professional development.
  – Teacher

Every school has a strong, decisive leader focused on student success.

- Give the principals coaching and assess results through observation.
  – Teacher
- We are losing some very good people to other schools.
  – Community member
- We need more consistency in the leadership of our schools.
  – Parent
- Train principals to create family-friendly schools and how to engage parents.
  – Parent
- Document places that are bullying-safe and those that are not, and make this information available to the public.
  – Community member
A powerful sense of community and a shared direction among all stakeholders is crucial to the successful transformation of HISD. Yet we know that the communication structures currently in place are insufficient to truly engage all of you. Throughout the process of developing the Strategic Direction, we have begun the movement toward a communications approach that is more interactive and transparent and better takes advantage of new technology. We know that to become the nation’s best school district, we will need a communications strategy and processes that make customer service a priority and that foster engagement, commitment, and unity of parents, students, staff members, the board, and the broader community.

In order to create a culture of trust through action, we will focus on the following key strategies:

1. Fostering effective, timely, two-way internal communication to engage staff members
2. Fostering effective, timely, two-way external communication to engage parents and community members

**OUR GOAL**

Every member of Team HISD is engaged and committed to student success.

*It seems to me that employees are in the dark. They cannot help advocate on behalf of HISD when out in the community.*
– Philanthropic partner

*Restore the trust and confidence through collaboration and transparent communication with parents and the community.*
– Community member

*Get parents involved in activities throughout the district.*
– Parent

*We need easier and more-obvious methods for parents and students to give feedback, complaints, and suggestions.*
– Parent

*Continue to hold community meetings with the board, parents, and other stakeholders.*
– Faith-based leader
This document has outlined the core elements of our strategy for transforming HISD. It represents the culmination of six months of hard work and a process in which thousands of our stakeholders have participated.

Yet it is only the beginning. Transforming HISD is a multiyear effort, and it will require our patience and collective vigilance to stay focused on the issues that have the greatest potential to improve the academic performance of our students.

Every member of the community has a stake in the success of this effort, and we cannot achieve real transformation alone. Your support and commitment will help determine whether or not we are able to create the best school district in the nation.

We must be very protective as we try to expand opportunities so that we do not lose all the good that we have. We must build on and expand the successes that we have.

– Parent

Our students’ futures literally depend on HISD’s success.

– Business community member

The plan sounds good. Now we need to wait to see how it is implemented.

– Parent

I am excited about the changes in HISD.

– Community member

It’s a great vision, and if HISD and parents work together we will succeed.

– Parent

The new initiatives are all looking forward and if followed through would help transform the district.

– Postsecondary leader

HISD is definitely headed in the right direction.

– Staff member

I think HISD is going in the right direction. As a previous charter school teacher I felt HISD was lacking data-driven initiatives.

– Teacher

Great job in identifying initiatives. I would be interested in partnering with HISD.

– Business community member

A key element for this transformation will be to continue this communication throughout the change process.

– Staff member

The plan HISD has developed is exciting, and I look forward to seeing the results.

– Elected official
Learning More About Our Plan

We will continue to engage you through frequent two-way communication as we implement the Strategic Direction plan. There are several other elements of the Strategic Direction to look out for:

- Brochure: Dual-language overview of process and report
- Video: General overview of process and report in three languages
- Implementation Plan: Comprehensive details for executing core initiatives and strategies, with milestones and resource requirements (to be released in September 2010)
- Accountability Updates: Semiannual reports on key metrics and benchmarks

We will continue to keep you updated through the Strategic Direction website, Twitter messages, frequent updates in our weekly eNews, superintendent’s messages, information sessions for community members, a new parent newsletter, and other channels that emerge in response to your feedback.

Check our website regularly for updates: www.houstonisd.org/strategicdirection.

We welcome your comments at strategicdirection@houstonisd.org.

Did this publication help you understand the HISD Strategic Direction? Was it easy to read? Let us know what you think by going to www.houstonisd.org/feedback or calling 713-556-6005.

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