

The Power of Austin ISD.
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Did You Know? The Power of Us.
State of the District for Austin Independent School District
Superintendent Meria Joel Carstarphen
November 17, 2009
LBJ High School

The wave of the future is already here — right here, right now - in Li Tong Rodriguez.

Li Tong was born in Guangdong Province of China in 2002. She lived in an orphanage until she was 17 months old. In 2003, she was adopted and came to live in Austin, where she is now a second grader at Mathews Elementary School.

As Dr Martin Luther King’s daughter, Bernice, once said, “We may have come over in different ships, but we’re all in the same boat now.” Our charge, our responsibility as a school district and as a community is to make sure everyone on our ship reaches the bright future we set sail for. And the only way to do this is by pulling together.

Like Li Tong, we all have our journeys to the Austin of today. Mine began in my hometown of Selma, Alabama...

- A. I was born in Selma not long after the infamous Voting Rights March of 1965. I attended public schools and grew up appreciating the courageous actions of my parents’ generation.
- B. With the support of my family - and the influence of peers - I was afforded an opportunity to travel abroad in high school and study in Innsbruck, Austria which influenced my decision to get to college as soon as possible.
- C. I attended college at Tulane University, where I double majored in Spanish and Political Science.
- D. Then, I had the opportunity to study and work in Seville, Spain, where I experienced first-hand what it feels like to be a second-language learner immersed in a language not my own.
- E. That was followed by a very different kind of work in the shantytowns of Caracas, Venezuela, teaching refugees from Colombia as they sought safety from drugs and violence.
- F. I earned a doctorate in Harvard University, where I studied urban education as part of the urban superintendency program.
- G. Then I headed to Washington, D.C, our nation’s capital, where the district was in the middle, of all the things — good and bad — that happen to children and families when hardball politics and education collide.

- H. I was then named Superintendent for the St. Paul Public Schools, where I served for three years. It was about half the size of Austin but had many of the same prospects and challenges.
- I. And finally this summer I arrived in Austin. And here we are, Right here. Right now.

As the bumper sticker says, “I wasn’t born here, but I got here as fast as I could.”

Austin is an incredible city. Did you know that we’re in the top five on lists of U.S. cities that are rated the best places to Relocate Families, the Most Connected (internet), Smartest Places to Live, Most Educated, Most Fit, Fastest Growing, and, my favorite, Coolest? Many of you have had a large part in guiding us into those ranks. But here’s what I want. I want that list to include: Best Public School District.

And, with your help, there’s no reason we can’t get there. We just have to tap into the Power of Austin Independent School District, the Power of Austin, The Power of Us.

I see a large number of parents, students, teachers, principals and staff here tonight. I know that many of you have been our long-term supporters in this venture. You’ve participated in successful campaigns for public support for our schools through bond elections and the tax rate increase to support a teacher pay raise. That’s heavy lifting. And you’ve been on the front lines in supporting your children’s schools or the schools you teach and work in. Speaking of supporters, I want to thank principals Patrick Patterson and Rene Sanchez for hosting us this evening.

As you may have noticed, I am standing at the controls of an Innovation Station. With support from our last bond election, we are putting these digital multimedia presentation systems in more than 900 classrooms. It integrates:

- a computer,
- wireless keyboard and mouse,
- document camera,
- sound system and
- a mounted projector
- and a webcam that allows online interaction between students and teachers.

The system is easy to use, so teachers and students can focus on teaching and learning without having to concentrate on how to make all the gadgets work.

Is this the wave of the future? No. This is the wave of the present.

And this wave is growing in technology and demographics. Did you know that in 2005 Texas became the fourth majority-minority states in the U.S.? Between 2000 and 2006, the number of children in the U.S. under five years of age increased from 19 million to 20.2 million. Twenty-five percent, or 300,000, of the increase in all births in the United States is in Texas. Most of these children are Hispanic. Within four years, children in this new wave will begin moving into middle school.

As a former middle school teacher and consumer of research, we know that middle school is where we make or break our students' academic success and economic futures. We have a four-year window to prepare our district and get ready to serve the children in this wave. This isn't a bubble or a blip. It is a continuous increase. This is the beginning of a real shift in our population. I know it's not in the culture of public education or large bureaucratic institutions to plan for a future that is significantly different from the present, but that's what we have to do. We have to be ready for the inevitable changes coming our way.

