

**TASK FORCE ON EDUCATION AND THE QUALITY OF LIFE
IN AUSTIN FOR HISPANIC STUDENTS**

**Community Forum
April 28, 2006
Austin City Council Chambers**

Summary of Proceedings (Revised)

Task Force Members in Attendance:

Rick Burciaga, Eyna Canales-Zarate, Dr. Janis Guerrero, John Limon, Rosie Mendoza,
Veronica Rivera, Dr. Angela Valenzuela, Linda Velasquez

Task Force Support Staff in Attendance (AISD, Office of Planning and Community Relations):

Joey Crumley, Justin Fried, Irma Gomez-Torres, Rosa Montoya, Maria-Elena Ramon

Others in Attendance:

Librado Almanza, PODER
Raul Alvarez, Austin City Council
Steve Bradley, TSEU
Susan Bradley
Michael Conn, Student
Vicki Clark-Bradley
Mario Cruz, AISD, School Counselor
Margarita Deciendo
Sylvia Del Bosque
Dr. Pat Forgione, AISD, Superintendent
Sam Guzman
Susana Guzman
Katie Halloran, City of Austin, Neighborhood Planning
Brenda Hummel, AISD, Student Support Services
Jennifer Kim, Austin City Council
DeWayne W. Lofton, Austin City Council Candidate
Robert Martinez, HABLA
Eliza May
Henry McMinton, Jr.
Della May Moore
John Moore
Lori Moya, AISD, Board Candidate
Ryan Robinson, City of Austin, Demographer
Paul Saldaña, Greater Austin Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, HABLA
Jean Sanchez
Rene Sanchez
Dr. Ann Smisko, AISD, Curriculum
Gloria Sullivan, AISD, Professional Development
Vincent Torres, AISD, Board Candidate
Linda Vásquez, Student
Ana Villalobos, PODER
Rocío Villalobos, Student
Mel Waxler, AISD, General Counsel
Dr. Darlene Westbrook, AISD, Chief Academic Officer
Melvin G. Wrenn
Will Wynn, Austin Mayor

Call to Order

The meeting was called to order at 6:10 p.m.

Opening Remarks

- Task Force Chair Veronica Rivera welcomed all in attendance and thanked them for coming. She then introduced the other members of the task force and explained that the membership included community and business representatives and recognized experts in the field of education. She said the task force was formed on October 14, 2005 and first met on December 6, 2005, with several meetings having been conducted since that time to consider current data, research on best practices, and community perspectives.
- Austin Mayor Will Wynn pointed out that Austin was now the sixteenth-largest city in the nation, with a quickly growing and culturally diverse population. He also pointed out that Austin was recently ranked the number one city in the nation for Hispanics. He said his goal was to make Austin the most livable city in the nation. He said he was a parent of children in AISD and felt the district was doing a commendable job. He assured those in attendance that their input would be received and seriously considered.
- AISD Superintendent Dr. Pat Forgione pointed out that 56 percent of AISD students were Hispanic, and many of these students were economically disadvantaged and English Language Learners (ELLs). He explained that there were 20,000 ELLs in AISD, 95 percent of whom were Spanish speakers. He said the district had several programs in place to specifically address the needs of ELLs. He added that all students were benefiting from the district's character education program, culturally relevant instruction, and high school redesign initiative. He said the new Ann Richards School for Young Women Leaders would primarily target economically disadvantaged students. He concluded by saying that we need to build and maintain strong partnerships in this time of lean resources, and that a quality school system was the heart and soul of a great community.

Summary of Community Input Efforts

- Rick Burciaga went over several ways in which the task force was obtaining input from the community. He explained that almost 70 interviews representing a crosscut of the community were conducted to gain individual perspectives. He said that well over 700 individuals responded to an online survey. He added that the task force had recently met with representatives of HABLA to listen to their concerns.
- Mr. Burciaga explained that community input on the task force draft report was still being solicited online, and that comments received at the meeting tonight would be added to the collective community input received. He stressed that the task force report before the community at this time was a draft and subject to change based on the input received.

Summary of Draft Report

- Linda Velsquez said the principal contents of the report included an introduction, findings, recommendations, and appendices. She explained that an executive summary and sections on the results of tonight's meeting and online comments would be added to the final report. She said that the findings and recommendations were the heart of the report and were the focus of tonight's meeting. However, she reminded that the complete draft report with appendices was available online in English and Spanish.
- Eyna Canales-Zarate summarized the results of considerable data and literature research conducted to inform the task force. Highlights of the data research included a growing Hispanic population and work force, and continued disparities among Hispanic and African American students and their White peers in dropout and graduation rates, disciplinary

actions, Special Education referrals, achievement levels, and college enrollment. The literature research focused on factors related to persistent achievement gaps, including family conditions, student behavior, treatment of students, equity in resource allocation, teacher quality, curriculum, and school culture.

