

Texas

LONE STAR

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One Trustee's Trail

From Rookie to President
to Life Beyond the Board



Features

One Trustee's Trail

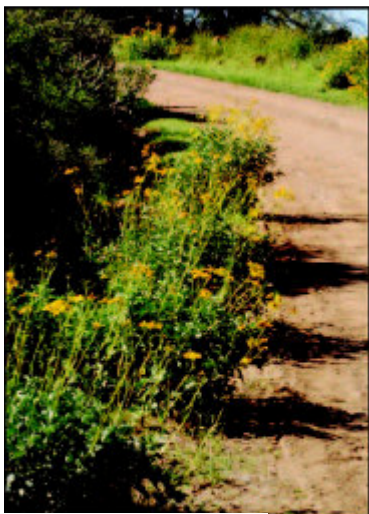
According to Pearland ISD trustee David A. Watson, his stories' "common theme has been that I've enjoyed an outstanding learning experience, because public education is a very complex proposition. If I thought board service had been challenging to this point, however, I had no idea just how tough it would be to lead."..... 6

Parental Guidance Suggested

A familiar challenge for administrators and school trustees these days concerns parental involvement in schools. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 handed down many parental involvement directives—but fear not. Parents can—and should—be a school district's greatest ally. 9

Following the Tech Trend

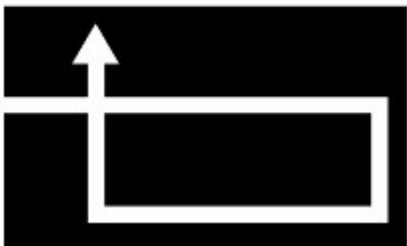
What do the latest technology-related bills from the Texas Legislature say about lawmakers' expectations for school technology use? Following the trend among districts toward technology implementation to improve operations and instruction, the Legislature now has taken steps to *requiring* it. 12



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TASB Online



Each month in this space we update you on the latest information on the TASB Web Site (www.tasb.org). Check out our site periodically.

Among the wealth of resources on the site this month is a photo page packed with images from the TASB/TASA Annual Convention October 28-30 in Dallas. You can view these great shots at Its.tasb.org/events/convention/photos.

For more information about the TASB Web Site, contact Josh Sklar at 512-467-0222 or 800-580-8272 toll-free, or send e-mail to josh.sklar@tasb.org.



ABOUT THE COVER

It's been an interesting trail for Pearland ISD Board member David A. Watson, who in this edition gives us his fourth installment in a series about his experiences as a public school trustee.

Editor's

Footnote

This edition marks the fourth, but hopefully not final, installment ("One Trustee's Trail," page 6) in a wonderfully insightful series of articles penned by Pearland ISD Board member David A. Watson. Beginning in June 2002, Watson graciously chronicled his experiences as a local school board member—from his first eye-opening surprises as a rookie trustee to becoming his board's president to recently leaving the board to serve for the University of Texas System.

Here are just a few samples of his comments along the way:

June 2002—"My crash course in the extensive time

commitment of school board service continued. . . as I spent an entire spring Saturday in a workshop meeting that didn't recess for lunch. Obviously, I developed some real food issues early on in my tenure."

"Perhaps my biggest revelation this first year has been simply the size and scope of what goes on in a district of even the relatively moderate size of Pearland ISD—approximately 11,000 students."

March 2003—"As another month begins, my plate remains full. As I learn my way around, I share in some triumphs and tragedies; academic and extracurricular victories are offset by a variety of disappointments."

"With continued encouragement from family, friends, administrators, and fellow

board members, I may well give it another go. In the meantime, play out more line, TASB. Tomorrow there is another marathon Saturday workshop, and I'm still scaling this mountain of information."

October 2004—"Group consensus, while warm and fuzzy, is difficult and sometimes impossible to achieve. This is especially true in a community as diverse as the one I call home."

"School board service is compatible with a real job—sort of. Oh yes, in spite of persistent rumors, no pay (and no vehicle) is provided me from this extra job of being a school trustee. As a matter of fact, I'm still driving my trusty '95 Saturn."

November 2005—"If I thought board service had been challenging to this

point. . . I had no idea just how tough it would be to lead."

"(Board) members need to trust that their opinions will be allowed to be heard, that one or a few voices won't overwhelm all others. Decorum and civility, I believe, still have a place in 21st-century board interactions."

Watson's letters from the front lines have been informative, enlightening, and entertaining; I'd like to thank Dave personally for his contributions to this magazine and wish him the best of luck in his future endeavors.★



Fast Growth Plus High Expectations Equal Big Challenge in Pearland

by David A. Watson

Editor's note: This is the fourth article in a series by Pearland ISD Board member David A. Watson, who has chronicled his experiences, from becoming a new school trustee in 2002 to the present. His previous articles appeared in the June 2002, March 2003, and October 2004 editions of Texas Lone Star.

Greetings again from the land of fast growth and high expectations.

When I wrote to you from this space most recently, I had just been elected by my colleagues as board president. That was a year and a half ago, but it could have been longer, so much has happened since then.

As I've prepared these essays, my common theme has been that I've enjoyed an outstanding learning experience, because public education is a very complex proposition. If I thought board service had been challenging to this point, however, I had no idea just how tough it would be to lead. Let me tell you what I mean.

Transitions, Trust, and Teamwork

Transitions: The first task of an incoming school board president, I believe, is to consider the feelings of the previous occupant of the position, as well as those of the superintendent with whom you will be working. Whether the president who preceded you was in your opinion great or terrible, there is a reasonable likelihood that he or she will continue as a member of the group—and needs to be reassured that his or her contribution will be as important as ever.