So in speaking to you about the State of our District, to be real, I need to speak with you about where we are *and* a little about where we need to be. That's how this district will be judged and how I should be judged as your new Superintendent: The plan is to not only to prepare AISD for the rising tide of these students but we must also do a better job of serving our current students, all of whom deserve the best education and who will be our workforce. Even the highest achievers can go higher. There should be no ceiling on our work.

This is so new that there is no benchmark study, no roadmap, no historical, navigational tool on HOW to address this. I don't have ALL the answers but I am certain that the intellectual and economic capital of this city can help me figure this out. And through the Power of US, we must.

After all, we are a city of engaged citizens—where the community is invested in the ownership of public institutions and advocacy is a major contact sport. If Austin, Texas, and our nation are going to continue to thrive, we must transform our schools to respond to changing demographics and meet future economic needs.

This could be our tipping point. It is our responsibility to develop, nurture and prepare students for jobs that don't yet exist using technology that has not yet been created. How challenging is that? And, oh, how exciting!

Fixing Schools that Don't Work; Lifting All Schools to Higher Performance

On my second day as Superintendent I was greeted by the news that the State was going to close Pearce Middle School. Shortly after that, I learned that in the upcoming year, nine schools would be rated Academically Unacceptable. For the first time, this year AISD did not make the federal Adequate Yearly Progress standard based on last year's performance. Unfortunately, those are the headlines many of you are most familiar with when you think about AISD.

- But did you also know that last year AISD had 54 Exemplary or Recognized schools; that's an increase of 20 schools over the previous year and nearly half our total campuses?
- Did you know that AISD had seven of Newsweek's "Top U.S. High Schools in the Nation" in 2009?

Here's the challenge:

In terms of academic achievement, we remain a divided city. We have some of the highest performing students in the state and nation and some of the lowest performing schools. We have three schools—Pearce, Reagan, and Eastside Memorial Green Tech—facing possible closure by the State if they do not pass this year. Therefore, I am working with our Board of Trustees to consider setting ambitious goals. Today, I'm going to talk you through these goals.

GOAL ONE. All students will perform at or above grade level by the time they have been in AISD for three consecutive years.

The research is clear. The key factor in student success is enrollment over time — I need three consecutive years—with good teachers. That's it. It's not magic. It's not smoke and mirrors.

We can commit to this: if you give us your children for three consecutive years, make sure they come to school and do their homework, we will commit to having them at or above grade level at the end of that time. We're close now, with almost 89 percent of our current students in that group scoring at or above grade level.

There is a direct correlation between absenteeism and the failure to finish high school. If you want to talk about tipping points, look at attendance.

- Did you know that students who drop out during the 9th grade have more than likely demonstrated poor attendance since 5th grade?
- If a student misses one day of class per week, then he or she misses one year of school over a five-year period?

Absenteeism not only has a direct impact on student achievement, but attendance also has a fiscal impact for the district. We are paid by the State by Weighted Average Daily Attendance. Even if the student doesn't show up, we still pay the teacher to be there. Did you know if we raised our attendance rate by one percentage point across the district, we would gain approximately \$6 million per year in state revenue? Every day a student doesn't attend school, we lose approximately 45 dollars in state revenue. I can't help but wonder what would happen if we could hit attendance targets of 95 percent as a norm. Right now we have an opportunity cost in excess of \$50 million per year in lost attendance. That should make everybody want their kids to be in school. That's revenue that could go directly to schools. This is an adult problem. You can help me generate these additional dollars by making sure kids go to school. Let's harness the Power of US.

GOAL TWO. Achievement gaps among all students will be eliminated.

Of course, once students are in our classrooms, then our job is to provide them with an engaging, meaningful, superior education. There's only one leading, research-based way to accomplish eliminating the achievement gap: make sure an effective teacher is in every classroom.

- Did you know the research also shows that students who have uninspiring, poorly prepared teachers for three years in a row have a difficult, if not impossible, road to grade-level achievement, graduation and college success?

