Summary of Proceedings

• Dr. Peggy Gordon, Associate Superintendent of Middle Schools, welcomed attendees. Also at the dais were: Dr. Pat Forgione, Superintendent; Charles Hunt, Webb Principal; and Dr. Darlene Westbrook, Chief Academic Officer.
• The forum was well attended; 157 individuals registered, but total attendance is estimated to be near 300. Headsets were provided to 60 attendees for Spanish translation services.
• Mark Williams, President of the Board of Trustees, called the forum to order at 7:05 p.m. He noted that several Board members were in attendance in the audience.
• Dr. Forgione provided an introductory presentation. He emphasized that we are dealing with state accountability requirements; Webb has had three consecutive years with at least one category of unacceptable performance, and a fourth year will result in closure of the school. He explained that Webb received an additional million dollars in funding and that a strategy for continued improvement has shown results, but not enough to fully meet state standards. He stressed that at this point we are trying to make a local decision rather than respond to a probable state mandate.
• Dr. Forgione said he presented three options to the faculty and campus advisory council of Webb: (1) stay open and await the latest state accountability ratings; (2) repurpose the school; and (3) close the school now. He said the later option would allow teachers enough time to find positions elsewhere in the district before the start of the next school year, and provide more time for students to be reassigned and possibly seek transfers.
• Dr. Forgione said the Webb community presented another option, that would create an English Language Learners Academy (ELLA) for middle school students at Webb, similar to the International High School at Johnston.
• Dr. Forgione said he would be evaluating all options and forming a recommendation to the Board following the community forums. He said he was hopeful that the Board would make a final decision by the end of February. He pointed out that there would be opportunities for citizen communications at upcoming Board meetings.
• Mr. Hunt said that TEA representatives had been working diligently with Webb to help raise student achievement levels. He pointed out that the ELLA recommendation would be an extension of a successful program already at Webb. He said he felt his staff was doing exactly what it needed to be doing, but he realized we were at the point of making a tough decision.
• Dr. Gordon then announced an opportunity for attendees to provide input in an open-mike format. Speakers included parents, teachers, students, community members, representatives of neighborhood associations, representatives of community organizations, and members of district task forces and advisory councils.
• Three different staff members took notes on speaker comments: one recorded comments of English speakers, one recorded comments of Spanish speakers, and one recorded unanswered questions and needed follow-ups.
• A total of 50 individuals provided comment. Following are highlights of this input:

Speaker #1. Strongly opposed to closure; Webb needs even more funding and resources to ensure success; closure is not the answer to low performance; the community is dedicated to seeing success … this is not a community of quitters.

Speaker #2. We need to find out the reasons for failure … something is very wrong and needs correcting; there needs to be more accountability in where funding is going; a new building can’t guarantee better outcomes; all of the people here are here because they are very concerned about doing the right thing.

Speaker #3. We shouldn’t send Webb students to other schools that are also struggling; we need to make continued improvements at Webb.

Speaker #4. Although different options were considered, they all really deal with closing Webb in one way or another; students will end up going to schools outside of their own communities; more students will end up walking and there will be more safety concerns; Garcia is a nice, new, expensive school, but Webb kids won’t end up getting to go there; we need to make sure the Board decides what to do, not the Superintendent; we need to make sure the commitment to listen is honored; keep Webb open and let the chips fall where they may.

Speaker #5. Minority students need to have the same opportunities as their white counterparts; Webb students are challenged by many things beyond their control; consider other options besides closing Webb; don’t send kids to classrooms that will be crowded; Webb kids are talented and need a chance to succeed; get rid of TAKS, not Webb.

Speaker #6. Kids are tired and stressed from TAKS tests; standardized tests are important, but they shouldn’t be the major determinant of success; testing is having the result of closing schools, and this will continue; Webb doesn’t even have enough textbooks; try giving more help and resources to Webb.

Speaker #7. Too many kids who don’t speak English proficiently enough are being forced to take tests, which dooms them to failure; this community loves Webb and its faculty … the situation is not their fault, it’s the system’s fault; sending Webb kids to Dobie and Pearce is sending them to schools in the same situation … this is like sweeping dirt under the rug; there will be more safety concerns as a result.

