

Austin Independent School District

1111 W. 6th Street ~ Austin, TX 78703 ~ 512-414-2482 ~ 512-414-1486 (Fax)
Pascal D. Forgione, Jr., Ph.D.
Superintendent



Testimony on Senate Bill 1601

Relating to sanctions for public schools designated academically unacceptable.

Before the Senate Committee on Education

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Good morning Madam Chair and committee members. I am Pat Forgione, Superintendent of the Austin Independent School District, and I am here to testify in favor of Senate Bill 1601.

I would first like to thank Senator Watson for introducing this legislation. Senate Bill 1601 is the embodiment of the lessons learned from our experience in Austin with one of our schools, the former Johnston High School, and I appreciate Senator Watson's involvement, leadership, and support.

Johnston High School was a school that faced a number of challenges, and for many, it became the poster child for school accountability sanctions. Many factors contributed to those challenges, including some perhaps unintended complications resulting from the requirements of the accountability systems at both the state and federal level, which were, at times, in conflict with one another.

I want to address several very practical issues that are lessons we learned. These include conflicts of leadership and timing, and conflicts within the community, as well as the consequences of closure and the need for repurposing. I believe that addressing these issues will strengthen accountability and result in a stronger educational environment for students.

Conflict of leadership

There is no tougher assignment for a campus principal than that of leading a campus with multiple years of low performance because of the many roles they must play and the sheer number of external partners to which they are accountable. Not only is strong instructional leadership required at such a campus, but a principal in such

an assignment must be able to juggle the Campus Intervention Team (CIT) assigned by the State accountability system, staff from the Texas Education Agency, and the Technical Assistance Provider (TAP) assigned by the federal system for failing to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), and, in our case, a Management Team assigned to us by the Commissioner. We were very fortunate to have a management team assigned to my District that has a great deal of expertise and the initiative to step up and assume the role of managing all the other groups that were advising our campus.

There were times when the CIT leader would tell the principal to do one thing, while at the same time, the federal assistance team advised her to do something quite opposite. Who is she supposed to listen to? Who trumps whom? Fortunately, our Management Team stepped up in the final year before Johnston was closed and helped coordinate the input and advice we received.

Conflict of timing

In addition to the conflict of leadership there was the conflict of timing. Many of the activities required for a campus identified as low-performing on both the state and federal systems are required at different times along the way. Contingency plans, reconstitution plans, restructuring plans, and school choice are all triggered at different times in the process.

In addition to the conflicts, the timing is difficult because sanctions are imposed at the end of the school year. After the school year is already over is not the ideal time to recruit and hire the highest quality staff, particularly for a school facing enormous challenges. The end of the school year is also not the best time to try to find positions for teachers displaced by the decision to close; in fact, it is incredibly difficult. Because the vast majority of educators have already secured their positions for the next school year by early May, the District found itself in the position of making a decision to try to hire the most effective teachers for our neediest campus without knowing whether those positions would truly be available until mid-June—after teachers had left for the summer break. In our District, we made the decision to hire the best teachers we could find and then to honor their contracts if they were not retained on the campus. What choice did we have? No educator will come to a challenging campus unless they are offered the promise of employment, even if the school closes.

Similarly, it is difficult to find positions for displaced teachers from a closed campus, especially since our District requires that principals have the authority to hire their staff and we object to forced placements of teachers on campuses unless the principal selects the teacher for the vacancy. So we found ourselves in the position of paying a full-time teacher's salary for a group of individuals who were assigned to permanent sub positions last August.

Conflicts in the community

Obviously, no community wants to see its school closed. That was the case in Austin, too. A lot of efforts were devoted to community engagement over the years of low performance at Johnston. Community involvement is critical to the success of a campus, especially a low-performing campus.

The difficulty in working to increase the level of community involvement in the school is the lack of understanding among members of the community as to why the District was making contingency plans in the event of closure. Our contingency plans were seen as an act of betrayal; it was disheartening to the community members, who thought the District didn't believe in their children's ability to make the necessary improvements to keep the school open. But we had to plan for every possibility.

Consequences of closure

If a school closes, that means that the building closes; but the students who attended that school must have their education continue. We grappled with the actual impact of dispersing students to other campuses, but after talking to parents and community leaders, we believe it would not have been in the best interests of students at the schools accepting those students or the students who would have been dispersed for three main reasons:

1. The schools that were closest to the Johnston campus, and therefore most convenient for students, were facing challenges of their own and were not equipped with the capacity to absorb a large influx of students from the closed campus.
2. Other schools to which students could have been assigned do not have many of the same services the students were receiving at the Johnston campus, such as childcare for the children of our teen parents.

3. We believed that requiring students to travel a long distance from their homes to attend school would have caused many students to drop out of school. Many students have circumstances in their lives such as a job outside of school or responsibilities within their family that limit the amount of time they have devoted to school, especially if a lengthy commute were added to the time required. If students had to be bused across town, many of them would not make the trip and we would lose them completely.

Need for repurposing

Currently, state law only allows two options when a school reaches the stage Johnston was in last year—alternative management or closure. Since no qualified entity responded to TEA’s request for qualifications to serve as a managing entity, that left closure as the only option. We were fortunate to work with a Commissioner of Education and Agency staff (not to mention a certain State Senator) who provided an option that allowed education to occur on the Johnston campus, even though the school itself was closed. After Johnston High School was closed, the campus was repurposed to become Eastside Memorial High School. Eastside Memorial will have three separate schools functioning at the campus next year, with a high tech focus. I wish I had time to tell you about all the exciting things that are taking place at that campus following the repurposing process.

While repurposing is allowed under commissioner’s rules, it can only occur after closure. In this instance, closure was not in the best interests of students, teachers, the District, or the community as a whole. It took our attention and resources away from what matters most—the education of children. Repurposing without first having to close would bring about all the same positive effects for students without the negative administrative burdens that take time away from the focus on the success of students. Throughout this process, the focus has to always remain on doing what promises to produce the best academic results for the students. In schools like Johnston, dramatic changes do have to be made; but they will not help many of those students if the school is first closed.

I wish I could say that Austin ISD will never find itself in the position of facing school closure ever again, but that is not the case. We have a middle school in that same position right now, and there are others throughout the state. I ask that you seriously consider the lessons learned from our previous experience so that those lessons can be applied in the manner proposed by Senator Watson to make our system better for our students and community.