

**Select Committee on Public School Accountability
Superintendent Hector Gonzales - Hearing Testimony
July 14, 2008 in Brownsville, Texas**

OPENING

Senator Shapiro and Representative Eisler, Commissioners and esteemed Committee Members, we welcome you to Brownsville, Texas.

I am Hector Gonzales, the extremely proud Superintendent of Schools for the Brownsville Independent School District. On behalf of my district and community, we want you to know that we truly appreciate this opportunity to present to you our thoughts about the impact of the current Public School Accountability System on BISD and other neighboring districts.

WE WELCOME ACCOUNTABILITY

I want to say publicly that we welcome accountability. We believe we are the stewards of the next generations of global citizens. We believe in the vision of No Child Left Behind even more than many districts because we ARE a minority that accountability has compelled districts to address. We know what it is like to be "left behind." The accountability required by TEA and the No Child Left Behind Act has required all districts to truly examine their data and ensure the success of ALL students. We believe it is important to require ALL schools to address the needs of ALL students and ensure that ALL make progress towards achieving rigorous standards of academic excellence.

WHO WE ARE

Brownsville ISD had a peak student population of almost 48,800 students for 2008 supported by over 7,000 employees. BISD is one of the top seventeen districts in size in the state and one of the top 100 in the nation. Students attend classes at 51 campuses: 5 high schools (5A), 10 middle schools, 33 elementary campuses, 3 alternative campuses, and adding an Early College High School this fall. The students of BISD are

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98% Hispanic, 95% Economically Disadvantaged, 70% At-risk by TEA guidelines, over 43% Limited English Proficient—primarily Spanish speaking, and 3% Migrant. Brownsville, a city of 161,225 people, is located in Cameron County, one of the poorest and most Hispanic counties in the nation, with a poverty rate of over 52%.

Yet, ... We are meeting and in numerous cases exceeding state expectations. The district has a long list of accomplishments at the state and national level. BISD is one of the five finalists for the 2008 Broad Prize for Urban Education due to multiple year progress in reading and mathematics performance for all students. BISD has ten campuses currently on the Texas Business and Education Coalition State Honor Roll. BISD has 27 campuses rated as “Exemplary or Recognized” by TEA for 2007 and 2 High Schools selected for the 2007 *U.S. News and World Report Magazine’s* List of America’s Best High Schools.

Current projections indicate that for 2008 BISD will have 32 of 33 Elementary campuses rated as “Recognized” or “Exemplary,” 4 of our 10 middle schools rated as “Recognized,” and one of the largest 5A high school in South Texas (with a peak enrollment of over 3200 students) rated as “Recognized” two years in a row. However, due to the rating system currently used, BISD will not be a “Recognized” district. It is frustrating as well as disappointing that the district and its campuses can receive so many state and national accolades yet remain rated as Academically Acceptable. If anyone should be able to address the accountability system and critique its shortcomings, I believe BISD has established the credentials to do so.

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CHALLENGES FOR BISD AND THE BORDER

BISD believes it is achieving these accomplishments with less funding than many other districts. **BISD receives \$4622 revenue per weighted average daily attendance (WADA) versus Austin ISD's \$5746 or Plano ISD's \$5472 which creates an unlevel playing field with respect to state funding.** We are expected to perform as well as large districts like Austin and Plano ISDs. If we were funded at Austin ISD's level we would receive approximately **\$70 million** in additional state funding!

BISD is often compared to Plano ISD where their average kindergarten student is white non-Hispanic, middle class, not at-risk based on TEA criteria, and speaks English proficiently. For BISD, a majority of our entering kindergarten students speak only Spanish, come from poverty, and are classified as at-risk for multiple criteria. Yet, the current accountability system expects all Districts' students to be tested in English and be successful at the same levels or standards by the third grade.

It is important to note that districts such as BISD and other Valley districts also face unique challenges with secondary students. We often receive students from our neighboring countries entering our secondary schools with limited English proficiency. These English Language Learner populations create an additional accountability challenge because they must test in English within three years while research shows it takes approximately six years to achieve academic proficiency in English.

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The accountability system should **promote, recognize, and reward the progress made by students** who come to school with many challenges. Many of our students do not know the English alphabet, come from homes in which English is not spoken and live in poverty with limited exposure to books or other “educational” experiences. Nonetheless, these children are expected to be performing on level and at the same pace as the students who come from homes without any of these challenges. Notwithstanding, BISD students ARE rising to the academic challenge and achieving success.

ASKING FOR FLEXIBILITY AND BETTER ALIGNMENT IN ACCOUNTABILITY

What Brownsville ISD and other Valley districts are asking for is an accountability system that provides information in a more “user friendly” format. We want our stakeholders to be able to clearly see where we are meeting and exceeding state standards. We want a system that will highlight district annual progress as well as progress compared to other comparable districts (in terms of size, ethnicity, economic status, English proficiency, and special populations). Currently most recognized and exemplary districts are comprised of higher socio-economic status, have less diverse populations, and have smaller stable populations. This means that districts struggle to reach “Recognized” and “Exemplary” status based on where they are located and who attends their schools rather than truly being a picture of what they are accomplishing academically.

We would like to see the accountability systems better aligned between the state and federal governments. The current system causes confusion, for example, our “Recognized” 5A high school did not meet AYP because of a small group of academically transitioning students.

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I believe we are responsible for providing a system that focuses on promoting improvement rather than labeling districts, schools, and students for missing targets.

CONCLUSION

Again, we welcome and embrace accountability. Historically, our subpopulations were not only underrepresented but were not accounted for in the accountability system. We all know that what gets monitored is what gets done!! Accountability for ALL students is important and does help districts ensure their students are making progress towards college readiness and/or being successful as members of the 21st century workforce. Please provide us with an accountability system that recognizes, promotes and rewards student progress and provide us with the equitable resources to address the unique needs of our students. All our children are worth our efforts!