

May 4, 2013

Mr. Mike Miles
Superintendent
Dallas Independent School District
3700 Ross Avenue
Dallas, TX 75204

Dear Mr. Miles:

Having long been involved with the Dallas ISD and being concerned for the quality of education for all the young people in Dallas, the three of us agreed, at the request of Dr. Michael Hinojosa, to co-chair the Dallas Achieves Commission. In that nearly 5 year process, we became even more deeply involved in Dallas ISD and its operations, issues, and stakeholders. We pen this letter to you and the board, in the spirit of expressing both our support for the District and our concerns on the current direction of you and your new leadership team. Although we generally share the goals of your Destination 2020 improvement plan, we are disquieted by the process and some of the decisions being made in its implementation.

We surely want any new superintendent to be successful in transforming Dallas ISD into the top urban public school in America. We know this is not easy. And we applaud your focus on instructional leadership and classroom teaching, the improvements in the IT systems, the continuing growth of the fund balance, and the implementation of the STAR Commission personnel recommendations.

On the other hand, we are deeply concerned that some of the processes and decisions you are making and the manner in which these decisions are being implemented pose serious risks to the future success of Dallas ISD and the nearly 160,000 children in your care.

The purpose of this letter is to call your attention to our concerns and to suggest you learn from our experiences with Dallas Achieves. To begin with one example, you, your staff and supporters have been pointing primarily to a single statistic to justify what's wrong with the District (and hence the need for dramatic and urgent change): i.e., low-income neighborhood high schools students are not scoring higher than 1100 on the SAT test and thus not college ready. We, of course, support an educational platform that results in low-income children having the same college opportunities as middle and upper class children. But given the socio-economic conditions these young people face, might it not be more constructive (instead of immediately firing the principals after only 4 months of the new principal evaluation process) for you to add more pre-kindergarten programming, reading support and book clubs in elementary schools, math and science reinforcement in middle schools and high schools, SAT and ACT prep courses for these

students (as all upper-income children have access to) and to more Advanced Placement classes and support programs, as developed and supported by the Peter & Edith O'Donnell Foundation?

In preview, we believe that surely there is a better path forward than what you are proposing to get all our students college or job-force ready. To put our concerns in context and how they contrast with your process, we will describe our experience with the Dallas Achieves Commission and recommend a similar inclusive process in contrast to the one you are pursuing, and then raise some further issues that give us serious concern.

Dr. Hinojosa appointed over 60 community members, including business, civic, and grass roots leaders, philanthropists, students, teachers, parents, faith community leaders, and current and former city and state elected officials— a very representative and inclusive group of Dallas people to serve as members of the Dallas Achieves Commission.

We began in the spring of 2005, and decided to try a pilot project – i.e., reviewing policies, practices and spending levels of certain Central Office functions. After considerable research and benchmarking against the best practices of high performing districts across the country (with the pro bono assistance of Boston Consulting Group – BCG), and comments and discussions by members, the Commission unanimously approved (on a motion made by former mayor Ron Kirk and seconded by Adelfa Callejo), 12 recommendations for reform that were approved by Dr. Hinojosa and the School Board (see attachment 1).

Encouraged by our ability through data, collaboration and discussion (even with all our differences), we next embarked on the much more ambitious subsequent plans of Dallas Achieves for comprehensive transformation to improve student achievement and graduation rates.

We engaged BCG, along with other nationally and regionally recognized education research and best-practice leaders, as well as trainers and facilitators, working alongside Dallas ISD to develop a process for comprehensive transformation, always incorporating research and best practices. Despite considerable differences of philosophies and opinions in sub-committees, private and public meetings, we worked through and resolved those differences over many months. On March 1, 2007 the transformation plan was overwhelmingly approved by the Commission (on a vote of 37-4). Two of the dissenting votes were from representatives of the teachers' organizations, who publicly stated they were very supportive of much of the plan, particularly the additional support for teachers, but voted no because they did not believe: 1) teacher evaluation should be based, in any part, on student achievement; and 2) any part of teacher compensation should be based on student achievement. One other dissenter expressed overwhelming support, but said her no vote was because the plan did not include constructing a special purpose building she strongly supported.

