

• Bernadette Nutall: Keeping children's interests first

Published: 05 December 2011 11:31 PM

Photo: TOM FOX/Staff Photographer



This year, the Dallas ISD Board of Trustees faced tremendous challenges: substantial budget cuts, staff reductions and reallocating resources. These challenges were, in their own way, a blessing as they forced trustees to focus on our core priority: educating children. Despite these challenges and the typical distractions of personal agendas, trustees took important steps to strengthen our district. Some of our most important decisions, however — including choosing a superintendent, addressing under- and overenrollment and approving a new budget with even deeper cuts — still remain.

All of us, as citizens and taxpayers, are responsible for what happens in our schools. As we consider these decisions, we must be willing to set aside our own desires in order to do what's best for children. When we adults allow ourselves to be distracted, to get wrapped up in our own ideas and comfort, we can end up making decisions that benefit us in the short term but hurt our children in the long run. We have to start putting children first every step of the way.

We put children first when we truly believe that every child in our school district can achieve. Too often, we sell out our children and their futures because we don't believe that all of them can succeed in school. If we think in negative terms, our actions will lead to negative results. This can mean decision-makers fail to act boldly on behalf of our students.

We put children first when we adopt policies and procedures that allow the district to place the best teachers in every classroom. School is never a dress rehearsal for our students; every day, every year counts. DISD must make sure the best teachers come, stay and are supported in DISD so students succeed every year. To find and keep great teachers, we must hire great principals for every school and give each the ability to determine the right staff for his or her students. Excellent teachers led by great principals will give all children access to the quality education they deserve.

We put children first when we base decisions on objective data instead of individual opinions and preferences. Progress is made when people come together behind a common goal. Student achievement is our common goal, and student achievement data must guide the decisions we make, from curriculum selection to staff retention. Trustees and community members must also look at data with regard to human, financial, volunteer and facility resources and come to informed conclusions about how these areas are helping or hurting the academic achievement of all children.

We put children first when we conduct ourselves in such a way that we are positive role models. Many decisions in education are difficult because the issues are complex and often emotionally charged. Asking tough questions and thoughtfully, respectfully discussing the issues is the best way to be productive in reworking a system to function in the best interest of all children. While such conduct is difficult to always practice, it is how we model the civil and responsible behavior we expect of them. Our children are watching, and we must act accordingly.

Every school day, 157,000 children come to DISD to learn. Each child needs a motivated teacher, an excellent principal and a community of adults who collaborate to help them succeed. Students are dependent on the nine trustees to institute policy and directives that create and protect a productive learning environment. That responsibility takes priority over all other needs. To make decisions with anything else in mind is to go back on the commitment we've made to our students. We must always, and in every way, put children first.

Dallas ISD trustee Bernadette Nutall may be reached at benutall@dallasisd.org.