We have about a 14 percent teacher turnover rate. A Texas State University study estimates that every time a teacher leaves the profession after a few years, it costs the taxpayer up to \$50,000 in staff development costs for that teacher, as well as the cost of training the replacement teacher. In AISD, on average, 500 teachers per year with, five years or less, experience leave the District. You do the math. How much money are we losing? Answer: \$25,000,000 each year.

The best way, and the only way over the long term, to close our achievement gaps is by making sure we have very effective teachers in every classroom. We need to find ways to keep teachers, and to use the money we save by keeping them to reward the best teachers in our classrooms. If we do, the gaps will shrink and, eventually, disappear.

Addressing the needs of ELL:

Austin has a large Spanish-speaking population, which is a great asset. It is our job to find a way to develop new generations of students who are highly proficient in English and Spanish and other languages.

- Did you know that the number of English Language Learners in AISD has more than doubled in ten years and now represents 29 percent of all of the students in the District?
- Did you know that 95 percent of these students are Spanish-speaking and 80 percent were born in the U.S.?

I am proposing that we make major changes in our approach for our English Language Learners and completely redesign our department, beginning with the implementation of dual language education in Austin. A study by Thomas and Collier showed that students in two-way dual- language programs:

- showed higher gains than students in other bilingual programs and
- had higher average performance levels than native English speakers.

But, on top of that, two-way dual language will create generations of students who are highly proficient in English and Spanish. That will be a great foundation for the future success of our city in a globally competitive economy.

GOAL THREE. All schools will meet or exceed state and federal accountability standards.

If you look at the AISD state accountability results for the last school year, you'll find some very good news and some very challenging news. While we could be considered a Recognized district for Reading, Writing and Social Studies, we are not faring as well in Math and Science.

When it comes to the State Standards, several of our high school campuses did not meet the 75% completion rates for all student subgroups, and other campuses are teetering just above the standard. Significant gaps remain among Anglo students and African American and Hispanic students. Economically disadvantaged students have the lowest completion rates.

At the core of successfully addressing the completion rate challenge, we must find new ways to help students get the credits they need to graduate. Too often, kids get behind in school and cannot earn enough credits to move on through high school. In order to turn this trend around, AISD must offer multiple, proven pathways for students to recover these credits and build a foundation for success in upper-level courses.

And the only way AISD can become a Recognized or Exemplary district under the state system is to have NO Academically Unacceptable schools. If schools have had multiple years with the Academically Unacceptable rating, then we can't wait for the State's closure order. You will see in the upcoming months me addressing this with the board, including creating a policy that outlines the rules of engagement.

And I believe we have to go a step further. Basing our performance on TAKS passing and the State and federal accountability systems isn't good enough. It doesn't serve our students well and it's not what this community expects. We can't just be governed by the "gotcha" of the State accountability system. We need to focus on the "got to," as in we have "got to" address our shortcomings and hold ourselves to higher standards of performance. Our Austin students deserve no less!

This is what we want for our kids in Austin—something bigger than these TAKS scores. Music, Art and Athletics are not extra-curricular. They are core curricular. Just ask the members of the choir and drumline here tonight. So I want to take a minute to thank the members of the LBJ choir and drumline and their teachers, Jay Martin and Don Haynes, for demonstrating their exemplary skills.

And Finally, GOAL FOUR. All students will graduate ready for college, career, and life in a globally competitive economy.

- Did you know that students are more likely to enroll in college if they successfully passed 8th grade Math?
- Did you know that 91 percent of all Austin seniors aspire to attend college?
- Did you know that college enrollment for AISD graduates has increased from 55 percent in 2002 to 63 percent in 2008?

Here's the challenge:

There is also a very large gap between those who aspire to go to college and those who go in their first year after high school, particularly among our low-income students.

Everyone has a role to play in transforming our school district into a college-going culture. That begins with families. We need to be working with families from elementary school on up in planning every child's road to college.

Now I want to test you on what you've learned:

How are we — the Power of US, we — going to reach these goals?

- We're going to ensure enrollment of our students for three consecutive years with improved attendance.
- We're going to have a highly effective teacher in every classroom.
- We're going to serve our English Language Learners.
- We're going to invent multiple pathways to success.
- We're going to use a high-level curriculum in every school as our baseline with advanced academics at every school

Managing Our Resources and Operations to Improve School Support

We can't talk about improving student achievement without talking about how to better manage our resources and operations.

