

Why Education Works
Birmingham Regional Chamber of Commerce Visit to Austin
September 23, 2008

Thank you for asking me to join you this morning.

Austin and Birmingham share many of the same challenges facing most urban school districts in America. Chief among those is the need to prepare all our students for a world in which employment skills are very demanding. They require the ability to do sophisticated calculation, think critically, to work in teams, to be creative, to use technology, to be able to communicate complex information, and to be able to switch gears and change direction when the need arises, as it will in almost every 21st century workplace. It's not the same old repetitive job that was required by the steelworks in Birmingham, for instance, or by the Pratt & Whitney plant in Connecticut. When I was going to school, I worked on the floor at Pratt & Whitney, and we'd all laugh at the one guy in a booth pushing buttons. Well, now the only guys working in that plant are the ones pushing keys on computers.

So we share the fact that we must prepare our students well for the 21st Century economy. And we share the fact that, while many changes arrive on our doorstep every year, transforming our schools to meet these new challenges effectively does not come easy. I know you are faced with challenges around consolidating your schools. While we are a growing school district, we are also faced by challenges that we are trying to address through what we call "repurposing" our schools.

Finally, I can see by this meeting that we are also very fortunate to share community support for our schools. You will hear from some of our key partners in a panel later this morning. But the message is: Austin supports its public schools. Our partners are critical friends—they may not always agree with some of the things we do or they may not always be happy with our outcomes. But they are with us for the long haul. That is crucial. We could not make the changes we are making without the support of the business community, our local non-profits, and our parents and taxpayers. With the support of our Chamber, we have passed two school bond packages in the last four years, and we also have chamber support for a tax increase in our first tax ratification election this November to increase our operations tax under the new state school finance law. I've found that you can't just assume the community will support you. You have to earn that trust. We are very fortunate to have strong business and community partnerships that tell the greater Austin community that investing in public schools is one of the best investments a community can make and that it is essential to the social and economic well-being of that community.

Building a Scaffolding for Change

The message I bring to you today, as a Superintendent beginning my tenth year on the job, is that, like Rome, a school district cannot be built in a day. The mathematician Uri Treisman, director of UT's Dana Center here in Austin, once told our School Board that you can't get the Queen Mary turned all the way around in a day, but every small change

you make to get you going in the right direction will produce positive results. We believe in continuous improvement in the Austin School District. The world doesn't stand still and wait for us, and so we can't stand still. We aren't nearly as successful as we need to be for all our students. We must get better every day. But to make continuous improvement, you have to first build a solid foundation so that you're ready for change. In Austin, we are making major changes in our secondary schools. We would not have been ready for these same changes nine years ago or even five years ago. The scaffolding we've built over the last nine years has been necessary to get us to this moment in the education history of Austin. I want to talk briefly about how we've arrived at this point.

Briefly, you should know that the Austin school district begins this school year with about 83,000 students. We are the fourth largest district in Texas and the 37th largest district in the U.S. We are a majority-minority school district, with 58 percent of our students coming from Hispanic families, 26 percent coming from Anglo families, 12 percent coming from African American families and three percent coming from Asian families. Three out of every five students in the district come from economically disadvantaged households, and one quarter of our students come to us with Limited English Proficiency. Since I arrived in 1999, our recent immigrant population has tripled, our population with Limited English Proficiency has grown by 33 percent, and our low-income student population has grown by about 25 percent.

The day I stepped off the plane in August 1999, I was greeted by a headline, declaring, "AISD Unacceptable," announcing the district had been indicted for bad data. When a reporter asked me for my reaction, I said, "I guess the honeymoon is over." We were on the negative watch for Standard and Poor's. I also found out that, in the middle of this high-technology capital, our information and financial systems were outdated and dysfunctional. From that first day, I decided the best approach was to drill down until we got to the bottom of our bad news. We shared everything we learned with the Austin community. In that way, we developed public trust, which we would need as we rebuilt the district from the ground up. Within that first month, the public backed my call for a property tax increase to create the information infrastructure we would need. The Chamber was crucial in building that initial support. We set up a new accountability department to scrupulously oversee our use of data. We started to get the ship turning in a new direction. But these were the relatively easy reforms.