Speaker #8. Don’t close Webb; make smaller class sizes and provide more individualized attention to students; low-income students face many more challenges, and it’s important for teachers to know this and to give them more attention; the alternative is a large population of under-education people.

Speaker #9. You wouldn’t close a fire station or a police station if it were underachieving … why close a school; parents also need to be more attentive to the
needs of kids; you say it’s important for kids to make an effort … the district needs to make an effort, too … provide what it takes to fix the problem; not doing everything we can reflects poorly on the entire community.

Speaker #10. Not everyone understands all of the state requirements; moving the problem doesn’t solve the problem; we simply need to help the kids.

Speaker #11. The majority of students are Spanish speakers and many struggle to take TAKS tests; our kids are not unacceptable; who is responsible for the situation we are in now; what is the point of moving our kids to another school and doing nothing else for them; we’re not preparing our students for college … it’s an embarrassment.

Speaker #12. More than 1,500 people previously joined in a unity march through St. Johns, showing that this community can come together and accomplish things; Webb has been central to the fiber of the community; the hand doing the cutting is the one saying it’s here to help; we’re leaning on TEA for the blame; put more experienced teachers where they’re needed the most; the Webb faculty is dedicated and works hard.

Speaker #13. Closing the school is not a good legacy for the kids when they grow up; the teachers here are great and our kids are not unacceptable; we need smaller class sizes; parents also need to do more; don’t just take the problem to the next school down the road.

Speaker #14. This is really part of a national issue; pay our teachers well and invest in the schools … don’t build more prisons; invest in continued improvements at Webb … more funding and resources means more results.

Speaker #15. The Webb staff is great and really cares about kids; look for more creative solutions; the entire community needs to look at what it can do; we also need to be concerned about the other schools that are struggling.

Speaker #16. The faculty and principal at Webb have done a lot and Webb has made a difference in the community; will Garcia close if it’s low performing.

Speaker #17. Even after many years and changes, there is still a feeling of racial tension in Austin; some people still have a mindset that poor, immigrant people can’t learn and contribute.

Speaker #18. Please reconsider closure; the Webb staff is awesome; don’t take what is a home to many people away from the community.

Speaker #19. The Webb staff works hard under challenging conditions … don’t give up on them.

Speaker #20. The principal and staff at Webb have done everything they could; St. Johns is a great community, recently selected as one of the top 100 in the nation for raising a child; so why are we closing this school … closing it tells the community that it’s not good enough; parents work hard and many are not proficient in English, so don’t blame them.
Speaker #21. Parents need to make sure and do their part to help kids learn and function in society; kids need to know they are going to school to succeed; the kids are worth the effort; we should be grateful that our kids have an opportunity to get an education, but many are struggling because they are still learning to speak English; these students are making progress, but we need to find more solutions to help them; don’t make them take TAKS until the can speak English well.

Speaker #22. A few years ago, the Superintendent came into a classroom and talked to the students and didn’t even know they were Spanish speakers; I don’t trust Dr. Forgione, but I’d like to; will Webb students be able to go to schools that are currently frozen to transfers; a show of hands indicated broad support for keeping Webb open.

Speaker #23. Webb is a second home to many kids; Dobie and Pearce are in bad shape, too, so why send them there; these kids need stability … don’t give up on them; find another solution.

Speaker #24. Sending kids to other schools will cause transportation hardships for many families; the GEAR-UP program is very good; if not for the teachers at Webb and Reagan, my son would not be in college now; provide more funding and keep Webb open.

• Dr. Forgione wanted to reemphasize that the state is the driver of closure and that if we don’t act now, we may have absolutely no options in a few months.

Speaker #25. This is sending the message that all of our hard work has been in vain; even though there have been improvements, we’re being told it’s still not good enough; data doesn’t reveal everything about a child; look beyond data to real-life situations and needs.

Speaker #26. My daughter learned English and then taught me … how can you say she’s not a good student.