The plan was then presented to Dr. Hinojosa, who approved it, and on to the School Board, which on April 26, 2007, approved the plan by a vote of 6-0, with 1 abstaining and 2 not in attendance. (See attachment 2 for the plan.)

Understanding that a plan, standing alone, does not change anything, the Dallas Achieves Commission began work on a detailed implementation plan, which included Dallas ISD's formation of a Transformation Management Office, to train, provide continuity and ensure momentum and accountability for change. The project team identified various critical work streams, along with timetables and deliverables. The Commission was represented in the change management process by a very able loaned executive from Texas Instruments, as well as BCG and trainers and facilitators paid for by contributions we raised.

With alignment among the administration, board and community, we embarked on a journey of work that went well over a 2+ year period. We began with ongoing, regular meetings of the Commission. The Commission concluded its work in late 2009. In the less than 5 years of this process, Dallas ISD improved its academic achievement and graduation rates as follows:

- Graduation rate improved from 57% of entering ninth graders to 66%.
- Of the 6 urban districts in Texas, Dallas ISD moved from tied for fifth with San Antonio to tied for first with Houston.
- 57% of Dallas ISD campuses were rated Exemplary or Recognized out of 228 schools. This compares with 37% in 2007. In particular, two schools that were slated to be closed subsequently improved their ratings from academically unacceptable to recognized.
- Overall performance at the 2,300 college readiness standard climbed from 20% to 35%.
- Even though 48 schools remained at an "unacceptable" rating from the State, this number had steadily trended downward, and the number of recognized and exemplary schools had increased from 49 to 127.
- More campuses earned principal empowerment. (These are detailed processes by which a principal can increase control over a campus based on student achievement and other important criteria.) Improvement leaped from 10% to 42% of the campuses. Key components that contributed to this positive trend included rethinking of the school culture, the improved curriculum and recognition of the importance of continually embedded professional development for all professional staff to ensure sustainability.

As we all know, research demonstrates that capable and empowered principals are crucial to recruiting and supporting the best teachers and hence student achievement. (As Tom Luce always says, "It's the principals, stupid.")

Also, both the Council for Great City Schools and the Brookings Institution noted dramatic improvement at Dallas ISD compared to other urban school districts across the country. We also pointed out areas needing strengthening academically, since continuous improvement is critical. As one example, Dallas ISD needed further aggressive work on the math and science curriculum and learning.

The transformation process was complex. Dr. Hinojosa already had numerous initiatives underway, and the Dallas Achieves plan started out with hundreds of different or overlapping recommendations. After analyzing what was already being done and what Dallas ISD's plans were going forward, these were narrowed down to 92 new actions: of those 46 were 76-100% complete; 5 were 51-75% complete; 31 were 26-50% complete; and 10 were 0-24% complete, as we concluded our work. (See attachment 3).

In order to fund the Commission's efforts, we raised over \$11 million locally to support this work and Dallas ISD in this initiative. With the District, we were also successful in bringing in national funders, including the Broad Foundation, the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation, the Gates Foundation, RGK Foundation and others. Further, we received governmental support through elected officials including Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison and Representative Eddie Bernice Johnson. Also we had considerable pro bono, loaned executive, or reduced fee support from others.

As a result of this hard work and successful fundraising for Dallas ISD, we feel duty bound as stewards to ensure this progress is carried on. Therefore, in our view, even though much progress was made, much more needs to be accomplished. The plan included forming the Dallas Education Foundation to continue support of Dallas ISD, including fundraising, programs and public accountability. Following Dr. Hinojosa's resignation, and the appointment of an interim superintendent, we were anxious about the continuity of this good work and progress. We are now alarmed to learn that virtually all of Dallas Achieves work and ongoing Transformation Management Office has been halted. Why? And what better is replacing this initiative?

When you were appointed, we were excited about the prospect of working with you and your new team. We were disappointed that after reaching out to you to share this effort by the Dallas Achieves Commission, you were simply non-responsive. You never reached out to any of us to understand and build on the success of this monumental effort for Dallas ISD going forward.

