



A special message from
Superintendent of Schools
Terry B. Grier, Ed.D.



Dear Colleagues,

Many of you have contacted me with questions about an article that appeared in the Houston Chronicle earlier this week. The article described some of the ways we're planning to improve teacher evaluations starting next school year and focused on how students' test scores would factor into difficult decisions such as when a teacher should be dismissed.

Let me answer the most frequently asked question right away: We will never remove teachers from the classroom based solely on their students' standardized test scores. Period. I made that promise to you last year, and it's still true.

I also want to emphasize that our goal in strengthening the evaluation process is not to remove more teachers. To the contrary, we want better evaluations so that we can give teachers the feedback they need to be successful in the classroom. But meaningful feedback is impossible without an honest assessment of each teacher's contribution to student learning. Standardized test scores give us one important indicator of how much students are learning, but it's only one of many different components we are proposing to include in a teacher's evaluation. And the idea of using standardized test scores in evaluations is increasingly accepted—earlier this week, American Federation of Teachers president Randi Weingarten endorsed the idea in a major speech.

This proposal is part of our larger effort to give more students access to our most important resource: great teachers. Teachers, more than anything or anyone else, have the power to put students on track for academic success. I see that every time I visit schools and witness the amazing work our teachers do each day.

I also know that even though the vast majority of our teachers are already doing a great job, there's more we can do to ensure that every student is taught by excellent teachers. We need to reward and learn from our best teachers. We need to give all teachers access to mentoring and professional development that's customized to meet their individual needs.

But we also need to be honest about the relatively small number of teachers who do not help their students learn despite our best efforts to support them. On this issue, I agree with President Obama, who said, "If a teacher is given a chance or two chances or three chances but still does not improve, there's no excuse for that person to continue teaching." I have talked to countless teachers who tell me there's nothing more frustrating than handing their students off to an ineffective colleague. That's why we won't shy away from insisting that teachers who consistently struggle should not be permitted to continue teaching.

These issues can be uncomfortable to discuss, but it's critical that we address them honestly and openly. Despite everything we have accomplished recently, the sad fact is that too many students are still leaving our schools without the skills they need to become successful adults. All of us—myself included—need to hold ourselves accountable for helping every student reach his or her full potential.

I'm going to continue this conversation with you in the coming months. As part of our effort to put great teachers in every classroom, we're going to be taking a fresh look at a wide range of policies—everything from how we recruit and hire new teachers to how we support our current teachers. We can't do that without help from you—especially our teachers and principals, who know better than anyone else what we're doing well and what we need to change to help all of our teachers and students succeed. Your opinions will have a strong influence on the changes we'll make in the coming year, and I will continue to rely on your ideas and feedback every step of the way.

Sincerely,

Terry B. Grier, Ed.D.

Superintendent of Schools
Houston Independent School District