

Written by Jeffrey L. Boney, Associate Editor
Wednesday, 13 March 2013 00:00

AN EDUCATIONAL BLACKOUT

African American Families Being Forced To Chase after a Quality Education in Houston



The dictionary defines a rolling blackout as an intentionally engineered electrical power shutdown where electricity delivery is stopped for non-overlapping periods of time over geographical regions.

Rolling blackouts generally result from two causes; insufficient generation capacity or inadequate transmission infrastructure to deliver sufficient power to the area where it is needed. Rolling blackouts are a common or even a normal daily event in many developing countries where electricity generation capacity is underfunded or infrastructure is poorly managed.

The African American community has been the unfortunate beneficiary of constant educational blackouts for decades; and by the looks of things, these rolling blackouts don't appear to be going anywhere anytime soon.

As a follow up to a story that appeared in the Houston Forward Times, May 2012, entitled "*Choking the Life Out of Our Black Public Schools,*" we reported that HISD Superintendent Terry Grier and his administration had recommended to the Houston Independent School District (HISD) Board of Education that it was in the best interest of the students, community and taxpayers to close the historic James D. Ryan Middle School, a traditional Black school located in Houston's Third Ward community, due to low enrollment.

Nearly a year after the HISD Board of Education decided not to follow through on Grier's recommendation to close the Ryan campus the HISD Board of Education had a change of heart.

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CHANGE OF HEART

On last Thursday, the HISD Board of Education decided to revisit Superintendent Grier's original plan and voted to approve a transition plan to close the historic Ryan campus and repurpose it as a magnet school designed to attract students from throughout the city to attend.

In a controversial turn of events, HISD Trustee Paula Harris, whose district includes the historic Ryan campus, was a no-show from this very important board vote. Superintendent Grier, who Trustee Harris requested return to the HISD Board last year with a new proposal to keep Ryan open, was also a no-show.

There are three African American HISD Board Trustees: Larry Marshall, Paula Harris and Rhonda Skillern-Jones. All schools that were on the agenda to be discussed fall in Harris' district. Marshall voted for the plan to close Ryan; Skillern-Jones voted against the plan; and Harris was a no-show for the vote. Only trustees Skillern-Jones, Manuel Rodriguez Jr., and Juliet Stipeche opposed the plan.

Trustees approved the Ryan plan by a vote of 5-3.

Marshall, a former HISD educator, was first elected to the HISD Board of Education in 1997 and has served as president in 1999 and 2009. Harris was elected to the HISD Board of Education in November 2007 and re-elected in 2011 and served as Board president in 2011. Skillern-Jones is the newest trustee and was elected to the HISD Board of Education in 2011.

FUTURE OF RYAN

Students currently zoned to Ryan Middle School will be permanently rezoned to nearby Cullen Middle School beginning this summer.

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According to HISD, *'comprehensive'* middle schools with fewer than 750 students are considered too small. They believe this plan addresses low enrollment at Ryan, which they state is too small to operate efficiently while offering students the services they need to succeed. As of the board vote, HISD reports that Ryan has 263 students.

From 2002 to 2013, the student population of Ryan fell 70%, from 830 students to currently 263 students.

Lockhart Elementary and Turner Elementary were the feeder schools for Ryan and Cullen. HISD trustees voted to close Turner and consolidate it with Lockhart back in 2008. By combining Lockhart and Turner, the number of students who flowed into Ryan and Cullen significantly decreased, impacting schools like Jack Yates High School, which has relied on Ryan and Cullen as its feeder school pattern for years.

According to HISD, combining the student bodies of Ryan and Cullen allows students to receive the additional funding needed to offer a stronger variety of academic course offerings and other services to students. Because they fund schools based on enrollment, HISD believes that schools that have fewer students have a challenge with offering elective courses that are outside the basic core curriculum and a problem with providing extra-curricular activity opportunities for students.

Parents and community leaders came out in full force, as they did last May, to protest the closure. Many residents took to the microphone to express their disdain and frustration with the HISD Board plan and specifically with HISD Trustees Paula Harris and Larry Marshall.

"Look at how they treat us and continuously disrespect us," says Travis McGee. "A no-show is the same as a no vote. Grier doesn't care to face the people who are being impacted and if Paula Harris wasn't going to be there, she should have requested that it not be on the agenda."

McGee, who serves as Sunnyside Gardens/Bayou Estates Civic Club President and Sunnyside/South Park Super neighborhood Vice President, believes that HISD wants the community to be divided. He points to the fact that HISD held four separate meetings; at four separate schools; on the same day; at the same time; to discuss the same issues.

