

School Board Members: The Forgotten Reformers? An exclusive interview with Donald McAdams

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"And let it be noted that there is no more delicate matter to take in hand, nor more dangerous to conduct, nor more doubtful in its success, than to set up as the leader in the introduction of changes. For he who innovates will have for his enemies all those who are well off under the existing order of things, and only lukewarm supporters in those who might be better off under the new." Niccolò Machiavelli

The Prince (N.H. Thomson, translator)

When Don McAdams and Rod Paige ran for election to the Houston Independent School District board in November 1989, they were driven by the same motivation that spurs so many public-spirited individuals to serve as trustees of the nation's 16,850 school districts: To change the lives of children by having schools deliver a better education.

After winning election as HISD trustees, McAdams and Paige united with other board members to reform the nation's eighth-largest school district--from the inside.

Over the next 12 years, McAdams twice served as Board President and oversaw major changes in the district, which resulted in significant improvements in student achievement. Paige was appointed superintendent of the district in 1994 and transformed HISD's operations, organization, and philosophy over the next six years, before being tapped by President George W. Bush to become U.S. Secretary of Education in January 2001. McAdams stepped down from the board a year later, at the end of his third term.

In reforming a major U.S. urban school district, the Houston board and Paige succeeded where the norm is failure. How did they do it? How can other districts do it? What are the lessons of Houston's reform?

It was partly to address such questions that McAdams in 1999 established the Center for Reform of School Systems, initially at the University of Houston College of Education and now an independent not-for-profit organization. The mission of the Center is to support school district and community leaders who want to become more effective school reformers.

McAdams, who currently serves as the Center's president, holds a B.A. from Columbia Union College and an M.A. and Ph.D. in European History from Duke University. He taught at Andrews University and served as president of Southwestern Adventist College and the Texas Independent College Fund. He was executive vice president and adjunct consultant at the

American Productivity and Quality Center; president of McAdams, Faillace & Associates, a management consulting firm; and executive vice president and COO at Texas Southern University. He recently spoke with *School Reform News* Managing Editor George Clowes.

CLOWES: *What prompted you to run for the school board?*

McADAMS: I've always been interested in learning, which is why I guess I became a professor in the first place. But one of the problems I had as a college president in Texas was the quality of incoming freshman students. We were spending a lot of money on remediation because more and more freshmen were coming to college unprepared for college work. There were a lot of students who couldn't find Europe on a map.

Initially, I made some real efforts to shake up the Department of Education in this college, but I was thwarted by the status quo attitudes of the faculty and the Texas Education Agency. I was interested in making changes in that agency and so I first ran for the State Board of Education in 1988. At the time I was working at the American Productivity and Quality Center and could see the link between educational performance and economic performance.

I lost my race for the State Board of Education but, shortly thereafter, a vacancy opened up on the Houston school board and I was encouraged to run by a lot of the people I had met running for the State Board. I ran, and I won.

**Mission Statement of the
Houston Independent School
District**

Beliefs and Visions:

- HISD exists to support the relationship between the teacher and the student.
- HISD must decentralize.
- HISD must focus on performance, not compliance.
- HISD must require a common core of academic subjects for all students.

CLOWES: *What needed to be addressed in the school district?*

McADAMS: It was obvious that the system wasn't working very well and that a drastic change was needed, but it wasn't clear exactly how to make that happen. But we started off as a board with several people being elected at that same time--Rod Paige, Ron Franklin, Paula Arnold, and myself--and we all united with Kathy Mitzberg, who already was on the Board.

We developed a belief and vision statement that outlined what we believed about public education and the vision we had for Houston ISD, and we approved it at the board table. The superintendent didn't like it and we ended up appointing a new one to try to drive the district into a reform mode.

We said we wanted a school district focused on educating children. That was job one. Everything has to relate to that. If it doesn't relate to that, then we ought not to be doing it.

Number two, we want a system where everybody is accountable for results. We want to focus on results, not on input. We want a performance basis, not a compliance basis. We want accountability everywhere in the organization.

Number three, we want a decentralized system so that people are empowered. If we're going to hold them accountable for results, we need to give them control of their workplace. But you can't get away from compliance if you have all sorts of rules and regulations to measure their input.

Lastly, we wanted a core curriculum for everybody. We didn't want any easy pathways to graduation. We wanted every child to take a good, solid academic curriculum.

CLOWES: *And the superintendent didn't like this?*

McADAMS: The superintendent resented that we were taking control of the district. She saw her job as being in charge and deciding what needed to be done. She also was a defender of the status quo.

There are a lot of people in public education who say, "It's not fair that people are criticizing us because we're doing the best we can with these children." Our attitude is, "If the public school system isn't meeting the needs of children, then we need to change it. Let's quit making excuses."

The next superintendent we hired was a dynamic, hard-working administrator who made a lot of improvements. But when we started pushing decentralization, he didn't want to give up much power. He was not pushed out, but when he left we had the opportunity to hire Paige as superintendent.

We decided as a board that we weren't going to go back and hire another traditional educator who would try to fine-tune the existing system. We wanted someone who knew Houston, where we were, and what our approach and philosophy was. We realized that we had someone here on the board--Rod Paige--who knew the city well, who had the respect of the leadership of the city, and who understood the Board's vision. In fact, it was his vision. We appointed Paige as superintendent in 1994 and, after that, the reforms really began to pick up speed.