I knew our biggest challenge would be to reform teaching and learning in our nearly 6,000 classrooms. The declining academic performance of many of our students and the large achievement gaps between groups of students were much more serious and difficult problems that we had to address immediately.. Without stable leadership, this district had no proven system to support increasing student achievement for all students. Our district was all *e pluribus* and no *unum*. Our schools were peacocks on the prairie, strutting off in different directions because they'd had no district leadership for so long.

The first thing we did was to establish the state's TEKS (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills) standards as our standards. The standards became our first non-negotiable. We would have the same high standards for all our classrooms. It doesn't matter what part of

town you grow up in—we'll have the same high expectations and high standards for you in every classroom. The second non-negotiable was a core belief in an effort-based education system. We teamed with the Institute for Learning at the University of Pittsburgh to develop a professional development program for all our administrators and teachers so that we would all be speaking the same language about teaching and learning. In this way, we began to talk about ourselves as an effort-based, standards-based school system. We believe that effort creates intelligence. You become smarter by working harder in a system set up for high achievement.

We were also becoming data-driven, using data to guide instruction and to focus interventions on targeted student needs. The results began to show. Between 1999 and 2002, every group of students showed significant gains in Reading, Math and Writing on the TAAS test. Our number of exemplary and recognized schools tripled from 16 to 49. For the first time they included schools from neighborhoods in which the students came from low-income families. Our number of low-performing schools declined from 14 to 3.

In 2002, we identified a set of our lowest performing schools, including four elementary schools and two middle schools. We called these our Blueprint schools. We brought in new leadership and an entirely new teaching staff to all but one of these schools. And that school volunteered to do whatever was necessary under the Blueprint plan. We also brought in a number of extra resources to those schools and put them all under the leadership of one of our most successful principals, Claudia Tousek, who is now our Chief Academic Officer. We had a tightly managed instructional program led by veteran principals and teachers. In three years, all but one of those schools was completely turned around. The elementary schools all achieved Recognized status or received bonuses for its staff from the state for making very significant academic progress. We learned that with a sharpened focus and adequate resources, we could turn challenged schools around.

In 2003, we entered a second stage of development. Our data systems were now in place. Our bond rating had risen from Unacceptable to AA. We were making academic progress, but it was time to shift to the next gear. Our students were also facing the high-stakes consequences of the new, more rigorous TAKS tests. To strengthen teaching and learning, our curriculum and instruction department teamed with master teachers to write Instructional Planning Guides to guide the curriculum in the core academic areas based on the TEKS standards. Like the districts around us, we lose about 14 percent of our teachers each year for various reasons. The Planning Guides are crucial for teachers in their first five years and serve as an additional resource for our more experienced teachers. We have now also developed Advanced Planning Guides for our pre-AP and AP courses and Magnet Planning Guides for our Magnet secondary schools.

We also decided it didn't make much sense to wait until the end-of-the-year TAKS tests to find out if our students had been learning. We developed Beginning-of-the-Year and Middle-of-the-Year benchmark assessments to help us track student achievement growth. These benchmark tests, teacher assessments, and formative six- and nine-week tests (made available to teachers if they have the need) provide the basis for data-driven professional development and intervention with struggling learners. We now have a three

–tiered system to support our struggling students in class, after school, and during the summer. In addition, we are bringing rigor and consistent delivery to our bilingual instruction, requiring knowledge of Academic English and Academic Spanish for all our English-Language Learners.

Once again, the results show that we are moving in the right direction. Between 2003 and 2008, our student achievement on the TAKS test has increased by double digits for all groups of students as we continue to close the achievement gaps. We are among the highest urban performers on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Trial Urban District Assessment (TUDA). Using the 2006 NAEP data, Uri Treisman of the Dana Center conducted an independent analysis of our performance. He found that our Hispanic students scored two grade levels better than their counterparts in other urban districts, and our African American students were second in the nation and well ahead of national and large city averages. We still have a long way to go, but with this standard we think we now have the right to “TUDA” our own horn, and, most important, we have real evidence that we are moving in the right direction.