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“If the people continue to sign these blank checks, then we will see more school closures and less accountability,” says McGee.

NAACP Board Member and Education Chair Dr. Carolyn Evans-Shabazz states that not having Trustee Harris be there to speak up for her constituents or speak out against these issues impacting her constituents and schools in her district, are primary reasons that many of her constituents have a huge problem with Harris’ absence at the board vote last Thursday.

“We need to know, as her constituents, where Paula Harris stands on issues that impact our community,” says Evans-Shabazz. “Her (Harris) absence and silence does not give us a clear message as to whether she is for us or against us. By her not being there, we are only left to assume that she is against us and doesn’t care what happens to the people she was elected to represent.”

Evans-Shabazz also expressed her disappointment with Trustee Marshall and believes that he should have recused himself from the vote on Ryan because of his personal animosity towards the school.

“Ryan has done better, but it didn’t matter how well that school did because HISD and others have always had a mission to accomplish,” says Evans-Shabazz. “This is blatantly discriminatory. We are not going to give up and we are going to continue to fight this issue. This assault on Black schools and the Black community has got to stop.”

According to an HISD spokesman, last month the HISD Board of Education voted to seek federal grant dollars to help start a new magnet school on the Ryan campus. Ryan students will be forced to attend Cullen and the campus would be repurposed as The Medical and Health Professions Academy at Ryan Middle School. HISD states that this newly-developed, district-wide magnet middle school would seek to prepare more students to compete for admission into the DeBakey High School for the Health Professions.

ANOTHER BLACK SCHOOL CLOSURE DELAYED

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In another confrontational issue that appeared on the HISD Board agenda, trustees postponed voting on a plan to consolidate Jones and Sterling high schools.

Under the plan, the current student bodies of Sterling and Jones high schools would be combined into a single campus on a permanent basis. Students from Sterling would move to the Jones campus and remain there while the new Sterling campus is under construction as part of the recently approved HISD bond program. The school would operate as a single campus, with all students joining together to compete on the same academic and athletic teams.

The new campus, which HISD states is slated to open in late 2016 or early 2017, would rezone all students who are currently zoned to Jones, to the newly-built Sterling campus. HISD states that the new campus will be a \$72.3 million campus, capable of supporting modern technology and accommodating the latest approaches to collaborative learning.

HISD tabled the measure and plans to revisit it in the near future.

If the merger is approved, HISD is exploring options for keeping the Jones campus open as a district-wide Vanguard magnet school for gifted and talented students once the new Sterling High School is opened. Jones was the original home of the Carnegie Vanguard High School, which now has its own campus.

COMPARING APPLES TO ORANGES

In HISD, *'comprehensive'* high schools with fewer than 1,000 students are considered too small. Jones currently has 446 students.

Carnegie Vanguard was built using bond money and began its first year as a separate school, during the 2002–2003 school year, with 173 students. That number has increased over the years, with Carnegie reporting an enrollment of 458 students during the 2010-2011 school year, according to their school demographic profile on their website.

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In 2008, when HISD decided not to allow Worthing High School and Carnegie Vanguard to have a shared campus, Trustee Harris expressed her disappointment with that decision by stating she believed the district needed to make sure it was treating neighborhood students the same as the gifted and talented students like those at Carnegie Vanguard.

'*Comprehensive*' high schools are the most common form of public high schools in the United States and are meant to serve the needs of all students, not just a select few. When a school, which is not considered a '*comprehensive*' high school, has less than 1,000 students and serves the needs of specialty students, then it can justify receiving funding from HISD because it doesn't meet the '*comprehensive*' requirement. 'c

Based on this criteria, schools like Carnegie Vanguard, DeBakey High School for Health Professions, High School for Performing and Visual Arts, Energized for STEM Academy and many others could always operate schools with less than 1,000 students and could never be at risk of being shut down due to low enrollment by the HISD Board of Trustees.

Many African-American families are concerned that their children's education is being threatened and is under constant attack by the very people that have been elected or hired to help their children succeed. This is an epidemic. HISD and all school districts across the country must proactively address these issues and do their best to attract students to '*comprehensive*' public schools through marketing and engagement, in order to show these families that they are committed to providing their children a quality education.

Black families, Black students, the Black community and concerned teachers continue to remain the victims of seemingly, never-ending educational blackouts; caused by consistent mismanagement and poor leadership, which is forcing Black families to chase the dream of a quality education for their children anywhere they possibly can.