

# *Creating a New Vision for Public Education in Texas*

*A Work in Progress  
for Conversation  
and Further Development*

Respectfully Offered by  
Superintendent Participants in the  
Public Education Visioning Institute







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# Introduction

The Public Education Visioning Institute was born from the work and ideas of thirty-five public school superintendents who came together as a community of learners to create a new vision for public education in Texas. As the representatives of over 1.2 million students, we who were part of that group were frustrated with the present direction, but realized no clear picture was available to frame a conversation regarding a preferred future. We were also concerned that the principal architects of the present system are politicians, business leaders, and their policy advisors—not superintendents, not principals, not teachers, and not parents or school board members. Educators and parents have vital contributions to make and their insights and commitments should be utilized. We knew it was time to begin a new and different kind of dialogue. We also felt that the only meaningful way to address the issues and challenge underlying assumptions was to define and express a vision, based on relevant beliefs, principles, and premises.

The Visioning Institute held its first of eight workshops on September 6-7, 2006. That first workshop focused on examining the culture and structure needed in schools to meet the needs of learners in a more global environment with attendant new expectations. Subsequent workshops held in 2007 explored moral and intellectual leadership, the nature of the future learner, assessment systems and accountability mechanisms, and more innovative ways to use resources.

We believe the work accomplished over the last 21 months of learning and intense dialogue has made us better leaders. It is our sincere hope that it will inspire others toward the common goal of making public schools better for all Texas children.

## Use of This Document

We perceive this document as a “work in progress” describing what we believe and the possibilities we see for the future of public education. It should be viewed as a basic resource for all who want to join this conversation, further develop these ideas, and bring to fruition the results it envisions.

Our urgent desire is that this document be used to begin disciplined dialogue, stimulate questions, identify problems, and frame issues that will eventually lead to strategic actions at the local level and in governmental capitols. Our intent is for it to serve as a catalyst for the development of specialized publications, presentations, and legislative testimony.

These statements of principle and supporting premises furnish the foundation for developing an understanding and commitment to a shared set of values and a common vision for public education in Texas, our public schools, and their success on which our democracy depends. We propose these to serve as a stimulus for conversations that will result in refinements and revisions from our colleagues, local communities, and other interested persons and organizations. This work can be used to create a community-based, bottom-up movement capitalizing on new and existing alliances with professional organizations, local business leaders, and similar groups. To quote author Margaret Wheatly, *“All great things begin with a conversation between two people.”* We are committed to seeing that the conversations continue and that the transformations we seek become a reality.

# Major Conceptual Themes

## **Why a New Direction and Why Now**

Every parent has a dream that their children will be happy and successful. Our communities and the schools that serve them should equally share in that dream and have a plan for making that dream a reality. Preparing students for success in the workforce is secondary to preparing children for success in life. The core business of schools is to provide engaging, appropriate experiences for students so that they learn and are able to apply their knowledge in ways that will enrich their lives and ensure their well-being. Unfortunately, the present bureaucratic structure has taken away that focus and replaced it with a system based on compliance, coercion, and fear. If proper focus is to be restored, the system must be transformed into one based on trust, shared values, creativity, innovation, and respect.

## **Engaging the Digital Generation**

In today's digital world, most students come to school computer and technology savvy. With their iPods, iPhones, computer games, MySpace pages, and text messaging, they routinely use multimedia and internet resources in their daily lives. Technology development has also resulted in widespread change in the way students learn. To keep students fully engaged, schools must adapt to this new and rapidly changing environment. They must embrace the potential of new technologies and make optimum use of the digital devices and connections that are prevalent today to make learning vibrant and stimulating for all.

## **New Learning Standards for a New Era**

A transformed system that meets the diverse needs of students in a digital environment demands new learning standards. Standards should reflect the realities of the age and recognize that students are not just consumers of knowledge, they can be creators of knowledge as well. Standards should focus on development of the whole person, tapping curiosity and imagination, and providing opportunities for all talents to be cultivated, nurtured, and valued.

## **From Misuse of Standardized Tests to Unleashing the Power of Assessment**

Assessment should inform accountability, but the present practice of one-shot, high-stakes assessment has failed the test. Appropriate and varied assessment using multiple tools for different purposes informs students, parents, the school, the district and the community about the extent to which desired learning is occurring and what schools are doing to improve. For assessment to be of any value, it must move from the present "autopsy" model to one that more resembles a "daily check up," which continuously identifies student strengths, interests, motivations, accomplishments, and other information necessary so that teachers can design the learning experiences that will best meet each student's needs.

## **Accountability that Inspires**

Accountability systems of themselves do not produce excellence. Excellence can only come from commitment and meaning. The present accountability system has created schools in which the curriculum is narrowed and only academic abilities are valued. Students become expert test takers but cannot retain or apply what they "know" in a context other than the test environment; and

creativity, problem solving, and teamwork are stifled. The punitive approach and “referee” model embraced by that system have hindered the success of students and schools. A more appropriate coaching model is needed to transform the system into one that inspires and stimulates.

### **Transforming our Schools from Bureaucracies to Learning Organizations**

Bureaucracies value power and authority, while learning organizations are driven by beliefs and values. Schools must be transformed from their current bureaucratic form, characterized by rules and sanctions, punitive accountability systems, routines, and standardization of everything, to learning organizations where only the mundane is standardized and standards are used to nurture aspirations and accommodate human variables. Learning organizations maintain a clear sense of doing the right thing and doing it well, shared commitments and beliefs, common purpose and vision, trust, accountability, and use of standards to inspire. Bureaucracies discourage and are disruptive to innovation and cannot create the dynamic conditions that foster superior performance of teachers and students. Learning organizations capture the learning of adults, share it, and support its application so that capacities to improve student learning are extraordinary.

### **Saying No to Remote Control**

The shift in power in setting education policy from the local community to the state and federal government has resulted in a system where schools feel more accountable to the Legislature than to their students and their communities. The school district’s role has been relegated to one of compliance, and the local community has been denied the opportunity to make the more important decisions and choices regarding the education of the children and youth who live there. A more balanced and reinvigorated state-local partnership is needed to create the type of schools that can best provide the learning experiences to help students succeed in today’s world.

