

HISD students deserve a new board [Opinion]

By Bob Harvey Aug. 1, 2019

The Houston Independent School District board of trustees has grabbed its fair share of headlines over the past couple of years. Unfortunately, the attention has only shone a spotlight on the board's culture of dysfunction, perpetuated through self-serving behavior and poor decisions. This has gone on too long.

The warning signs began more than two years ago when the Texas Education Agency (TEA) appointed a conservator to monitor the board and its efforts to turn around failing schools. Reading through the conservator's reports, the board's divisions and dysfunction are clear. Put simply, the board has not been focused on what really matters: our children. One recent analysis determined the board spends less than 10 percent of its time discussing issues related to student outcomes.

How can Houstonians be satisfied with a school board that prioritizes its own personal and political interests over the needs of 210,000 students?

All Texas school districts are governed by the same statute: If one or more schools in a district receives a failing grade for five consecutive years, the TEA must intervene, either by closing the failing school or schools, or by appointing a board of managers. A handful of HISD schools have been teetering on the edge of intervention, which could be triggered by the TEA's Aug. 15 release of the 2019 grades.

Given that school failure in HISD isn't isolated but is a systemic issue perpetuated by board failure, it is likely the HISD trustees will be subject to replacement by a local board of managers.

Let's look at the big picture. Over the past six years, 106 of the district's 280 schools have received a failing grade at least once. In 2018 alone, more than 44,000 students attended an HISD school that received a D or an F rating — which is to say, one out of every five of the district's students.

These are not just data points. Each one is a child who is being failed by a system that is supposed to build them up and create opportunity. For the sake of their future, we must all do better.

The Greater Houston Partnership acknowledges that a TEA intervention is no panacea. But given the board's acrimony and poor performance, it's clear HISD needs a fresh start. This is an opportunity to reset the culture of governance and lift the entire system.

The environment has become so toxic that even well-intentioned, student-focused community leaders who were elected to join the board are rendered ineffective or become consumed by the established divisions and political infighting. This dysfunction has created uncertainty and roadblocks for everyone in the district — the administration, principals, teachers, parents and most important, our children. This level of failure is unacceptable and must be addressed.

We insist on a local board of managers composed of a diverse group of Houstonians who will prioritize our children and create sustainable conditions where clear-minded decisions can be made. They also must be willing to commit to the long road ahead. Fixing HISD will take several years and will require an engaged and supportive community. It also requires a plan for a thoughtful transition that returns control back to the electorate, but with a stronger culture of governance established within the district.

The Greater Houston Partnership cares about public education because as a community we have a moral obligation to our children, and also because we recognize that Houston's long-term ability to compete on the global stage requires a thriving system of public schools. Today's HISD students will become tomorrow's city leaders.

As our economy grows, a strong system of public schools is critical to ensure that this growth is inclusive and helps provide opportunity for all of Houston's children, regardless of ZIP code. It is clear that our current board does not share this focus on our students.

It is time for the community to stand up and say, "Enough is enough."

For the good of Houston and to create opportunity for all our children, we need to turn the page on failure and begin a new chapter. Now is our moment to stand together and demand the leadership that our children deserve.

Harvey is the president and CEO of the Greater Houston Partnership.