

**Under the Microscope:
Educational Progress in Houston**
by
Rod Paige, Secretary of Education [1]

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Remarks of Secretary Paige before the Greater Houston Partnership

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This country is in the midst of a revolution in education, a revolution that promises educational emancipation and equitable inclusiveness for all students - not some - all!!!! It is a revolution about freedom, fairness, and quality education. It is also about America's international well being.

The reforms introduced in the Houston Independent School District (HISD) and throughout Texas helped start this revolution. Other Southern states such as North Carolina, South Carolina, and Arkansas initiated reform and sparked accountability programs at about the same time. The reforms in Houston were the product of a community effort, with widespread input from business, non-profits, parents, clergy and other community groups. These reforms included openness and transparency, inviting an examination that was unprecedented in American education. In fact, Houston has become one of the most analyzed school district in America; Texas has become one of the most analyzed states.

Today, I want to discuss the impact of this revolution. Because those who are fighting against it have targeted Houston, and are targeting you and your children, you have a right to know what is happening.

For better or worse, Houston has become the epicenter of this discussion, the battleground of a new struggle for freedom.

The Houston experience has been unique. In the 1970s, you will remember that community leaders realized Houston had to diversify to attract new employers. Several large corporations which would have served as economic engines turned away from Houston and located their corporate offices elsewhere; companies like the American Can Company, Grumman International, and Sears Roebuck. They said that the quality of the school system was a major factor in economic development.

So there was a community-wide effort to make the school system better. The community started down the path of school reform, step by step, through a series of actions.

First, HISD introduced greater accountability. There has been a long history of accountability in education, going back to the 1980s. A businessman, Charles Duncan, asked, "How will we know if our children are learning?" How indeed! The result was the Perot Report, which was the foundation of the Texas accountability system. It resulted in House Bill 72, which has been in place through several generations of state leadership. It has received bipartisan support.

Second, HISD adopted an open attitude to reform, looking for the ways and means to quickly improve the quality of education. Openness included reaching out to the business community, asking them to become a partner. HISD even invited representatives from the business community to audit our books, offer suggestions to cut waste, and help develop a better managed educational system. The community looked to Al Haines, Harold Hook and the Houston Business Advisory Committee, and the Greater Houston Partnership for assistance.

Third, HISD adopted strong reforms to improve the schools: decentralization, comprehensive parental involvement, improved safety, and stronger relationships between the student and teacher. And HISD emphasized testing as a method of measuring performance measurement. Houston students took the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills tests (TAAS), as required by the state. They also took the Stanford 9, which was something extra that HISD chose to use to see how students were doing against a national norm. HISD set a high bar for performance because much of the Stanford 9 is geared toward a suburban school model.

You will remember all of this, because there was close partnership throughout. For every action HISD solicited and received broad-based community input. This was a close working relationship that benefited every student.

I want to emphasize this point. HISD's work with the community, and with the Greater Houston Partnership, was because the district felt itself to be a part of the economic development of Houston. In fact, the strategic intent of reform was to strengthen the economic and social foundations of the City of Houston by providing Houston's children with the highest possible quality education.

These actions, individually and cumulatively, generated positive results. A report from the "Making the Grade" Conference showed that between 1994 and 2000, the achievement gap between white and Hispanic students dropped from about 36 percentage points to about 13.5 percent. Reading and math scores improved. Administrative costs dropped. Staff positions increased. Decentralization meant that the percentage of school dollars controlled by the principal went from 5 percent in 1994 to 66 percent in 2001.

There is some interesting recent data, too. In 2002, the National Assessment of Educational Progress examined six urban school districts. Normally these assessments are done on a state level. HISD volunteered to participate. In almost every comparison, students scored at the top of all the other urban school districts tested. This measure is important because HISD was compared to similar student populations in other large urban areas.

There is also some recent data on 4th Grade mathematics achievement. Texas students did pretty well. Among white students, only Connecticut and North Carolina had higher average scores. Among African American students, Texas led the nation. Hispanic students in Texas had an average score better than almost every state, except Florida, Montana, North Carolina and South Carolina.

So for those having trouble balancing a checkbook, find a 4th grader in Texas.

By any measuring stick, in a few short years, together HISD made a striking difference. The results were real; the changes overwhelmingly positive. HISD had

engineered one of the most comprehensive systematic reforms of a school district in educational history. The Broad Foundation and many others recognized these efforts.

HISD is far from perfect; there's still a lot of work to be done. After all, any organization with more than 27,000 employees and more than 200,000 students will always be vulnerable to problems. But there has been substantial progress. Don't let anyone obscure or blur your gains. Don't let others rewrite history and take away your many accomplishments.