# The Vision

*We envision schools where all children succeed, feel safe and their curiosity is cultivated. We see schools that foster a sense of belonging and community and that inspire collaboration. We see learning standards that challenge, and intentionally designed experiences that delight students, develop their confidence and competence, and cause every child to value tasks that result in learning. Ultimately, we see schools and related venues that prepare all children for many choices and that give them the tools and attitudes to contribute to our democratic way of life and live successfully in a rapidly changing world.*

## **In this context we see:**

- Schools that are safe havens for students physically and emotionally, where students and teachers feel liberated to develop and nurture the whole person.
- Students who are encouraged to cultivate their curiosity and who realize questions are sometimes more important than answers.
- A culture that inspires all to do their best and a curriculum that is relevant, challenging, and meaningful.
- Learning standards that reflect development of the total range of student capabilities and that enable students to acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes they need to successfully contribute to our democratic ideals and to compete in today's digitally connected world.
- High learning standards with reasonable variation to challenge every child and motivate him or her to success.
- Students who have access to the tools of technology and who value the use of those tools in learning and communication.
- Students who own their learning, who can remember what they learned, and who can apply it wherever and whenever needed.
- Students who know that development of all their talents is valued and fostered by the school, their families, and the community at large, and who know safety nets and second chances are there to help them succeed.
- Multiple assessments that assist in the ongoing learning process and that serve as a positive influence in motivating students to succeed.
- Students who are prepared for life, for pursuing further education, for taking the first steps on their career paths, and recognizing all options open to them.

# Transformed Systems for Making the Vision Reality

*The schools we need are community-owned institutions. They are designed and established as learning organizations, treating employees as knowledge workers and students as the primary customers of knowledge work. They are free of bureaucratic structures that inhibit multiple paths to reaching goals. Reliance on compliance is minimized, and generating engagement through commitment is the primary means to achieving excellence. Leadership at all levels is honored and developed. All operating systems have well-defined processes that are constantly being improved. Attention of leaders is focused on the dominant social systems that govern behavior, beginning with those that clarify beliefs and direction, develop and transmit knowledge, and that provide for recruitment and induction of all employees and students into the values and vision. The evaluation, boundary, and authority systems are submissive to the directional system, allowing for major innovations to flourish, new capacities to emerge, missions to be accomplished, and the vision to be realized in an increasingly unpredictable world.*

## **In this context we see:**

- Schools that are kid-friendly and safe, with multiple and varied learning spaces incorporating state-of-the-art technology, and possessing the capacity, in alliance with the community, to meet the needs of all children and youth.
- Schools that are staffed by competent, committed adults who are supported and appreciated, and who understand their first priority is the children they serve.
- Schools that operate in partnership with the state, which provides adequate financial resources in an equitable manner, establishes frameworks for learning standards, supplies technical support, and enables assessment and accountability systems that inform the community and the public about the quality of the schools and level of student success.
- Schools that foster a sense of community, where local citizens know that the schools belong to them and they are responsible for the quality of education and creating the community conditions in which great schools can flourish.
- A school governance structure that provides significant insulation from direct political control and short-term political expediency, a structure in which the legislature is arbiter and source of only major state educational policy matters and does not involve itself in minute decrees and directives or imposing one-size-fits-all regulations.
- Schools that support and invest heavily in the continuous learning and development of all their employees, with a focus on substantive improvement, leading to enhanced student success.
- Schools with leaders who serve, support, and ensure that student engagement is and remains the first focus.
- Districts that enter and sustain collaborative partnerships with those who prepare teachers, ensuring that beginning teachers have had some field experience to ready them for teaching in engagement-centered schools.
- Districts that recruit, induct, and promote teachers who love learning and kids, relish the conditions in which they teach, work collaboratively, and see themselves as designers and leaders, along with their traditional roles as planners, presenters, and performers.

- Schools where students advance based on their learning and performance instead of seat time, courses are dominant over classes, and use of time and space is flexible and innovative.
- Assessment processes that are designed to inform instruction in timely ways, honor student feedback, are comprehensive and fair, and do not rely on a single standardized test for important decisions.
- School board members who are focused on ensuring that the system is responsive to student, staff, and community needs and that the common good of all students prevails.
- Accountability systems that are designed to inspire and that are founded on high expectations, a sense of fairness, trust, and complete confidence in the measures employed.
- Schools and communities that, with state and federal support, transform the present bureaucratic institutions into organizations that recognize knowledge work as requiring different conditions within which staff and students can excel.
- Acceptance of the fact by schools and communities that the lack of success of many students today is less a problem of the students than of the systems that define current schools and the communities in which they function.
- New learning standards dictating major changes in how schools are organized, the assumptions and beliefs on which their culture and structure are based, meaning the factory model must give way to more flexible ways of achieving the standards.
- Schools that embrace their (school board members, in particular) fundamental role in building the communities needed for great schools.

## A Moral Imperative: Why We as Public Education Leaders Must Speak and Act Now

*...not to find out new principles, or new arguments, never before thought of, not merely to say things which had never been said before; but to place before mankind the common sense of the subject, in terms so plain and firm as to command their assent, and to justify ourselves in the independent stand we are compelled to take. Neither aiming at originality of principle or sentiment, nor yet copied from any particular and previous writing, it was intended to be an expression of the American mind, and to give to that expression the proper tone and spirit called for by the occasion.*

–Thomas Jefferson on the purpose of writing the Declaration of Independence

The framers of the Declaration of Independence provided inspiration for this monumental task we have felt compelled to undertake. While making no claim that this work is in any way comparable to their epic accomplishment, we have used what they did to inspire us, as a metaphor to frame our own efforts, and to reflect our deeply held belief in the assertion of Thomas Jefferson that learning is essential to liberty. So in that sense, we, like them, find that we can no longer keep quiet and continue to endure the injustices the present bureaucratic school system is imposing on our youth and their future.

