

Austin's schools chief rebounds from tough year

July 27, 2013

By Melissa B. Taboada and Benjamin Wermund – AustinAmerican-Statesman Staff

Eastside Memorial High School senior John Rayner and some of the students sitting near him scoffed when Superintendent Meria Carstarphen took the stage at graduation, congratulating them on making it through a tough four years.

The state threatened to close the school midway through the Class of 2013's final year, and some students and parents blamed Carstarphen. So, as she talked about all the obstacles the school had overcome, Rayner and some in the crowd were thinking that one of those obstacles was her.

"She has been against Eastside from the beginning," Rayner said. "Pretty much everything that came out of her mouth was PR."

After four years as the chief of Austin schools, Carstarphen has critics who are both vocal and well-placed.

At least four of the nine school board members have been critical of her leadership style. She sometimes bristles when her decisions are questioned, and she has been faulted for advocating sweeping changes with little buy-in from the teachers and parents who are the heart of the school system.

And yet the city's business establishment, led by the Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce, has rallied around her. Organized parent groups say she's been willing to hear them out, and many laud her ability to connect with students.

That support has helped her weather a tough year. Carstarphen has shown the same resilience that allowed her to overcome substantial public outcry in 2011 — when her proposal to close several successful schools and to cut 1,100 positions had opponents calling for her removal.

The district's stumbles at Eastside ended this spring with a new partner that will run the school, a deal that pleased both district leaders and parents. And, while some in the community blame Carstarphen and her staff for voters' rejection of half of an \$892 million school bond package in May, her supporters are quick to point out that \$490 million in bonds passed, and the failures were by a slim margin.

There is no indication that board members who have scrutinized her leadership will push for her departure, even as they are now in the middle of her annual review, which could be her least favorable. As it stands, her contract is good through June 2015. She makes \$283,412 a year and has refused raises and bonuses in all but her first year.

Carstarphen, a Harvard University graduate, is both the first African-American and the first woman to serve as Austin's superintendent. She won't say how long she plans to stay, but she says she loves the city and the job, despite how difficult it can be. The average urban school district superintendent lasts less than four years.

"Every year I think it can't possibly be that challenging again — and it just is," Carstarphen said.

Her supporters say the high-profile setbacks shouldn't take attention away from steady progress the district has made in graduation rates, her openness to innovation and alternative schools, or the district's solid financial footing despite state budget cuts and other shifts that are beyond her control.

"She's a strong leader, who is very creative and believes in innovation but pays attention to the research data," said Michael Casserly, executive director of Great City Schools, the country's primary coalition of large urban school systems. "She is an out-of-the-box thinker, but her overriding commitment is always to the kids."

Style rankles some

Many see Carstarphen as a hands-on leader, who frequently visits schools and interacts with students. Last week, while visiting Doss Elementary, she danced with summer school students to a Wii game. In the past, she has had showy convocations to motivate the staff. For her most recent State of the District address, she played an oboe alongside a student, and in another, decked in a raincoat and galoshes, she danced to "Singing in the Rain." She has even given out her cellphone number to students.

"Her ability to touch students is remarkable," said Mark Williams, the former school board president who was on the board for most of her tenure. "When you get her out of the limelight and with students, she's gifted."

Monica Sanchez, president of the Austin Council of PTAs, said Carstarphen is accessible and is always open to meeting with the group.

"Every time I call her, she responds," Sanchez said. "She's easy to talk to. She responds to questions very thoughtfully and doesn't shy away from questions."

Sanchez recalled a time last spring when a concerned parent raised questions about changes to state testing requirements and asked how Carstarphen felt about it.

At that moment, a baby in the audience screamed loudly, as if on cue, and Carstarphen jokingly replied, "That's exactly how I feel." Everyone laughed.

But others say she is thin-skinned and reluctant to consider other points of view. At school board meetings, she has rolled her eyes at her bosses when they asked a question she found irrelevant, or when they second-guessed the district's response to an issue or problem.

The perception that she isn't open to feedback has hurt morale in the district, said Ken Zarifis, president of Education Austin, the largest employee group, representing 3,000 district workers, mostly teachers.

"We have an environment where people are afraid to speak up or are discouraged from speaking up. That's what we have, and it's a sad statement, because that is a tone that's set by leadership," Zarifis said. "Dissent and critical thinking are valuable if a system wants to evolve."

Carstarphen disagrees with the assessment.

"What staff reports to me, and I feel as well, is frustration around the high stakes accountability in Texas, and the deep budget cuts forced on us by the state," she said. "Our staff is deeply engaged in the process and, most importantly, directly involved in the solutions."

'Toughest job in Austin'

Eastside isn't Carstarphen's first go-round with state sanctions and school closures. The state announced it would close Pearce Middle School in her first days on the job as superintendent.

Within weeks she had successfully presented a plan to reorganize and reopen the campus — which is still open today.

Bouncing back from just those kinds of problems has become a hallmark of her tenure. Her supporters point to her ability to move quickly to find solutions and to improvements she has made despite the ups and downs.

"If you look at the district as a whole, is it better than it was before she got here?" Williams said. "I would offer that AISD is better than it was four years ago. Have there been misfirings? Problems? Yes. But taking into consideration all the variables that come into play, I think she's done a remarkable job."

Carstarphen has guided the district through difficult budget years. She and her administrative team inherited a \$15 million shortfall in 2009-10 and closed that gap within one year, presenting a balanced 2010-11 budget.

That same year, Carstarphen pushed the district to declare financial exigency — a state of fiscal emergency that would give the district greater leeway in terminating employees, including those with current contracts. The board balked at the idea, but less than two years later, in February 2011, followed her recommendation, which made way to ax more than 1,100 positions.