In terms of technology, thanks to your generous support of our last bond election:

- Every AISD teacher is equipped with a laptop and tied through that to real-time student data, ongoing staff development, district information and interaction, lesson guides, and to the families of our students.
- One-third of our families now have active Parent Connection accounts after our first year using Gradespeed, getting access to their children's up-to-date attendance and grade information.

Austin is a technology capital. We need to keep bringing the expertise from leaders of our technology companies into our classrooms. Our district should be the model for the country in the use of technology.

With your help, we will keep moving forward.

- Our students are experts at social networking. We need to find ways to put their expertise to use to support academic achievement.
- Our goal is to have digitally enabled students using integrated systems in our schools.

As part of our long-range facilities plan, we must find ways to use our buildings more effectively and efficiently. Even if we close under-utilized schools, that doesn't mean we have excess capacity. We are still growing and even bursting at the seams in North Central, Southeast and Southwest parts of the district. We have 21,000 students housed in 950 portable classrooms. And our numbers will continue to grow.

We also will need a long-range transportation plan, as fuel prices increase and our attendance patterns change. AISD buses transport students approximately 17,000 miles every school day—or the equivalent of three times around the Earth every week. I guess

that's one way to become globally competitive, but it's not my first choice. We need to find ways to reduce this costly footprint.

Managing Our Budget to Serve Schools

Now we're getting to the part that makes everyone nervous—how do we fund our schools so they are effective and our students are successful while maintaining our budget integrity? We all know too well the state of our economic climate. Our school system is anything but immune to the turbulence the state is facing, with double-digit sales tax declines coupled with our own local property tax declines. The most recent news we've received from our appraisal district projects a drop of eight percent in commercial property values for AISD, which increases our projected \$15 million deficit to close to \$20 million. These austere conditions necessitate tough-minded budget tradeoffs. But in doing so, we must remain strategic by following the Board's budget parameter that calls for reductions that have the least impact on classrooms.

We could:

- Increase employee contributions to \$50 per month for healthcare insurance [\$6.6M];
- Increase class size in middle and high school by one student [\$3.2M];
- Consolidate six schools with low enrollment or other criteria [at least \$3.5M];
- Reorganize our facilities use and selling properties we can't utilize [NA];
- Reassign our central office staff to schools [NA];
- Increase the property tax rate by one cent [\$4.2M that AISD gets to keep.]
- Reduce from two to one teacher planning period for secondary teachers [\$17M];
- And there are others.

Budget management should not just be about cutting to eliminate the deficit. First and foremost, it should be about finding money and redistributing money to support what we value. If we value keeping highly effective teachers in all our classrooms, that should be a major budget consideration.

And here's the big news. If we work together, we can get there. Let's connect the dots:

- If we improve our attendance, we could generate tens of millions of dollars.
- If we retain half the 500 teachers with five years or less experience we lose each year, and keeping those teachers saves us about \$50,000 each, as the research indicates, then we save an additional \$12.5 million per year.
- If we're conservative, we could estimate that a one percent increase in the attendance rate would generate \$6 million, added to the savings from retaining half of our teachers that we would have lost, and we could then project at least \$18.5 million per year in additional resources to draw on for the district.

That's where the power of US would really take hold—if this community joined us in working to boost attendance dramatically and to retain our best teachers.

If we harness the power of US, we would be not only the coolest city in the U.S. but the coolest city with the best school district and the brightest economic forecast in the country.

Seventy-five years ago today, Lady Bird and Lyndon Baines Johnson were married in San Antonio. I was thinking about that for one thing because we are, after all, in LBJ High School and because I'd like to share with you something Lady Bird said, "Sometimes you become so wrapped up in something that you forget to be afraid." Sometimes it takes courage for us to move forward together against daunting odds. But if we become so engaged in providing a bright future for all Austin's children, we won't have time to be afraid.

"Education is not a problem. Education is an opportunity." That's not my quotation. That's a quotation by Lyndon Johnson.

I look forward to working with you in creating great opportunities for Austin's students. Thank you.