External forces are creating requirements for public education that are detrimental to children and their teachers, as well as to the systems and communities in which they live and work, and, ultimately, to our democratic way of life. We assert that the major present reform efforts, in spite of some positive impacts, are resulting in a multitude of unintended negative consequences that far outweigh the benefits.

We concur that major changes in our schools are needed, but we disagree with the present direction and major assumptions and policies in place (and similar ones that are contemplated) to achieve that end. Therefore, we assert that schools must be transformed based on a different set of assumptions and beliefs if they are to accomplish their intended purpose in this new world that is so dramatically different from the nineteenth and early twentieth century world in which their basic form and structure originated. This document reflects our sources of discontent, but more importantly it clearly conveys what we are for and declares our resolve to work toward the transformations needed.

Our collective experience and our intensive study of what is happening in our schools and communities lead us to conclude that the future of public education is at risk and will not survive if the present direction continues. It is time to redirect this concern, energy, effort, and support for improvement to create a positive commitment to the education of our youth by transforming systems that better meet the needs of 21<sup>st</sup> century learners.

## **Educating Our Youth: A Shared Responsibility**

The creation of a system of public education is a primary responsibility of the state; however, the operation of the system is a local function. The present situation has been brought about by state (and federal policies) advancing the false notion that education is a function that can be directed from government capitols instead of from the community. There is a huge difference in the state seeing itself as having major responsibility for providing for school systems and assuming the authority for operating those systems by remote control.

The state legislature seems to have forgotten that all independent school districts were created by a vote of the people who lived in those districts. Those voters probably never conceived that the day would come when the local districts they created would become little more than satellite state agencies for enforcing regulations.

This shift in power has resulted in multiple layers of bureaucratic regulations that become more onerous and complex with each governmental action. Government policymakers, in an effort to correct what they perceived as inefficiency and ineffectiveness in public education, have over-mandated and over-regulated the local function. Multiple and largely punitive accountability provisions were created to ensure compliance. Though this continual proliferation of prescriptive rules and requirements is probably well-intentioned, its impact on schools is inherently counterproductive. Rather than focusing efforts on student success, school districts have been forced to behave like inflexible and unresponsive bureaucracies, more accountable to policies set by the government and their enforcement agencies than responsive to meeting the needs of their students and the communities they serve.

Finally, this shift in power has stripped the local community of a sense of ownership of its schools and denied its citizens the right and opportunity to make meaningful choices about the quality and nature of education it desires for its youth.

*We believe* the present direction will not result in excellent schools or the properly educated citizenry we need. The narrow focus of state and federal compliance systems does not promote the full range of students' abilities that parents want and society needs. The voices of people in our local communities are not being heard, which will ultimately result in diminished support and involvement at a time when they are needed most.

## **Restoration of Local Authority**

The local/state partnership in providing public education is founded on a set of core values: equity, adequacy, and liberty. Equity and adequacy are associated with the state's responsibility to fund public education, while local control of decisions that matter is embedded in the concept of liberty. The value of local control, however, has been superseded by the dominant value of state control.

In 1949, as a result of the Gilmer-Aikin Act, public education funding in Texas took a new turn and began a new commitment to quality and equity with the state providing the largest share of operational costs. In contrast to recent times, the state set some standards but did not try to run the schools. Today, the burden for financing the schools has shifted to the local level with most financial support coming from local property taxes, while the authority to run the schools has shifted to the state, not unlike the plight of the original thirteen colonies. This over-reliance on the local property tax forced the creation of a "share the wealth" system to correct equity issues, further straining the sense of local control and community ownership.

Similarly, the locus of control for educational policymaking was originally envisioned to be centered in the local community. Today, students, teachers, administrators, parents, school boards, other local residents, and businesses live the nightmare of state and federal micromanagement. New laws are thrust on schools and communities from the state and federal levels without opportunity for significant participation from the local level, yet schools faithfully implement the biennial spate of new laws and rules. This stranglehold by the state is causing the tolerance level of those most affected to reach a breaking point, resulting in unbearable levels of frustration, particularly for students and teachers.

*We believe* the state is interested in quality local schools and that our responsibility as local leaders is to work diligently within our own districts to improve, but we cannot in good conscience advocate policies that interfere with real improvements that are so badly needed.

*We believe* strongly in accountability, but accountability for the right things done in the right way for the right purpose. We cannot support a system that relies on one-shot testing, pushes a myth of objectivity, and punishes students and teachers based on false conclusions about student success and development.

*We believe* the state/local partnership should encourage community capacities to meet the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century learner in ways that develop the full range of a student's abilities and talents. We must restore the right of local communities to have a significant say about what the learning standards should be and how they are to be met and assessed.

### **The Federal Role: Less Control, More Support**

In the context of shared responsibility, the role of the federal government should become one of research, support for solutions to major problems that transcend state and local boundaries, dissemination of information, and protection of constitutional rights.

The federal government has circumvented local and state authority by regulating many school and classroom functions over the past several decades. The *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) Act greatly accelerated this trend, and regardless of its intent, discretion of local school boards, administrators, and teachers has been drastically diminished.

This has been done through a contractual arrangement, the terms of which exchange state and local control for federal dollars. The same legal scheme could be used to create a nationalized system with nationally-mandated curriculum, assessments, and accountability mechanisms. This approach, despite the national interest it portends to advance, will further marginalize the sense of local ownership, community, and responsibility and will significantly reduce the local support and community capacities needed to function in optimum ways. It will, in fact, result in the opposite of what was probably intended. Schools must be allowed to function in ways that build communities.

*We believe* that the further removed from the function of local schools, families, and centers of learning the policymakers are, the greater the likelihood that special interests will prevail to the exclusion of the voices of school leaders, communities, and families, orchestrated public hearings notwithstanding. The schools cannot be run either effectively or efficiently from Washington any more than from Austin. Local schools and communities may not always function as well as they should, but removing their authority generally instead of specifically is not the answer.