- Dr. Janis Guerrero summarized the results of the individual interviews and online survey. She said in both cases, although participants acknowledged that improvements had been made, they generally felt there was considerable room for improvement in providing the quality education for Hispanic students. She said the most prevalent recommendations for continued improvement offered by the interviewees included: preparing every student for college and career; acknowledging the plurality of the Hispanic population; enhancing outreach efforts; expanding support programs and services; and investing in a quality workforce. She said the majority of the people who took the online survey were Hispanic, and their responses generally indicated less satisfaction than other people who took the survey.
- Dr. Angela Valenzuela reemphasized that the task force report was just a draft at this time, and that citizen input would be received shortly. She explained that the recommendations of the task force were divided into goals, strategies, and activities. She said she would be going over the three goals and ten corresponding strategies, but not the several activities in order to save more time for comments. The three goals covered the areas of: building greater understanding and positive attitudes; developing and allocating resources and services to build a strong foundation for teaching and learning; and preparation for college and career.

Citizens Communications

- Task Force Vice-Chair Rosie Mendoza reemphasized that task force members welcomed and valued the input of the community. She said task force members would be listening carefully and taking good notes. She explained that the choice of having the meeting on a Friday evening was probably not ideal, but was based on the availability of both the Mayor and Superintendent, the attendance of whom she felt was critical. She said that due to the relatively small number of people who had signed up to speak, that a little more time would be allowed to each speaker.

Following are summaries of speaker comments:

1. **Mario Cruz** said that he was a counselor at Zavala Elementary School and had worked for AISD for 35 years. He said a major public relations campaign was needed to show support for our many hard-working teachers. He said that teachers do more than teach, and that they need to be appreciated, and not necessarily with more money. He said that many great teachers are leaving our schools because they feel a lack of support. This is particularly true in schools with predominantly Hispanic students.
2. **Katie Halloran** said she worked for the City's Neighborhood Planning Department, but was speaking for herself. She felt that more community involvement in schools was needed. She said more parental involvement was particularly needed, and more outreach efforts would help, particularly to immigrant families. She commended AISD for hiring Parent Support Specialists and said that their work was critical. She felt it was important for AISD and the City to continue collaboration on projects to better ensure effective and efficient use of available resources. She mentioned the need for safer schools and street crossings. She said it would be important now to focus on implementation of the recommendations of the task force.
3. **Robert Martinez** explained that HABLA was composed of business and community leaders and representatives of several Hispanic organizations. He said that HABLA members met with AISD Superintendent Dr. Pat Forgione in November to express their concerns and identified several specific areas for improvement. He said he wanted to particularly address Campus Advisory Councils (CACs) at this time. He said that there

was a perception that many CACs were not operating at full effectiveness. He said more training for CAC members would be helpful.

4. **Librado Almanza** felt that zero-tolerance policies had resulted in several problems for youth of color. He said that teachers did not reflect the diversity of the student population, and more qualified teachers of color needed to be hired and retained. However, he said that Hispanics were over-represented in disciplinary actions. As alternatives involving students and families, he felt that oversight committees or peer juries should be used. He said that when in-school suspensions were necessary, that more productive learning opportunities were needed.
5. **Ana Villalobos** provided additional comments related to zero-tolerance. She reemphasized the disparities in disciplinary actions between students of color and their White peers, and felt that Hispanic students continued to be criminalized and placed on the margins of society. She said more mentoring and fewer suspensions were needed. She felt that the recommendations of the task force only scratched the surface, and that district leadership needed to take positive action now to change these problems.
6. **Sam Guzman** said he had seen numerous other task forces and committees look at similar issues, but little progress had been made. He felt that contributing factors included lack of commitment by district leadership, lack of political capital within the Hispanic community, and getting the right people to look at the problems. He said he hoped that some other group would not need to be convened after this task force concluded its work. He said that any changes recommended by the task force needed to be fundamental and actionable. He said such changes could require a lot of effort and funding.
7. **Paul Saldaña** felt that a well-educated Hispanic population would go a long way in addressing quality of life and empowerment concerns. He stated that the specific concerns of HABLA included discipline and campus environment, immigrant ELLs, Special Education, CACs, preparation for college and career, and communications and accountability. He felt that AISD needed to hire more Hispanic and bilingual teachers. He said more positive results were needed, which would require systemic and fundamental changes and greater supports. He said that AISD was a public corporation, and HABLA wanted to continue to work with the district and to serve as a resource.
8. **Eliza May** said that in her journey to become a City Council member, she had heard many community concerns relating to education and the need for more coordination and cooperation between AISD and the City of Austin. She said specific concerns included safer school crossings, truancy problems, and a desire for more people to be able to communicate well in English and Spanish. She said a common sentiment was to see a better utilization of resources.

Conclusion

- John Limon thanked everyone for joining the task force in its effort to gain further input from the community on the very important issue of providing a quality education for Hispanic students. He thanked the staff of AISD and the City of Austin for their support. He said the minutes of tonight's meeting, including summaries of speaker comments, would be placed on the task force web site. He said the task force would be working over the next few weeks to assess all of the community input received, and would present its final report to AISD and the City of Austin on June 13. He then provided a message in Spanish.

Adjourn

The meeting was adjourned at 7:20 p.m.