Now we are in a third stage of our development. We want to take all our students to higher levels of achievement at every level. As our elementary schools began to make progress as a group, we recognized that our middle schools and high schools needed new attention. And like many districts across the country, we recognized that we would need to change the way our high schools were structured in order to better meet the needs of our students.

In order to make major changes, we had to look squarely at the problem. In 2004, we asked the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) to help us do that by analyzing all our high schools. We knew the report would be public and that it would not be pretty. But we needed an independent analysis before we could move forward. This analysis produced a report showing a common set of challenges for all our high schools. This soul-searching led to district-wide discussions and conversations within each high school. The SREB report showed us change was absolutely necessary. It might be different in kind or degree in each school, but change would be necessary at every one of our eleven comprehensive high schools. While our high school completion rate in 2003 was 79 percent for all students, it was only 68 percent for Economically Disadvantaged Students and 53 percent for our LEP students. We needed to change. SREB told us we needed to build academic rigor, relevance of the curriculum, and supportive relationships for students in every high school.

To make a long story short—and in the near future you can read about this process in a book Dr. Larry Cuban of Stanford will be publishing about our journey as part of a three district case study he has just completed—we did not have the resources we needed to transform all our high schools. And we knew that all our high schools needed to change to serve all their students well.. Fortunately, we were able to work with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation to put together the resources to transform all our comprehensive high schools. We told the Gates Foundation that we needed to make all our high schools better, not just a chosen subset.

So the Gates Foundation provided more than \$15 million for five years, including a planning year. Austin has the entire spectrum of urban high schools. It has some best high schools in the nation and a handful of high schools that are chronically low performing. Despite all our efforts, one of those high schools this past year made a good deal of progress but not enough progress for the fifth year in a row to meet the state's required performance standards. The State closed Johnston High School last May, but it has allowed us to "repurpose" the Johnston campus. This year the school has reopened with strong community support as Eastside Memorial High School. By next year there will be two, college-prep small high schools on that campus serving that community and any other Austin ISD student who wants to attend. I'm convinced that Eastside Memorial will be a success story in the future.

But I want to tell you about two success stories right now. With support from the Gates Foundation, two of our most challenged high schools, Travis High School and LBJ High School, have been working with First Things First, transforming themselves into schools to prepare their students well for the 21st Century. For years, LBJ was home to our district's academic magnet high school. The magnet masked the lower performance by the neighborhood students attending LBJ. Last year, we separated the two schools—asking the State to treat LBJ and our Liberal Arts and Science Academy as separate schools. Using the First Things First model, LBJ High School marked its first year as a separate school with an Acceptable rating from the State. In addition, Travis High School had been ranked as Unacceptable by the State for two years. We were so fortunate to hire a successful principal from another district, Rene Garganta, as principal for Travis two years ago. With the help of First Things First, Rene has transformed that school, and it is now moved from Unacceptable to Acceptable in its rating by the State. Later today, you will be visiting Travis and Rene will be speaking with you about the remarkable turnaround at his school. Now we are beginning our first year of middle school transformation. We have a plan designed by school experts working with representatives of our community.

We're finding that success breeds more success. Our improvement in key areas has made believers out of our teachers and our community. Both are ready to support further change because they've seen the results of earlier reforms. But that also raises expectations.

And to meet those expectations you need resources. We have been fortunate that many local and national foundations have decided that the Austin School District is a good investment. We could not have made all this progress without them. At the same time, we struggle within the limitations of a school finance system that has put a ceiling on our ability to increase resources to meet increasing needs. Because we are deemed a property-rich school district by the state, even though the majority of our students are from low-income families, we must send nearly one-fifth of our revenues back to the state—approximately \$172 million this year. We have set the stage for the deep transformation of all our schools into 21st Century institutions. But in order for all our schools to be able to play upon that stage and to make sure all our students are reached by reform, we need adequate resources. This is, of course, another challenge all urban school districts share.

But we'll get there. Public education is the cornerstone of our democracy and our economic success. I appreciate this opportunity to meet with you today to talk about our experience rebuilding this school district—based on a strong foundation, the courage to change, a commitment to excellence, and a set of values guiding us to prepare all our students well for the 21st Century.

Thank you .