## **A New Vision and Direction Needed**

We are compelled to offer a new vision that is based on our experience within our own communities. We listen and continuously search for new knowledge and ways to help parents realize their dreams for their children. What we envision comes directly from the aspirations of our citizens, parents, community leaders, students, teachers, and school board members who we interact with every day. The future we see is tempered by the insights and beliefs derived from our professional judgment, experience, and what we have learned from our communities and each other. The voice we reflect is a cry from home for great schools and a better tomorrow for our children.

*We believe* that certain premises, principles, and beliefs should drive a vision that is 21<sup>st</sup> century in its character. We have articulated those principles in the section that follows. A vision that can frame the debates and conversations is needed to create the deeper understandings and commitments of all who care about the future. We have painted a picture of a dynamic vision of learner success in a global, digital world and the organizational structures and supports necessary to realize that vision. We have proposed some strategies for action as well.

*We believe* this endeavor will result in major changes in state policies and local practices, better public education opportunities, and stronger communities. To bring about these changes, we will engage citizens of the local communities and elected officials in open and informed conversations focused on the agendas contained in this document and the subsequent topics they will generate.

## Our Declaration of Commitment

The writers of The Declaration of Independence expressed their beliefs on which their vision of the new nation was based. They also felt a responsibility to enumerate the wrongs that justified their separation from the tyrannical king and his parliament. We too, have shared our beliefs, and a general description of the preferred future we believe can and must be created.

The principles and premises we embrace are defined in this section. We think of these principles on which the schools can be transformed, in a metaphorical sense, as analogous to the Articles of Confederation and the United States Constitution. We know they do not rise to that magnitude of importance or clarity of expression of the philosophical underpinnings of our great nation, but we sincerely believe that moving in this new direction for educating the young is fundamental to the survival of the nation of the free they envisioned and created. We see the Federalist Papers as symbolic of the conversations for understanding that must be stimulated and provided for now.

*We pledge ourselves* to act on these beliefs, to pursue these ends, and to be willing to take the personal and professional risks required, for we do not believe the next generation will have the opportunity open to us today. It is with that sense of responsibility and urgency that we take on this enormous task, the first of which is to invite those who may share our discontent and the possibilities of our approach to join us in seeking understanding, in improving it, and in taking the strategic actions necessary to begin and sustain this critical journey of transformation.

# Principles and Premises We Embrace

## *Introduction*

### **Beliefs Behind the Vision:**

Beliefs create vision and drive action. Purpose-driven organizations are clear about what they believe, who they are, why they exist, what vision they seek to realize, and what missions they must accomplish. The assertions we make here are the basis for our vision. They form the foundation for what we see for a new direction and future for public education in Texas.

### **Importance of the Digital Revolution:**

*We believe* that the new digital environment will have more impact on the generation and transmission of knowledge than anything since the invention of the printing press. Like the mid-fifteenth century scribes and monks who were suddenly confronted with new roles, leaders in public education must adapt to these new realities or face extinction. The current culture and structure that prevail in most schools will not meet the needs of these new “digital natives,” nor will they result in the improved learning opportunities and engaging experiences our students deserve.

### **Re-framing Required for Changing the Conversation:**

*We believe* it is our duty to help reframe the “problems and challenges” of public education in this new context. We offer these assertions to stimulate different conversations and to provide impetus for legislative actions so that public education in Texas can take a new turn for a vibrant future.

### **Bureaucratic Stranglehold/State Dominance Must Go:**

*We believe* this transformational process must rescue schools from the bureaucratic stranglehold of over-regulation and the government-imposed and antiquated factory model that now forms their character. The state cannot have great schools and strong communities as long as it insists on the real power and authority residing in Austin, for the long arm of control carries with it the high cost of the very bureaucratic structures for compliance that render local schools and communities incapable of responding to changing needs. A new, more balanced and re-invigorated state/local partnership based on the principles embodied in this document can make Texas the leader in which all can take great pride in the schools—pride in ownership and in a new sense of community committed to the common good.

# Article I: The New Digital Learning Environment

## *Statement of Principle*

*Digitization and miniaturization of information processing power are expanding exponentially and are changing the world, our lives, and our communities at an overwhelming speed. To be viable, schools must adapt to this new environment. We must embrace and seize technology's potential to capture the hearts and minds of this, the first digital generation, so that the work designed for them is more engaging and respects their superior talents with digital devices and connections.*

## *Supporting Premises*

### **We hold that:**

- The technologies that make this new digital world possible must be viewed as opportunities and tools that can help us in educating and socializing the young both in and outside the school.
- The virtual social-network connected and tech-savvy generation will not tolerate the one-size-fits-all mass production structures that limit learning to particular times and places and conventions.
- The potential of learning anywhere, anytime, “any path, any pace” must be embraced. Future learning will be a combination of learning at school, virtual learning, learning at home, and in the community.
- Schools must reach out to those who would educate at home or in small networks and welcome their involvement in the school community.
- Virtual learning should become the norm in every community to meet the needs of students who prefer such an environment.
- The secondary school credit system should be expanded beyond school walls so that any place/any time learning, including virtual learning, are equally valued and supported.
- We (families, schools, churches, youth organizations, etc.) cannot control access to information by the young and recognize that once existing boundaries no longer exist.
- Children and youth need role models and adult guidance and connections even more than in the pre-digital era, but the role of adults is different, becoming one that is more about facilitating understanding, raising questions, and designing engaging tasks that produce learning than lecturing and instructing.
- School leaders, including board members, must work to bring the public into conversations that are needed not just to support these transformations but to help shape them and create ownership.

