

How Dallas ISD can become an urban success story, with Harvard's help

Written by Dallas Morning News Editorial

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It always surprises us how much people worry about national politics and how little attention they pay to the local governments that have a much more immediate impact on our lives.

People will rail about Congress and the president all day, but what happens at the school board or city hall may as well be invisible.

What we know is that good governance and effective leadership at the local level are key to successful cities. And for schools, it can create meaningful reform and improved student outcomes. Divisive school boards that wallow in the weeds can set a district back years and stifle its innovation — something Dallas has had enough of over the years.

Thankfully in Dallas ISD, this spring's election of a fresh crop of reform-minded trustees promises to offer more of the good and less of the bad.

And we're encouraged to see trustees are going back to college this week to improve their abilities to successfully govern. We see it as a good sign for a board whose nine members include three brand-new trustees and one elected last year.

Seven DISD board members and Superintendent Michael Hinojosa joined dozens of their colleagues from Fort Worth and urban school districts across the country at Harvard University for a professional development program to help them become strong and effective board members.

The Accelerated Board Capacity Institute was custom-designed for the Council of Great City Schools by a team of Harvard faculty members. Trustees and administrators will receive instruction from professors in Harvard Business School, Graduate School of Education and the Harvard Kennedy School about their roles and responsibilities.

In other words, trustees are learning what they should and should not be doing in their oversight positions. And they're learning that their efforts are direct links to student achievement and improved relationships with their superintendents.

This work could prove key for a DISD board that we believe is the best in years. But we realize many members have a learning curve. We encourage them to come back with tangible tools focused on four priorities:

- 1) Setting sound policies that double down on innovative initiatives around early childhood education and college- and job-readiness.
- 2) Holding Hinojosa accountable for consistent growth in reading and math test scores.
- 3) Being good stewards of taxpayer dollars — making sure every dollar is spent where it is most needed.
- 4) Understanding that their oversight roles are not just about the schools in their individual districts, but they should be concerned about all children in DISD.

Not too long ago, Dallas ISD school board meetings were an embarrassment.

Some trustees didn't trust the superintendent and the superintendent didn't trust some trustees. Certain trustees couldn't stand other trustees. The animosity reached its nadir when a former superintendent had a trustee escorted from a school in her district by police. Frankly, children often behaved better.

More important, the divisiveness led to stalemates and logjams on policies that were no good for kids. Trustees seemed more intent on scoring victories in some imaginary war than in doing the hard work of analyzing the district's policies and procedures, considering best practices, reviewing reforms and then implementing strategy.

We can no longer afford that kind of divisiveness. By all indications, this new board is in a different place. That's a good thing for students who are depending on the adults to effectively guide their success. We hope trustees come back from Harvard armed with the skills to do so.

This editorial was written by the editorial board and serves as the voice and opinion of The Dallas Morning News.