This progress was on the President's mind in late 1999. When President Bush was elected, this country faced a nation-wide, well documented, if silent, national problem: a two-tiered educational system.

For some fortunate students, they received a world-class education. There were islands of excellence. But millions of children were left behind. In my view, that was wrong. It was outrageous. Most of those left behind were from low-income or minority families, or children with special needs.

I know, as someone who grew up in rural Mississippi, that this situation is unjust and a latent vestige of racism. I know that 50 years after *Brown v Board of Education*, we still have battles to fight before an equal education is available to all.

And I know this is a battle that we must win. No Child Left Behind is the logical next step in fostering racial equality and equal opportunity. As Thurgood Marshall said in his oral argument before the Supreme Court in the *Brown* case, "There is no way you can repay lost school years." I agree...no way!!! There isn't a form of compensation that makes up for lost time and for lost opportunities.

I give the President much credit for seeing this problem and making it an issue in the last national election. He said that, if elected, he would institute change, and he did. Within four days of assuming office, he initiated a blueprint that became The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Thanks to his leadership, education has transcended traditional partisan lines. The law was passed with strong support from both Democrats and Republicans.

Now, for the first time in the history of our nation, every state in our nation has an accountability plan that holds all schools and all students in their state to the same high standards.

For the first time in our nation, parents and teachers will be able to work together to make sure no child is left behind. Every child counts.

No Child Left Behind is a tough law. But it's a good law. It focuses attention on the children who most need our help; but it benefits all children.

Some in the educational establishment have been willing partners.

Some have resisted. Frankly, some people don't like change. Change is difficult precisely because too many people have a good thing going with the old system. Some people aren't as concerned about your children as about themselves. They aren't about education or inclusion, just paychecks and no hassles. Rather than

working to make reform a reality, they want to derail it. They aren't worried about inefficient spending, teachers forced to teach out of their subject, low testing scores, high dropout rates, or the future of the children coming out of our schools. They offer no positive thoughts about reaching out, no good advice about making the system work. They just peddle stasis, nihilism, and hopelessness.

The more they are threatened, the harder they fight any change. The more we work for inclusion, the more they will paint their resistance in diversionary language.

Some people think they can damage the process of national reform and defeat the No Child Left Behind law by striking out at Texas and the Houston Independent School District. They believe they can win by fighting a proxy war here. So they try to devalue the good work of the people of Houston. Your work!!!

Some people are not interested in an open-minded inquiry. They have an agenda. If they can muster substantial dirt on the Houston school system, then they hope to damage the national implementation of No Child Left Behind. There are those who want failure, who demand it, for political or professional gain.

So, critics come after the school district in Houston...not Sacramento, Denver, Boston, or Los Angeles. It is Houston that they put on the front page. They come after you, not because of an interest in quality education, but because of where you live and who it might hurt politically.

In a way, the scrutiny should be welcomed. Openness is an important component of reform. But transparency doesn't necessarily mean approval, or even guarantee understanding. Some of the analysis is confused and misleading. Some of it is wrong.

I'll show you what I mean. One media story tried to compare the TAAS and Stanford 9 scores, claiming that Houston's progress on the Stanford test was slower than its progress on TAAS. I almost fell out of my chair when I read that. Comparing those two scores is like comparing bull riding and sheep herding. Both involve livestock, but test different skills. It is like comparing apples and squash, or chess and football. The TAAS measures performance pass/fail on indices set by the State of Texas, mostly dealing with instructional standards and curriculum. It is used for in-state comparisons only and is meant to test students on what they are being taught in class. The Stanford 9 is a national test, graded on a 1 to 99 scale, covering reading and mathematics. It is designed for national comparisons with others taking the same test.

The overall achievement gains made on each test were not part of the story. Rather, it implied that Houston was failing because you were succeeding. The two incompatible tests somehow proved this. Both tests showed gains - the arrows were going in the same direction - showing gains. But the story argued that the improvements should have been identical, which is a clear misunderstanding of the tests and what they demonstrated.

The story now had what it wanted: shocking headlines and startling statistics. But it was flawed; it wasn't a fair, balanced story. To add insult to serious intellectual injury, the story only quoted experts who agreed with the central premise of the story. It was pre-ordained journalism, making the facts fit the desired headline.

Here's another example. There was a front-page story about dropout rates. Again, the fact that Houston has accountability measures to uncover such problems was not reported.