## Article II: The New Learning Standards

### *Statement of Principle*

*The new digital environment demands new learning standards for students so that they will have the values and the capabilities to live, learn, and earn in a free society surrounded by a world that is truly global, connected, and increasingly competitive in scope and character.*

### *Supporting Premises*

#### **We hold that:**

- Standards should be clear, attainable, and high enough to provide for a system of student performance variance where all can experience success and challenge.
- Learning should be specified to the “profound level,” that is, students are able to apply their learning to new situations, to synthesize, solve problems, create knowledge, and cultivate and utilize the full range of their capabilities.
- Learning standards should embrace development of the whole person to build students’ capacity to shape their own destiny as individuals and as contributing members of society.
- Standards should respect and value students’ “multiple intelligences” and talents and provide opportunities for all students to excel and experience success.
- Standards should tap curiosity and imagination in the traditional academic core, aesthetic, and skill areas in a way that lack of proficiency in any one area does not discourage students from recognizing and pursuing their special talents and learning in other areas.
- New learning standards should reflect realities of the new digital era, where students are not just consumers of knowledge, but creators of knowledge.
- Content standards should serve as frameworks that assist teachers and students in creating learning experiences that motivate student success.
- Standards should be flexible enough to provide for expansion and extension by local districts and their communities.
- Guidance should be given to teachers’ daily work so they can make the content standards clear and compelling to their students for each unit of focus.
- Standards should be framed so they do not sacrifice the profound learning desired for easy and low-cost state assessment and accountability measures.
- When competent, caring teachers provide properly designed learning experiences in inspiring social environments, all students will engage and can meet or exceed a reasonable variance to the standards.
- Standards should result in all students being committed and equipped to be competent lifetime learners, well-prepared for further formal education and to pursue multiple careers.

## Article III: Assessments for Learning

### *Statement of Principle*

*Appropriate and varied types of assessments are essential for informing students about their level of success in ways that affirm and stimulate their efforts and for informing their teachers so that more customized learning experiences may be provided in a timely way. Well-conceived and well-designed assessments should also be used to reveal to parents, the school, the district, and society at large the extent to which the desired learning is occurring and what schools are doing to continuously improve.*

### *Supporting Premises*

#### **We hold that:**

- Assessments must be framed in a system development approach to meet the information needs of all users of assessment results. The system must be balanced and reflect at least three basic levels of assessment: the classroom level, with particular attention to the impact of the assessment on the learner; the program level, which allows evaluation of program effectiveness; and the institutional level, which appropriately informs policymakers.
- Assessments used by teachers are the most critical for improving instruction and student learning, and to be effective must reflect certain characteristics, be interpreted properly in context, and reported clearly. Conducting good assessments is a part of the art and science of good teaching that results from teacher experiences and formal teacher professional development opportunities.
- Assessment should be used primarily for obtaining student feedback and informing the student and the teacher about the level of student conceptual understanding or skill development so that the teacher has accurate information to consider for designing additional or different learning experiences.
- Assessment should be continuous and comprehensive using multiple tools, rubrics, and processes, and incorporate teacher judgments about student work and performance as well as the judgment of others, when needed.
- Assessment should not be limited to nor even rely substantially on standardized tests that are primarily multiple-choice paper/pencil or on similar online instruments that can be machine-scored.
- Standardized tests should be used primarily to identify hard-to-learn/difficult-to-teach concepts to differentiate learning experiences and focus attention on the more systemic curricular issues involving student performance. Assessments that rely exclusively on quantifiable information remove from the teacher and school informed judgment prerogatives that are necessary to be timely and productive and deny the human aspect of the daily interactions teachers have with students and each other.
- Assessment should reflect and encourage virtual learning and incorporate ways of recognizing its value and counting it as credit in meeting graduation requirements.

- Reports about student performances, generated as a result of assessment, should inform students, parents, the school, and the greater community about how well students are doing.
- Sampling techniques involving all student groups should be employed periodically to evaluate programs and overall student progress. On occasion, community members or other teachers who have particular expertise may observe student performances and participate in protocols gauging the quality of student work products or examinations.
- The voice of students should be respected, and their feedback should be solicited regarding their learning and their response to the tasks they are assigned.
- The voice of teachers should be respected, particularly what they have to say about student performance, curriculum development, and program evaluations.
- The voice of parents should be respected, and they should be involved in feedback processes regarding the response of their children to tasks assigned as well as parental desire to do work at home that extends the learning.
- Assessments for learning, when they are varied and comprehensive, can also furnish important information in context as one factor among many in personnel appraisal systems, in ascertaining the performance levels of campuses and departments, and in measuring the impact of accountability systems on inspiring continuous improvement.

## Article IV: Accountability for Learning

### *Statement of Principle*

*Comprehensive accountability systems are essential to achieving minimal personal and organizational performance only. They are necessary for weeding out the incompetent and reconstituting unproductive schools, but such systems serve to create compliance and mediocrity at best. Excellence and sustained exceptional performance come from a commitment to shared values and a clear vision that encourages collaboration and teamwork. Creating organizations that foster commitment requires superior moral leadership and a responsible use of authority.*

#### **We hold that:**

- Accountability systems should be carefully designed on a theoretical base that honors what teachers and students actually do, that empowers and builds integrity, trust, and commitment to the values that define the school.
- Assessment results and other examples of work products and performances of students should be used as the primary information source for understanding where students are and what they need. These can also be used for reporting to parents and the public.
- Accountability systems that draw on assessment information external to the class, school, or district are important for internal confidence in large systems and external confidence in all districts. Descriptions of the contexts in which assessments are given should be a part of reports. All parties should have some say in what measures are used and the weights assigned to different measures.
- Districts should be allowed to design their own internal systems of assessment for learning and accountability, as long as they meet certain specified state standards.
- Those for whom the accountability mechanisms are to apply must have confidence and trust that they are fair and unbiased.
- Sampling techniques (the full range of examinations, evaluation of student work products, and performances as well as teacher tests and standardized tests) should be used in lieu of testing every child every year.
- Processes should be clearly defined so they can be controlled, measured, and improved.
- End results are not the only results that matter, for some results are set as goals that, if achieved first, would enhance the end result.
- An effective accountability system has multiple measures in place that provide for continuing employment, promotion, development, probation or termination; and respects the perspective that most people want to do a good job and want others to do a good job, as well.
- Standardized tests (including criterion-referenced tests) cannot measure with precision profound learning.
- Much for which schools need to be accountable will require subjective measures, and the decision about what and how to measure is admittedly one of the most subjective.