Speaker #27. When I came to this country, I thought it was the land of dreams … I thought my child would have an opportunity for a good education, and now you want to close his school and send him to another that is just as bad off; will you end up closing those schools, too.

Speakers #28 - #34 (a group of several students). Please don’t close Webb; there are many opportunities and positive experiences at Webb; students love this school; why aren’t you talking about closing Dobie and Pearce; Dr. Forgione was asked to think about his kids might feel if he were closing their school.

Speaker #35. Having moved back to Texas from California, there are noticeable differences in the schools; we need to make a lot of changes here to become better.

Speaker #36. I and a lot of other students didn’t want to go to Webb at first, but now we really like it; please don’t close Webb.

Speaker #37. Webb has established principals who have given us real improvements; not all faculty members agree with the campus advisory council; try to fix this school.
**Speaker #38.** Parents have a lot to do with student outcomes; let people know you care about your children; I would be willing to lead a protest march to the capitol if the state says we have to close Webb.

**Speaker #39.** Webb has a high number of novice teachers; the district needs to pay to bring in more experienced teachers; ESL needs to be more intensive; we need to focus more on the needs of Hispanic students, who are in the clear majority.

**Speaker #40.** Webb, as well as Pearce and Dobie are not bad schools ... we need to be careful about labels; if kids are learning in some of our schools, they should be learning in all of our schools; data can be looked at in many different ways; we need to concentrate on continued improvements; we need to emphasize that low-income kids can learn and achieve.

**Speaker #41.** Why was someone speaking only Spanish the only person asked to wrap up comments; it didn’t appear that anyone was recording the comments of Spanish speakers.

**Speaker #42.** Texas educational standards are clearly lower than those of other states; you can see the differences in the achievement levels of students from other states; not enough Hispanic students are going to college, and many of them that do end up dropping out.

- Dr. Forgione stated that Texas educational standards were indeed rigorous, and that AISD students, including Hispanic students, recently achieved at the highest levels among urban districts in national testing. He said he would gladly provide more detailed information.

**Speaker #43.** We need to put more funding and resources into low-performing schools; we need more and better textbooks, and kids need to be able to take them home.

**Speaker #44.** St. Johns is an incredible community that works hard to meet a number of challenges; make sure to not forget about the community during this tough time.

**Speaker #45.** The Webb principal is doing a good job, and we should thank him; give the principal more time to continue the progress that has been made at Webb.

**Speaker #46.** TEA needs to have less of a big stick, and they need to come out and talk to the community; we’re all very worried about this situation … the parents are stressed, and the kids are stressed; we need even more schools; please don’t rush into a solution; getting kids ready for tests isn’t helping them in the long run.

- Dr. Forgione said we had to continue to work hard to meet state requirements, but he wanted to clarify that TEA representatives had been working very diligently with Webb.

**Speaker #47.** Instead of sending Webb students to other schools, why not send kids from other schools to Webb.
• Dr. Forgione pointed out that the TEA Commissioner made it clear that she was looking for a plan in anticipation of closing Webb. He repeated that the consequences of waiting to the last minute included more difficulties in rescheduling students and locating alternate assignments for teachers.

Speaker #48. The St. Johns community is a vital and passionate one, concerned very much about the future of Webb; closing Webb would disrupt the long-range visions established by the community; the community is in real need of stability; is there any chance of Webb becoming a Blueprint School; the community is doing better, but if Webb closes crime will increase and many community programs will cease; Webb is more than just an academic provider; TEA needs to come talk to the community; we can work in unity.

Speaker #49. The situation at Webb is not the teachers’ fault; the teachers have a tough job, and the students need to help out, too.

Speaker #50. It’s sad that we have no other choice but to close Webb; we need to reassess TAKS; we also need to reassess the way we allocate our resources; the Board must be the ultimate ones to decide.

• Mr. Williams thanked everyone for their comments, and reminded attendees that there would be another forum on the future of Webb at Reagan on January 30.
• The meeting forum was adjourned at 9:50 p.m.