June 7, 2007

Dr. Shirley Neeley, Commissioner
Texas Education Agency
1701 North Congress Avenue
Austin, Texas 78701-1494

Dear Commissioner Neeley:

I am writing you about the future status of Johnston High School. On June 4, our Board of Trustees approved a resolution supporting the district administration in asking the Texas Education Agency (TEA) to consider keeping Johnston High School open with an intensive restructuring and improvement plan, in partnership with the Institute for Research and Reform in Education (IRRE), that will ensure that students’ needs are addressed rapidly and effectively (see Attachment 1). This plan calls for the implementation of the clearly articulated, research-based First Things First (FTF) model at Johnston. In addition, the FTF model will be supplemented by additional instructional interventions and monitored through ongoing, regular campus, district and community meetings, in conjunction with any personnel TEA assigns to track the progress at Johnston (see Attachment 2). We believe this comprehensive approach will effectively address immediate needs while restructuring the school to be successful for the long term.

In your letters dated January 12, 2007 and March 9, 2007, you referenced the statutory intervention structure in place under the Texas Education Code (TEC) to address circumstances of ongoing academically unacceptable performance. We believe the comprehensive restructuring we are proposing for Johnston meets the intent of the intervention structure, specified in statute, and thus allows the Commissioner some discretion in making a decision in the best interests of the students and community of Johnston High School.

The redesign plan we initiated at Johnston two years ago, with the Texas High School Redesign and Restructuring Grant, was unfortunately, based on the use of individual best practices and not a cohesive, research-based model. While it was implemented with great commitment and effort and in concert with a reconstitution of most of the school’s teaching corps and leadership, it did not represent the kind of comprehensive, cohesive, best-practice model that First Things First provides. Our lack of experience with the principles of effective high school redesign at the campus and district levels at that time was partially to blame for the mistakes made in this design. We have learned a great deal over the past two years from our work with TEA, the Texas High School Project, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, IRRE and our other redesign partners. We now understand that the implementation of the
proven FTF model with fidelity through a close partnership with IRRE offers the best opportunity for turning Johnston around and serving the students of Johnston well.

Regarding the two additional intervention options outlined in your letter of March 9, we ask you to consider our utilization of IRRE as meeting the requirement that the district acquire professional services to address ongoing campus performance issues. First Things First is the innovative redesign and comprehensive school-wide improvement model we believe best fits the needs at Johnston. In addition, we would support the appointment of a monitor to assure our accountability for implementation of the FTF program, the centerpiece of our Johnston improvement plan, as well as the additional district curricular support and the ongoing campus and district oversight process described in Attachment 2.

We believe this plan to bring success to Johnston and its students is consistent with the district’s responsibility to comply with the instructions you furnished in letters dated January 12, 2007 and March 9, 2007. To that end, the district has prepared contingency plans for the possible closure of Johnston High School in 2007-2008 (see Attachment 3) and/or 2008-2009 (see Attachment 4). AISD’s Board of Trustees unanimously approved these plans on June 4, 2007, during a televised meeting.

Our primary goal in developing these plans and making this request to you is not to avoid accountability sanctions, but to do what we believe is in the best interests of the students and community of Johnston High and Austin ISD. It is clear that the public understands the ratings assigned to Johnston and that we understand our responsibilities as a district. We feel strongly that closing Johnston and moving these students throughout the district would not be in the best interests of the students of Johnston High. Closing the Johnston campus does not fix the problem. What is needed is a proven, innovative, research-based program at that campus that best serves the needs of the students of the Johnston neighborhood. We believe that First Things First is that program. This determination is supported by the Gates Foundation and the Texas High School Project, each of whom is willing to devote resources to the district to aid in the successful implementation of this plan.

AISD’s intention is to work as hard as possible in a coordinated, cohesive way to implement a proven, research-based model at Johnston, supplemented with ongoing additional support for enhanced instruction. We are also building in weekly and monthly accountability meetings at the campus and district levels to measure progress of implementation and outcomes at Johnston. Included in this planning will be regular meetings with parents and the Johnston community to report on the school’s progress. I hope that, given these detailed plans, you will support AISD in moving forward to achieve student and school success at Johnston.
As always, Dr. Neeley, please feel free to contact me at 414-2482 if you have any questions about the aggressive plan for improvement that is now in place for Johnston High School, the framework of support for the plan’s implementation, or the district’s contingency plan.

Best regards,

Pascal D. Forgione, Jr., Ph.D.
Superintendent of Schools

Attachments: 1. Resolution of Support for Johnston High School
              2. Johnston High School Plan of Action

cc: Darlene Westbrook
    Glenn Nolly
    Ann Smisko
    Paul Cruz
    Kent Ewing
    Maria Whitsett
    Celina Estrada-Thomas
    Karen Sperry