- Accountability systems are guided by the fact that to attach any matter highly valued by students, teachers, school leaders, or schools/districts to any *single measure* such as a standardized test, corrupts the test and the integrity of what it measures as well as the accountability it was intended to provide.
- Labels for schools and particularly those that use the lowest performing unit as the basis for a punitive label should be avoided. There is a distinction between identifying performance gaps and labeling. Identification of performance gaps enables schools to move forward in designing different instructional strategies or approaches to help students achieve the learning desired.
- Complete transparency is a requisite for how all data is collected, analyzed, and reported, including the subjective, sometimes political, manner in which state proficiency standards are set on state tests, if such tests are to be used.
- A multi-year cycle for periodic district and campus performance reviews should be established, using highly trained visiting teams to analyze a predetermined set of student performance information.
- As single measurements, standardized norm-referenced tests, criterion-referenced state tests, aptitude tests, end-of-course exams, other oral and written examinations, student performances/projects/portfolios, regular teacher assessments, and grades each give a piece of the picture; and used in combination, can provide a more holistic view. However, if a high-stakes standardized test is given a preponderance of weight, it will become *the* assessment that really counts, others notwithstanding.
- Standardized tests to which high stakes are attached can become substitutes for the learning standards themselves and result in “teaching to the test” rather than teaching for attainment of the standard.
- Consequences (sanctions) should be associated with a performance assessment *only* if the assessment uses a combination of measures including sample examinations and other student performances to ascertain the degree to which the learning level is outside the variance allowed.
- Alternative assessments in combinations as indicated in other premises in this section should be considered.

# Article V: Organizational Transformation

## *Statement of Principle*

*The digital revolution and its accompanying social transformations and expectations dictate a transformation of schools from their current bureaucratic form and structure that reflects the nineteenth and early twentieth century factory after which they were modeled, to schools that function as learning organizations. We believe that a learning organization can create the conditions and capacities most conducive for leaders, teachers, and students to perform at high levels and meet the expectations of new learning standards.*

## *Supporting Premises*

### **We hold that:**

- Excellence emanates from a shared commitment to values and standards, high levels of engagement, and strong leadership at levels functioning within an accountability system that inspires.
- The teacher's most important role is to be a designer of engaging experiences for students, supporting students in their work by incorporating more traditional roles as planner, presenter, instructor, and performer.
- The overall quality of the present teaching force is excellent, and most teachers are capable and willing to take on their new designer role if their sense of moral purpose for entering teaching is honored, and if they are provided relevant developmental opportunities and a climate and conditions that support them.
- To attempt to incentivize teachers with material rewards for improving test scores is an insult to teachers and infers that improvements in learning can be measured with precision. Such pay schemes should not be mandated by the state but left to the discretion of local districts.
- The costly loss of so many teachers from the profession in the first three to five years of employment is likely more a function of the social systems and conditions that dominate most schools than a lack of material rewards.
- Districts will have increasing difficulty in attracting experienced teachers to teach in poverty-stricken schools, and the overall teacher retention rate will decline even further if federal and state bureaucratic controls continue excessive focus on high stakes standardized tests.
- Leadership development at all levels (teachers, included) must become a primary means of building needed capacities to function in required new roles.
- Students are in charge of determining where their attention, effort, and commitment go, and their access to information gives them even more power; hence, they must be treated accordingly.
- The variation in student learning is as much a function of student effort as it is of ability, meaning that we must incorporate into the tasks we design and assign to students those qualities that will increase engagement.

- Profound learning (owning the knowledge) as opposed to superficial learning (short-term memory) comes more from engagement and commitment than from various forms of compliance, coercion, sanctions, or rewards.
- The use of too tightly monitored curriculum and a scripted approach to teaching to ensure coverage of the material for the test instead of broad understandings of connected content is a detriment to profound learning.
- The district is responsible for creating the conditions in which student commitment and engagement become central and for attracting principals and teachers who can learn to use appropriate frameworks, protocols, processes, assessments, and resources in different ways in a collaborative setting.
- Operating and social systems exist in all organizations including schools. Transforming these systems is the only way to transform schools into the type of organization needed.

## Article VI: A More Balanced and Reinvigorated State/Local Partnership

### *Statement of Principle*

*A more balanced, reinvigorated state/local partnership can generate the public involvement and community support needed to meet the demands of new learning standards essential to the success of the 21<sup>st</sup> century learner. The present state-dominated partnership is inherently incapable of creating the type of schools that can provide the learning experiences most needed by students in our schools today. New levels of trust and reciprocal arrangements, including a return of significant authority and responsibility to local communities, are the only hope.*

#### **We hold that:**

- The state's interest in great schools and communities can best be assured by a partnership that may specify the basic standards for graduation and general accountability measures but does not detail how standards are to be achieved nor the assessments needed to inform and guide instruction.
- The dramatic increase in number of students, diversity, and poverty levels demand that the state/local partnership be shaped to respond to these needs with innovations not bound by bureaucratic rules of the present.
- Schools reflect the problems of the society from which their students come; therefore, it is essential that community/school partnerships be developed and supported that coordinate social services to students and families.
- Educating our youth is a state responsibility but a local function. Attempts to run the schools from Austin and Washington will result in a further decline in the local sense of ownership and responsibility at the very time when local involvement is most needed.
- The public education finance mechanisms must be adequate, equitable, and provide for local meaningful discretion and flexibility in the allocation of resources to support goals and priorities. Digital learning opportunities will require innovative revenue generation and accounting possibilities not yet invented.
- A stronger sense of community ownership would prevail if conversations by school board members and other community leaders focused on substantive issues over which they had control rather than on state and federal compliance matters.
- Regional education service centers are a vital resource and developing their capacities to provide technical assistance in collaborative ways can accelerate the transformation journey of schools and school districts, particularly in development of assessment tools for learning and training for school personnel.