As superintendent, he immediately put into place a very elaborate process for designing a new system. He involved leadership from the business community with extensive task force proposals, design documents, and so on. Within a year of his being selected, we had a totally new management system in place. He took the accountability system we already were developing before he became superintendent and expanded upon it. He put administrators on private sector contracts instead of tenure. He outsourced business functions in partnership with private companies--food service, maintenance, and trash disposal. He had the same vision that we did.

CLOWES: *What did the board do to make sure their reforms were sustained?*

McADAMS: We didn't have to worry about that as long as Paige was superintendent, but the board did take action when he left. To make sure we didn't have any policy churn, we selected an insider who was part of the system, understood the system, and was not coming in from outside with a whole bunch of new ideas.

There's a trade-off that the Houston board makes with its superintendent. On the one hand, we stay out of management but, on the other hand, we establish the vision and are responsible for policy.

We don't expect the superintendent to come in and say, "Here's my plan for saving Houston." We expect the superintendent to say to the board, "Give me your plan for saving Houston, and I will implement it." It's quite different from what happens in a lot of school districts, where it's often the superintendent who is in charge, not the school board.

Frequently, when there's a vacancy, board members in many districts will interview superintendent candidates and ask what their plans are for saving the district and leading them out of the wilderness. That's really backwards. What the school board needs to do is to say, "We have a belief system. We have a vision. We have a theory of action to make that vision come true. We want someone who understands this and who can make it happen."

For example, when the pioneers wanted to go to California, they put up the money, they bought the wagons, and they put the group together. They also hired a wagon master who knew how to get to California. They didn't say to the wagon master, "We'd like to have a better life. Where do you think we should go?"

It is the board's responsibility to set the direction for the district. That's their job. They are the elected officials and they can't just pass this responsibility on to the superintendent.

The recent Enron scandal illustrates this point. All too often in corporate America, boards become pawns of the CEO. That's not good for big, for-profit corporations, and it's not good for school districts, either. The board members have to accept their fiduciary responsibility and they have to exercise oversight.

Paige was the one responsible for changing the culture of the organization. And to a large extent, he did. It's much more of a performance-oriented culture today than when he became superintendent. He was in charge of making personnel decisions and changing administrative procedures. He was out there preaching to the choir and enunciating the vision every time he got a chance.

CLOWES: *Were there changes for the parents, too?*

McADAMS: Our theory of action for change was basically to implement an internal marketplace. Obviously, accountability and empowerment are characteristics of the market.

Other characteristics of the market are information and choices. We tried to create as much choice as we could within the system.

We adopted a public school choice system where parents could take their child to any school in the district as long as there was space available. This has not worked as well as we would have liked because the schools are crowded and there hasn't been a lot of space available.

We also created about 25 charter schools; we contracted with private vendors to operate schools; and we built a lot of new schools, too, to match population shifts. We created as much choice as we could.

At one time, we had four to five hundred students in an experimental program called Contract Placement, where we gave parents who were not satisfied an opportunity to take HISD money and go to a private school. One of those schools eventually became a state charter school.

We put in a policy where the money follows the child, and the money is weighted so that children with greater need have more money following them. Our definition of equity is unequal resources for unequal needs. Principals now are competing with each other for children.

CLOWES: *What has the Houston school district accomplished as a result of these reforms?*

McADAMS: By any objective measure, HISD has improved significantly since 1993, and Houston has improved at a faster rate than the state of Texas.

Tests of student achievement are up, the dropout rate is down, attendance is up, and the administrative costs as percentage of instructional costs are down. HISD has narrowed the achievement gap between affluent or middle class children and poor children. The gap between African-American and white achievement has been cut in half, as has the gap between Hispanic and white achievement. HISD has been a pioneer in reform in this country.

CLOWES: *What are Houston's lessons for board members and superintendents?*

McADAMS: The first principle is: Commit yourself to every child learning at grade level, and accept responsibility. Don't tell me you're a great board if your children aren't learning.

Second, no excuses are allowed. You have to take the resources you have, and do it. This is not to say resources aren't important, but enormous improvements can be made with the resources at hand.

The board must come up with a clear theory of action. What actions will make this happen? Is it smaller classes? Higher salaries for teachers? Charter schools? Scholarships for poor children to attend private schools? More tests?

There isn't just one theory of action that is preferred and must be accepted. A lot depends on the local situation. But to make that kind of decision, the board needs to be familiar with the literature on urban school reform and know what's going on in other cities.

On the other hand, there are some things that do need to be managed very tightly. Reading is one of them. There is a great deal of mobility in a system like ours and if you don't have some tight parameters around reading instruction, the children who move from one school to another become confused.

The next step is for the board to develop policies that will reinforce their theory of action. Having done that, don't meddle in management, and don't fight in public. Process is important and boards need to understand that.

Finally, school board members do have the bully pulpit. They need to exercise their civic leadership to build knowledge in the community about the beliefs that are driving the mission of the community's schools. That way, the school district is not dependent upon the current board members.

After all, board members come and go, as do superintendents. But the kind of people who are likely to get elected in Houston now are the ones who know what track the school district is on and want to keep going down that track.

The school board also has to pick a first class superintendent, like Rod Paige, or his replacement, Kaye Stripling.