

Mike Rawlings: Next steps for building on DISD success
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People ask me, “What’s the biggest surprise you’ve had in your first months as mayor?” It’s how much progress we’re making on the education front. No one is declaring victory, but I’m pleased about the sense of urgency and commitment throughout the community to face this issue head on. We dug ourselves a deep educational hole 15-plus years ago and we’re steadily climbing out. Where are the signs of hope?

First, we all agree education should be a top priority. In a recent survey of Dallas residents, the No. 2 issue we face is our schools and the belief that they are not where we want them to be.



Statistics point to meaningful progress in the last few years. The number of DISD high school graduates has increased by 22 percent in four years with a four-year graduation rate of 75 percent vs. 63 percent in 2007. Dropout rates have been cut in half across all ethnicities. In the last four years, commended rates on state tests are up by 39 percent, passing scores on AP tests have climbed by 29 percent, and half of our graduates enrolled in college this year vs. 40 percent in 2007.

On the governance front, we have signs of real progress. In 2011, the DISD board of trustees has focused on solutions instead of differences, strategically agreeing to let principals be accountable and fully choose their staff; to overhaul the teacher evaluation system; and to use performance, not seniority, in any teacher reductions.

The board is searching for dollars to potentially lengthen both the school year and the school day, and trustees authorized the expansion of Pre-K to a full day across the district in a tough budget environment.

All of these are key cornerstones of proven reform strategies for improving public education.

Many others are breaking new ground as well. Leadership DISD was formed in September to prepare roughly 100 citizens annually for future leadership roles in the district. EducateDallas and Dallas Kids First were recently created to remove barriers — financial and others — for qualified trustee candidates to serve. Also, Commit!, a new partnership of Dallas County school districts, nonprofits and other stakeholders, was created with a stellar volunteer executive, Todd Williams, signing on to lead the organization. Its focus is to create a sense of community urgency and serve as a catalyst for greater coordination among all of the city’s educational assets.

The reason for all of this work is because we have a lot of ground to make up. Despite great pockets of excellence, [college readiness](#) rates are not universally strong. We’re still 10 points behind the state’s average four-year graduation rate. While perception needs to catch up with the realization of what’s been accomplished, there’s still much work to do on four important fronts: governance and policy, increasing human capital, growing school options, and strengthening neighborhoods and parental involvement.

Here are some tactics critical for our success:

1. Focus on placing great principals at every campus, especially the most underperforming schools.
2. Continue to leverage [Teach for America](#) and other pipelines for talented new teachers. Principals continue to tell me they’re making a difference.
3. Build up our struggling neighborhoods in key low-performing school areas. Habitat for Humanity’s goal of 1,000 homes in these areas is needed. And we at the city need to do our part as well.
4. Continue to foster our high-performance public charter schools such as Uplift and KIPP, which are growing and preparing students for college at a record pace. We must find facilities for them to expand.
5. Have high expectations of our kids and ourselves. Let’s talk to every child early about furthering his or her education after high school and believe that we can create a world-class school district.
6. Hire a great DISD superintendent who believes in the work that’s already taking place and is a change agent with great leadership and communication skills.

With real progress in our schools, let’s make sure we cheer on this positive traction while at the same time never settling for mediocrity. To convince more middle-class families that Dallas is the place to raise their children, we need to be viewed as a city committed to delivering the educational choices they want.

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