## Legislative Initiatives Required

These principles and premises and the resulting vision involve major transformations throughout all aspects of public elementary and secondary education. The initial changes in laws and rules should include the following:

- **Transform** the current litany of overly detailed **curriculum specifications** to frameworks that identify at the state level the most important topics for the new learning standards in a way that leaves room for local communities to make decisions about the details.
- **Transform** the current **assessment system** that is cumbersome and focused on a series of snapshots for accountability to a system of multiple types of assessment that satisfies various state and district needs but has a primary focus on informing instruction and design of work for students. Invest in piloting assessment alternatives to standardized testing.
- **Transform** the **Texas Education Code** from a litany of overly prescriptive regulations and a myriad of practices imposed on the schools that restrict local prerogatives, distract attention, and use resources, particularly misuse of time, to a streamlined compendium of major policies that support the new learning standards and focus schools on their main purpose.
- **Transform** the **accountability system** from one based primarily on standardized test scores with counterproductive high-stakes that result in mediocrity at best, to a system that enables excellence through inspirational standards, comprehensive review processes that ensure accuracy in reporting levels of learning, outstanding moral leadership, and a culture of commitment.
- **Transform** the **Texas Education Agency** from an organization that is totally focused on compliance and enforcement to one that carries out its compliance function as secondary to providing leadership and technical assistance to school districts liberating them to innovate and focus on children and ensure they are accountable to their families and communities.
- **Transform** the **state governance structure** from a system that locates inordinate power in the governor, providing little or no insulation of schools from political expediency, to a system that has clear lines of authority and accountability and provides for general oversight of the agency. Clarify the role of the state board of education and its authority related to the core business of schools.

# Appendix A

## *The Story Behind the Visioning Institute*

### **Where's the vision?**

This story begins with conversations among school superintendents and other school leaders. Such discussions are often dominated by compliance issues such as how to implement the latest mandate from Austin or Washington. At other times, the exchanges relate to school finance, politics, changing demographics, challenges of technology and its impact on students and society, the test-focused craze, dysfunctional school boards, and the negative impacts of the present accountability mechanisms on students and teachers. On occasion, we lament how we allow ourselves to be co-opted into supporting policies that we know are counterproductive and take away local options, and how we permit ourselves to be discouraged from being more assertive in representing our local communities in support of meaningful improvements.

But when the discussion turns to thoughts about the future for Texas public education, no clear picture emerges to frame the conversation. We sense the present direction is wrong but what direction would we propose? Most of us have some understandings of the future we want in our districts, but even those descriptions are framed by the present state accountability labels, as if reaching “Exemplary Status” defines it. Can we begin a new and different kind of dialogue about the future? Should we challenge the underlying assumptions on which so many bureaucratic practices are based? In the absence of a clear picture of the preferred future, should we as public school leaders define and express our own vision to “get the ball rolling?”

### **What are we for?**

The second part of the story has its origin in the state educational policymaking environment and associated debates. Politicians, state business leaders, and their policy advisors have been the principal architects of the present system—not school superintendents, not principals, not teachers, and not parents. What we hear most often from these external decision makers is that they know what school superintendents are *against*, but don't know what they are *for*.

If they are asking us to describe what we are *for* in a broad based and coherent way, then we tend to come up short in spite of our issue-specific legislative programs, with the exception of the principles we favored in the school finance issue. Otherwise, we often gave inadequate answers. What evolved from these interactions was the assertion that we could answer the “for” question only if we were clear about our relevant beliefs, principles, and premises and the vision they would generate. One thing we know for sure is that we object strongly to the present debilitating conditions for students and teachers generated by the false assumptions that underlie many current policies. Therefore, we feel duty-bound to discover and express the answers to the “for” question, not in a piece-meal fashion but in a comprehensive and fundamental manner, and in a way that makes sense of the digital revolution now impacting every aspect of our world and our lives.

### **Where did we start?**

The catalyst for bringing these ideas forward was Keith Sockwell, retired superintendent of Northwest ISD, and, at the time, with SHW Group LLP, an architectural firm in Plano. In his

visits with a number of superintendents around the state during the spring and summer of 2006, these questions kept coming up again and again. The “what are we for” and the “no vision” bug bit him hard. So he asked SHW Group if they would underwrite such a quest with “no strings attached.” The only stipulations SHW Group made, through its Chief Executive Officer Gary Keep, were to take the long-term view, think creatively, follow through, and ask the participating superintendents’ school districts to support the effort by paying their travel costs and a minimal fee, and, more importantly, supporting their commitment and the time to make it happen.

We anticipated that the effort would require at least a yearlong pledge, and that it would be professionally developmental for participants. Secondly, it became clear that follow through could involve significant resistance from the backers and benefactors of the present state-controlled system. However, our confidence in the democratic process was such that if parents and other local community members were empowered, they would rise in support of the new vision if it were clear, reflected their values, and appealed to their interests and needs and dreams of success for their children.

### **What were the next steps?**

Sockwell contacted John Horn, retired superintendent, Mesquite ISD, and now a Senior Associate with the Schlechty Center for Leadership in School Reform. He has worked with several Texas school districts and has been facilitating planning and goal setting sessions for leaders of the Texas Association of School Administrators (TASA). He was also the primary facilitator some years back when eleven educational leadership organizations came together to develop the core principles around a school finance system that would provide adequacy and equity and meet constitutional requirements.

Along with Frank Kelly, director of educational facilities planning, SHW Group, Sockwell and Horn met with Johnny Veselka, Executive Director of TASA, who saw the need for such a visioning effort, eagerly agreed, and with the TASA Executive Committee’s unanimous support, obtained approval of the Texas Leadership Center to be the fiscal agent. TASA would provide coordination and other staff support. SHW Group agreed to pay for facilitation, materials, cost of resource speakers, and publication of the initial draft product that would be used to foster intentional conversations around the agenda promoted by the proposed principles and premises.