Student achievement has also improved in some areas during her tenure.

Reflecting a statewide trend, overall graduation rates reached an all-time high with 82.5 percent of students earning their diplomas. When Carstarphen started in 2009, the graduation rate was 75.6 percent.

The rate at which African-American and Hispanic students are graduating has moved up several percentage points during her tenure. However, African-American and Hispanic students for three years through 2011 were graduating at a lower rate than their peers statewide and in the Dallas and Houston school districts; Austin also lagged behind Dallas in improving dropout rates through 2011.

“AISD is leaving African-American and Hispanic students behind,” said Annette LoVoi, a former six-year board member who did not run for re-election in November. “Is that fair to these students, and is that good enough for Austin?”

Carstarphen has publicly said that East Austin has been historically neglected, something previous leaders avoided acknowledging, and she has reduced the number of off-campus disciplinary referrals, especially among minority students, keeping more students in class and learning.

The district’s attendance rate increased a full percentage point over the last three years. That translates to about \$5.6 million in increased revenue.

In her four years at the district, Carstarphen has successfully launched a number of nontraditional programs. She started an Early College Start program at Reagan and LBJ high schools. And she shifted away from the district’s traditional bilingual program to launch a successful dual-language program at schools like Becker Elementary.

“Our programs benefit all families, all students, in some way,” Carstarphen said. “The closer we get to ensuring what we are doing programmatically is in alignment with the value system of this community, we will be able to hold our own.”

The district’s advances under Carstarphen’s leadership have earned her the praise and support of the Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce.

“It’s grueling being in that position,” said Drew Scheberle, the vice president of education for the chamber. “The chamber board members have said for a long time that it’s the toughest job in Austin.

“You are always on,” he said. “There is never a break.”

Others say they see crisis management at the district.

“She either causes problems or makes them worse,” said LoVoi.

In 2011, discussions among a task force working with Carstarphen to close academically successful schools — to save \$11.3 million — prompted hundreds of parents to protest. Parents decried the talks and said the district lacked transparency. LoVoi said that highlighted Carstarphen’s difficulty with being “community minded.”

Williams, the former school board president, sees the outcry in a different way.

“Her pace of play is sometimes faster than Austin as a community can move,” Williams said. “She was new to Austin, and she really had to adapt. We can be mad about what she did two years ago, but she’s learning. Setting aside process and community listening, she’s been pretty courageous. She really is doing as much or more than her peers around the country.”

Still, some said they haven’t seen the successes from Carstarphen they had hoped for.

“I was among many local leaders who placed a lot of hope in Meria to make a difference,” said state Rep. Eddie Rodriguez, a Democrat whose district includes Eastside Memorial. “I’m still waiting to see the positive outcomes I expected.”

A difficult year

The past year was marked by two highly charged issues: Eastside’s uncertain future, and a push to pass the largest bond proposal in the district’s history — the first in two decades to see any propositions fail.

People who already had doubts about Carstarphen’s leadership point to those two issues as evidence that the district’s credibility is suffering.

That showed in the close bond election, some argue. The bond proposal was assembled on a tight timeline — largely in an effort to land it on the May 11 ballot — and some thought more time was needed to fully vet the numbers. Cost estimates for some work that would have been funded by the bonds were far off the mark, architect reports showed.

“I think we have nearly a leadership crisis in the district,” school board member Robert Schneider said after the bond election.

The president of the union, Zarifis, is just as blunt.

“If leadership does not instill faith for people to follow, then you have to reflect in the choices that have been made during the course of the leadership,” he said.

Tensions rose again in 2012 over Eastside Memorial, where the community fought hard against IDEA Public Schools, the charter operator Carstarphen picked to run the troubled high school.

The school board approved the partnership with what critics say was little discussion, prompting a backlash from students, parents and residents who protested outside the board room and marched in the streets. The charter operator also moved into Allan Elementary in the fall of 2012; 85 percent of students transferred out.

Three new board members were elected in November, helping to tip the scales, and the IDEA partnership was terminated a month later. That kicked off a mad rush to find a new partner, and this time the district involved the community.

A committee of Eastside parents, teachers and school district officials evaluated five firms vying to operate the school and recommended Baltimore-based Talent Development Secondary of Johns Hopkins University. The board went along, and 20 people spoke up at the meeting, most of them thanking the district for involving the community.

School board President Vincent Torres said the district learned from the experience.

“I do think that we are needing to pause and listen and step back and say, ‘What of the process we’ve used up to this time is not working?’” said Torres. “I think she’s willing to listen to that, and retool, and modify, and listen to what this board wants her to do.”

Carstarphen said she realizes that in Austin the process can be as important as the outcome.

“In a community like this, the cultural context is one that desires more process,” Carstarphen said. “If we could have negotiated all those things on the front end, which were not possible before, maybe things would have been a little less intense and hard on everyone.”

‘I love my job here’

Carstarphen has received an extension to her contract twice since she’s been with the district — a traditional show of good faith in her work by the school board.

It appears unlikely that will happen at the end of her review next month. Multiple board members have said they don’t plan to give her an extension, in part because she received her last one-year extension, through the 2015 school year, less than a year ago.

The extension was tacked onto her contract in late October by the previous board, just before the four new members were elected to office, a decision that was criticized by some parents and community activists.

If she stays through her contract, it would mean six years leading the district — nearly twice the average for an urban school superintendent.

“I love my job here,” she said. “My goal is to ensure our district holds up its end for this city — this great city that has an international reputation for being a leader in everything from green energy to technology. And AISD must do its part to keep this city strong. No matter the distraction, I think it’s impossible for anything, or anyone, or any statute to shake me off of that focus.”