Of course, there may have been some administrators who did not provide accurate reports. That may be true; I'll let others decide that. But, the problem was found because of the effort to enforce accountability and to institute transparency. And even the critics cannot diminish the quick and substantial reduction in dropouts.

And there was a front-page story about the crime rates. Our children must be in a safe environment if they are to learn their full learning potential. The stories about crime have also misused two sources of data, inappropriately comparing them. The critics mixed on and off-campus crime together and then forgot to mention their extrapolation.

The truth is that crime has diminished in the schools, and the data prove that.

With respect, these stories are a pointed insult to everyone working so hard to make public education better for the children of Houston. These stories have the unintended consequence of undercutting the progressive improvements Houston has made in educational reform. The children of Houston, your families, the school system, and the city itself have all greatly benefited from your long process to introduce accountability, improve quality, and build community support. You are not wrong to want to give every child a quality education. You are not wrong to work toward inclusiveness, to be guided by principles of fairness and equality. You are just trying to keep kids in school, keep them safe, and provide a good education.

Let's try to have some perspective and balance. Education should be a bi-partisan effort. We should not play politics with our children's lives and their futures.

How should you respond? You must keep faith in your work and yourselves. Stay the course. Keep working to make education better and more inclusive. I will keep speaking up, and so will the parents whose children benefit, and even the children themselves. And you should, too!!!

Here is the real measure of reform. At a speech last month in Washington, two children came forward and thanked me for helping them. It seems that they were special needs children, and their school programs became even more inclusive thanks to No Child Left Behind. So they were receiving a fine education, and just wanted me to know.

Those children are the reason we must forge ahead and make education inclusive of all children. There are some who think that African American children can't learn as well as white children, or that Hispanic American children are slow learners, or that special needs children should be held back, or that children from other countries can't adapt quickly, or that poor children are poor students. Such attitudes become self-fulfilling. These children can learn. All children can learn, if we give them the opportunity, the attention, the time, and the resources to learn. That's what this is all about: helping all children to learn. That is something that teachers, parents, clergy, education advocates, civil rights leaders, government officials, business people, and everyone should want and should demand.

Frankly, I find it staggering that the very critics and organizations that fought so hard for civil rights could leave our African American, Hispanic American, and special needs children behind. And that is who we are talking about.

Some critics are just on the wrong side of history. The No Child Left Behind law will survive because it is the right thing to do, in the best traditions of this great country. It offers fairness, opportunity, inclusiveness, and equality. It is the way to guarantee a quality education for all of your children.

Now I know...they will fight it anyway they can. If those who fear change defeat national reform, then division, exclusion, racism, and callousness win. This is a debate with profound consequences. If we lose this debate, millions of children will be harmed by being excluded, ignored, disrespected, and under-educated, and then sent out into a world for which they are educationally unprepared and uncompetitive. Who among us would wish that on any child?

Nationally, the President and the Congress have committed this country to a more effective, fair, and inclusive educational system. The President has initiated one of the most sweeping reforms in the history of education. Now, our job is to make it work because it is the best way to give kids the education they deserve. No Child Left Behind is working. And millions of children who would have been excluded will have been given the greatest gift imaginable: an education. That education will give them life-long benefits: intellectual growth, economic security, and competitive opportunities. The Ancient Greeks said, "Education is freedom." I agree, but it is more than that. It is life itself.

That's what this debate is all about. The HISD reforms, starting in the 1970s and continuing to this day, have helped your children immeasurably. You cannot let those with a different, personal, political agenda destroy all that you have accomplished. Thank you.

[Link to this speech](#) on the Department of Education site.

About Rod Paige

On January 21, 2001, the United States Senate confirmed Dr. Rod Paige as the 7th U.S. Secretary of Education. For Paige, the son of public school educators, that day was the crowning achievement of a long career in education and a life of determination and hard work that began in segregated Monticello, Mississippi.

His resume speaks of his persistence in the journey. He earned a bachelor's degree from Jackson State University in Mississippi and earned both masters and doctorate degrees from the Indiana University.

In the years since, he's been a teacher, a coach, a school board member, a dean of a college school of education, and superintendent of the nation's 7th largest school district in Houston, Texas.

Paige is the first school superintendent ever to serve as Secretary of Education. And his vast experience as a practitioner—from the blackboard to the board room—paid off during long hours of work to pass the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

As Secretary, Paige has held the Department to the same high standards expected of our schools. Prior to his taking office, investigators uncovered wide-scale criminal fraud, abuse, and waste within the Department that was featured on NBC News' *The Fleecing of America*.

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