We respect that as the new leader you will be bringing in your own ideas and team. We cannot take any significant issue with your Destination 2020 improvement plan, which appears on its face to build on the Dallas Achieves goals and plans. However, we do object to the apparent abandonment of the Dallas Achieves implementation plan and to the closure of the Transformation Management Office function. From our long and varied business experiences, we know that transformation is a never-ending process of continuous improvement, requiring training, innovation and accountability. We already hear of a regression to some poor practices of the past. For example, it is our

understanding that you are not currently producing the crucial school scorecards for the Dallas community, with detailed information on each school's performance, nor the dashboard tool to provide up-to-date information on key performance indicators for each school, and increases in bureaucracy at the central office. If this is true, we want to know why that is the case and what is the purpose of eliminating these practices for public accountability, and the increase in the central office bureaucracy.

We are also deeply concerned about the processes by which you are going about making these changes, and their consequences, and are asking you for explanations. In one of your PowerPoint presentations, you quoted Secretary of Education Arne Duncan in calling for "disruptive" change. Disruptive change does not always produce good results: witness the recent sudden and drastic failures of former J.C. Penney Co. CEO Ron Johnson. Unlike the processes of Dallas Achieves, we do not believe you are being collaborative and inclusive of a broad base of stakeholders, both inside and outside the District. Further, we observe little understanding and respect for the history of Dallas or Dallas ISD. From insiders we hear of a culture of fear and reprisal ("my way or the highway") versus one of collaboration and teaming up to bring forth the best ideas, people and results.

On Wednesday, one of us was in a meeting, with 12 or so present, convened by a local philanthropist, which was attended by Kerri Holt, a staff member in your Chief of Staff division. She presented your Imagine 2020 improvement plan for the feeder pattern schools of the Lincoln/Madison and the Pinkston clusters. She referred to over 60 community meetings to build community support for the plan. When asked which community groups and leaders she met with and as to who supported the plan, Ms. Holt could not name one single organization or individual. When asked if Marian Willard, the principal of Madison, supported the plan, she replied, "Ms. Willard will not be there next year." When asked if trustee Bernadette Nutall (in whose district the Lincoln/Madison cluster reside) supported the plan, she said, "No, but community support and her support are unnecessary since we have a 6-3 board majority." When asked, "Well, which is it? Are you proceeding out of community support, or out of power through board control?" she was flummoxed and did not respond. Unfortunately, this is the kind of duplicity we repeatedly have seen and see in the District and community – i.e., a public narrative to business and other groups that is bold, positive and constructive, but a private narrative to teachers and principals and small groups that is power-based, resulting in a culture of fear, intimidation and reprisal. We believe this type of culture is unhealthy for our public schools and unlikely to produce the best results for our children.

In short, we believe there are better solutions and that you and your staff should consider a different approach to your implementation process. We feel strongly that your current solutions may not bring the educational successes that our school district deserves. It is very disconcerting to have 70 of our principals put on the "growth plan" in preparation for firing (and in the meantime to be losing so many good principals and teachers to other school districts or early retirement); this pattern is not a hallmark of likely success. Of equal concern is that so many of the leadership team you brought in (none remaining from prior administrations) have so quickly left the District. This track

record is hardly reassuring that you can recruit and select 70 excellent new principals. Also, we hear of confusion in the schools because your new leaders provide no institutional memory and little working knowledge of key policies and procedures to help them conduct their schools in accordance with board policies and governing laws. If it would be helpful for any of us on our team to meet with your team for a deeper dive into our Dallas Achieves experiences, we of course would be pleased to do so.

We should appreciate the Board of Trustees reviewing our concerns and providing a response to us. If you help make a difference now, Dallas ISD may be able to achieve its prominence among school districts in our country and our state. The substance and processes of your leadership at this point in time has the potential to make a crucial difference in what our future will become.

Our letter comes to you from the sentiment of many who have lived, worked, raised and educated our children here over many decades.

Sincerely yours,

Arcilia Acosta
Pettis Norman
J. McDonald Williams