The Visioning Institute then became a reality. The Institute contracted with the Schlechty Center to help design and facilitate the work sessions. A small nucleus of superintendents from the larger group was invited to form what became known as the Design Team. They met with Lennie Hay from the Schlechty Center and John Horn to develop clarity about the objective, map out a 15-month timeline, select topics for discussion germane to the objective, identify experts in those fields, and design each session as a developmental experience for participants that would free them up to think creatively, elicit insights from their own experience, and to develop a sense of collegiality and moral commitment to the goal and to each other. Horn worked with the Design Team between sessions to adapt and meet the needs of the participants so their contributions could be maximized.

### **How were other participants selected?**

The superintendents invited to participate were those with whom Sockwell had been visiting, and who, for the most part, were SHW Group clients. The Texas Leadership Center Board of Directors

and TASA officers were also invited. Horn and Hay advised the Design Team that a maximum of 35 participants would be the most conducive to having the type of disciplined conversations and dialogue needed to reach the stated goal.

When the 35 participants were identified, it became clear that the group included an appropriate sample of superintendents representing various types of districts, serving over 1.2 million students. The Design Team members believed that if the initial proposal were a “work in progress” or an “initial draft,” that any who desired could help to shape its continuing evolution, that if it were inspiring and captured the spirit of what any similarly constituted group of superintendents would also produce, then it would be welcomed and well received.

The original participants were sensitive to not make presumptions about speaking for all. We viewed our work from the perspective of how we would react if we had not been part of the original group. Our conclusion was that if it were kept as a “work in progress” until anyone who desired could weigh in with suggestions and changes, then it would be judged on its quality and relevance.

It was agreed that an extensive written record of the discussion and video recordings would be made to ensure that, at the end, the thoughts and contributions of all had been captured and honored in the resulting product. However, to ensure completely candid discussions and protection from those who might misunderstand such free and open dialogue, it was agreed that no video or quotes of individuals would be made public without their consent.

Now that the initial “work in progress” document has been offered, the SHW Group has agreed to support further dissemination and public information strategies to give our colleagues the opportunities described above and to put “feet and legs” to the more fully developed ideas and policy initiatives that emerge. They will also support efforts to extend conversations in local communities, with other organizations, and with state leaders in hopes that many of them will embrace the statements of vision, principles, and premises required to create the future envisioned.

## Appendix B

### *Meetings, Topics, and Participants*

The Visioning Institute had its first meeting with participants on September 6-7, 2006, and met for seven sessions during 2007 with an additional work session in November and the most recent meeting in January 2008. The Design Team continues to meet and additional sessions are likely to orchestrate the next steps.

### *Our Purpose as Framed in the Invitation Letter to Prospective Participants*

*The Public Education Visioning Institute is a unique opportunity for thirty visionary, progressive superintendents to learn from one another by challenging conventional thinking to improve their leadership capacities and their school systems.*

*Participants will engage in stimulating dialogue with each other and leading thinkers to explore ways they can create more meaningful educational opportunities for their students. The first in a series of eight workshops will focus the group on examining the culture and structure needed in schools to meet the needs of learners in a more global environment of new expectations.*

*Development of relevant core values from which new visions and purposes for public education can emerge is a goal. The remaining workshops have been designed to explore moral and intellectual leadership, the nature of the future's learner and the new social contexts in which they will live, more appropriate assessment systems, and more equitably designed accountability mechanisms.*

*Participants will explore innovative ways of using resources such as people, time, space, technology and funding to realize a new vision for public education in the year 2020.*

## *The Schedule/Topics/Resource Speakers*

- Session 1: Purpose, Core Values, Vision—Phil Schlechty**  
September 6-7, 2006
- Session 2: Learners and the Design of a Productive Social Context (I)—Marc Prensky**  
November 8-9, 2006
- Session 3: Learners and the Design of a Productive Social Context (II)—Judy Johnson/Lauren Resnick**  
January 10-11, 2007
- Session 4: Results for Public Education—Doug Reeves**  
March 7-8, 2007
- Session 5: Rethinking Resources for Public Education (I)—Milton Chen**  
April 25-26, 2007
- Session 6: Rethinking Resources for Public Education (II)—Ian Jukes/Ted McCain**  
June 22-23, 2007
- Session 7: Moral and Intellectual Leadership for Change—Michael Fullan**  
September 27-28, 2007
- Session 8: What Could Public Education Look Like in 2020?—Phil Schlechty**  
January 16-17, 2008

## *Participating Superintendents*

### *Superintendent*

David Anthony  
Cathy Bryce  
Gene Burton  
Deborah Cron  
Thomas Crowe  
Ralph Draper  
Robert Duron  
John Folks  
Alton Frailey  
Greg Gibson  
Annette Griffin  
Jim Hawkins  
Michael Hinojosa  
Rick Howard  
Mark Jackson  
Melody Johnson  
Duncan Klussmann  
Richard McReavy  
Leonard Merrell (Retired)  
Richard A. Middleton  
Vernon Newsom  
Dawson Orr  
Douglas W. Otto  
Thomas Randle  
Rick Reedy  
Jerry Roy  
Karen G. Rue  
Rod Schroder  
Greg Smith  
Barbara Sultis  
Jeff Turner  
Stephen Waddell  
Ryder Warren  
Nola Wellman  
Leland Williams

### *District*

Cypress-Fairbanks ISD  
Highland Park ISD  
Rockwall ISD  
Weatherford ISD  
McKinney ISD  
Spring ISD  
San Antonio ISD  
Northside ISD  
Katy ISD  
Crowley ISD  
Carrollton-Farmers Branch ISD  
Killeen ISD  
Dallas ISD  
Comanche ISD  
Burleson ISD  
Fort Worth ISD  
Spring Branch ISD  
Waller ISD  
Katy ISD  
North East ISD  
Mansfield ISD  
Wichita Falls ISD  
Plano ISD  
Lamar CISD  
Frisco ISD  
Lewisville ISD  
Northwest ISD  
Amarillo ISD  
Clear Creek ISD  
Goose Creek CISD  
Coppell ISD  
Birdville ISD  
Marble Falls ISD  
Eanes ISD  
Dickinson ISD



