

Written by Eryn Roberts

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As her first term comes to a close, HISD Board President and District IV Trustee Paula Harris took the time to update the Forward Times on the state of the school district, District IV, and on what she hopes to accomplish as she seeks re-election for a second term. Harris, 47, was elected in 2007. She became president of the school board in January.

"I'm passionate about public education because public education was my ticket to success, as it was for my community, my family, and I know it is the ticket for our children," said the Sunnyside native and Community Affairs Director for Schlumberger. Harris graduated from Texas A&M University with a bachelor's degree in Petroleum Engineering.

Harris emphasized the importance of the public education system and its ability to change lives. "Historically, public education has helped a lot of people escape tough financial situations. Special education needs are met by public education, and we have so many testimonies of how HISD and our educators change children's lives everyday," Harris said. "As with any system," she said, "there is always room for improvement."

Harris said overcoming budget cuts, while making sure that each of the 204,000 students in HISD--whether they started below grade level, at grade level or above grade level, are progressing by at least one year's educational value by the school year's end is the biggest challenge facing the district. Ms. Harris believes that the residents of District IV should re-elect her because she's "worked extremely hard and we've shown excellent results. We can now say our African-American dropout rate is at an all time low, our achievement gap has decreased, and our percent passing rate on state tests has improved in all demographics."

She cited some of the successes District IV has shown during her first term. "When I got to District IV there was only one exemplary school. Under my leadership we've had as many as 12." One of the biggest successes is "the cultural change in many of our schools with increased rigor in the learning environments." She talked about the increase in commended students in District IV from 18 to 29 percent. "I'm very proud of the 11 percent increase of African-American students in District IV testing at the commended level," Harris said. "I think the Apollo program shows us that all children can learn at higher levels no matter what their environment is. We just have to find the strategy and funding to make it happen."

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As she seeks re-election, she said her top priorities include continuing to close the achievement gap, while focusing on stronger magnet programs in District IV and dual language programs. She also emphasized the importance of focusing on literacy levels. "We have to have more children reading on grade level in order for them to be successful throughout their lives," Harris said.

There has been much discussion recently about teacher accountability in the district. Harris said the teacher is the most important component in the learning process, more important than class size, socioeconomic status, home life or an unmotivated student. "This year the growth in academic achievement that our teachers made happen with all the changes in teacher accountability policy, the implementation of a new teacher evaluation program, with budget cuts, and all of these unknown challenges for teachers; to see them perform at the levels they did shows how talented our teachers are and how when we focus on student achievement, and measuring student achievement, it just happens," Harris said. "I've never been so proud of the 12,000 teachers in HISD."

Harris addressed the challenge of educating children with unstable home lives and little parent involvement. "We don't live in the day of the June Cleaver or the stay at home mom, or a mom and dad in every house. We have a lot of situations where the parents are challenged. We have a lot of situations where a grandmother is raising multiple grandkids, we have a lot of challenges in lower socio-economic communities where we can't say the parents aren't involved so that child can't be taught, so we have to overcome a lot of barriers which makes it more difficult for our teachers, which is why we have to make sure they have all of the support they need," she said. "We have to make sure these children are taught to break the cycle through a great education.

She said we can empower parents and the community by informing them. "That is why at the very beginning of my tenure as an elected official I have held community town hall meetings, and those meetings are to inform the community, the parents, teachers, and other elected officials, because it is going to take all of us working together to turn our schools around," she said. She also said we need to bring more people into the schools with programs like "Real Men Read," which she started, that brings over 200 men into schools once a month to read to children.

She is also a proponent of partnerships. "Whereas parents may not be taking kids to the NASA Space Center, I sit on the board at NASA Space Center. More of our schools are participating in

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programs, free programs where buses pick up children from Ryan and where kids go to NASA and Ellington Field for Science Lab, or partnering with the museums where they come into our schools,” said Harris who has won the Greater Houston Women’s Chamber of Commerce Women of Distinction award, sits on the Texas Energy Planning Council and is a board member for Space Center Houston.

New rules, slated for board consideration this week, would bar a trustee from taking contributions from vendors while the district is soliciting bids in their area of business. Trustees also are considering banning themselves from calling meetings with prospective vendors and district staff, a practice that has come under scrutiny in recent months. Harris said, “HISD has some of the strongest ethics rules of any of the surrounding districts, but to assure the community that everything is being done ethically, they can be tightened even more.”

She said “as a board member it is my due diligence to make sure all vendors are being treated fairly. Over the past four years I have communicated with every parent, every teacher and every vendor that’s called me and said they had a problem. I think as long as a board member is not telling the administration who they should use as a vendor, and board members are following the current ethics rules on gifts, then meetings are fine. We have to be open to meet with all stakeholders; the problem is we need to assure the public that board members are not picking vendors and not directing the administration to use certain vendors. One of the things I’ve had to go to the administration about multiple times is that minority vendors are not being treated fairly or that the district has not been responsive, and I’ll continue to do that.”

In closing Harris said, “District IV is on the right track. We see more choices in our district so that people don’t have to leave our area, such as the High School for International Studies where kids travel all over the world, and the brand new YWCPA an all girls school which provides the option for gender separated studies. We have E-STEM Academy which is an internal HISD charter, and all the students spend their summers attending universities such as Harvard or Syracuse University. We have Debakey, which is one of the best schools in the nation, and then we have our traditional comprehensive schools, and the administration has work very hard to find the right leaders who can manage and grow schools like Yates Ryan. We have more high performing schools in District IV, our students are learning at higher levels, they’re staying in school longer, and they’re benefiting from more advanced placement and dual credit programs. In District IV we have increased from \$700,000 to \$1.4 million in after school programs, but there is still more work to be done. We have too many children still not reading on grade level, we have too many families that are still not understanding all the choices in our district and they choose to leave. So I think in the next four years we will see additional growth and additional victories, programs and parent participation in District IV and I’m excited to see that growth.”{jcomments on}

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