Further, the superintendent is in a period of transition, having essentially been told that he or she will be working with a new leader, regardless of whether the previous arrangement was working well.

Trust: It is said often, yet bears repeating, that boards are composed of seven individuals, each elected separately for the purpose of representing a constituency within the community. Because of this, each member needs to be heard from, and each should contribute to the decision-making process. It is, in my view, the board president's responsibility to see that this happens. To do so, however, requires that all members agree to allow the president to moderate the discussion, to draw in those who are for

whatever reason reticent, and, yes, to occasionally ask others to “summarize” or “conclude.”

Members need to trust that their opinions will be allowed to be heard, that one or a few voices won't overwhelm all others. Decorum and civility, I believe, still have a place in 21st-century board interactions.

Teamwork: Once the other six board members and the superintendent are convinced that your goals as a leader are in concert with theirs (namely, to do that which is in the best interest of children), then strategic planning and refining of the vision for the district can follow. It isn't necessary, for example, to agree that a particular book should or shouldn't be placed on the shelves of a library, but rather, that a policy exists for how the appropriateness of books for inclusion in any district library is determined (as was recently clarified in our district).

Getting the Message Out

Print: Among the more important lessons I have learned during my tenure as a board president is that not only are the local paper or papers eager to know the opinions of the members of the school board on the issues of the day, but that if the board president will articulate those views in written fashion, these media outlets will usually print them verbatim.

This not only demonstrates to the public that the board is aware of and cares about the issues but has the added benefit that the risk of being misquoted diminishes tremendously. Involving the district's communications or public affairs office also sends the message that the district and the board work closely together to get out the message about public education.

Radio/TV: There are times, of course, when the radio and television media will report stories about your district. Unfortunately, my experience has been that in almost all such instances, the news they report will be bad (assaults, improprieties, district errors). In these cases, it is, in my opinion, very important that the district and the board speak with one voice, both to avoid the spread of inaccurate information and to reinforce that the incident is an aberration not indicative of how the district normally functions.

Board members need to feel confident that their president and district administrators will not damage the credibility of the district through sloppy or otherwise ill-considered statements made in haste.

The Story versus “The Story”: Though I'm not one to allege media bias generally, I do have reason to believe that it does on occasion exist. In attempting to build a particular story even when the facts don't necessarily support it, I believe that such bias can occur.

I recall that after our board instituted a more stringent student dress code within our district, a handful of parents and students (perhaps five or six people total) organized a protest outside the district's education service center prior to a board meeting. One local television station showed up expecting to capture images of an angry sign-carrying mob but was instead overwhelmed by individuals asking to be interviewed on camera in support of the tighter rules. The crew soon left, telling our superintendent that there was “no story here.”

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

The Good: Of course, there are high points I'll always remember about being board president. When my daughter graduated from high school, I was there on the



Photo courtesy of Pearland ISD

Watson: “As I've prepared these essays, my common theme has been that I've enjoyed an outstanding learning experience, because public education is a very complex proposition.”

podium to present her with a well-earned diploma (and, of course, to give her a hug and tell her how proud I was of her).

Celebrity readings, where I have been asked to visit elementary schools within the district and read to classrooms full of children, have always been at the top of my list of things I love to do. (And, you know, in all the times I've read to groups of kids, I can recall but very few instances when a child was disruptive or otherwise did not want to listen—there are, in my experience, almost no children anywhere who don't like being read to.)

Calling the words out at spelling bees is a real high point, too; there's just something about listening to a fourth-grader spell a word that I can't explain—a feeling at once both humbling and joyous.

The Bad: Though I appreciate the fundamental right of patrons to air their disagreements with a policymaking governing entity, school boards included, I continue to be bothered by those who choose to do so anonymously. If we as boards are not able to make clear to the public that redress for problems resulting from administrative or other inadequacies falls to us, then we have failed in our duty.

Without knowing that a real person stands behind an allegation, we can't act; this would not be fair to the staff, teachers, and administrators who give us their best in service to our children.

I'm also distressed any time a school bus is involved in an accident—and especially in those rare instances when children are harmed. Boards should tell and retell the story that school buses are, by far, always the safest way for children to travel from Point A to Point B.

Last, as kids get older, they fight, especially those carrying “y” chromosomes. This is neither new nor surprising, but when they get hurt, or walk away from education because of it, then it's tragic.

The Ugly: Ah yes, public school finance, and the politicians charged with sorting it out, are my least favorite topic. Why? Because they hold our future as a society in their hands. I am weary of explaining that the general and administrative costs associated with public education are, in fact, lean relative to those in the corporate world; that dollars spent on education represent an investment with a substantial (and highly competitive) return on investment; and that level funding isn't



Photo courtesy of Pearland ISD

Pearland ISD Board President David Watson signs his name in concrete at the groundbreaking ceremony for a new campus earlier this year. At Watson's right is Pearland ISD Superintendent Bonny Cain.

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really level, since it is variously estimated that an additional 60,000 to 100,000 children will need to be educated each and every biennium.

I related these facts to the Public Education Committee of the Texas House this past spring while testifying on behalf of TASB; alas, public education finance in Texas has yet to be sorted out. Guess I need to be more persuasive next time.

And Now, Goodbye

So here we are 17 months later, and maybe you're wondering what might be next for someone who considered school board service a lifetime goal. Indeed, I was privileged to be allowed by the voters to fill this role in a rapidly growing community, but, to paraphrase a great book and a great song, for everything there is a season.

So now I turn to another challenge. I'll assist the state's higher education system as an executive within the University of Texas System. I'm still feeding my passion for education, just not as a public school board member. Perhaps I'll come back to board service in the future; if I do, you'll be the first to know.★

David A. Watson, Ph.D., has served on the Pearland ISD Board since 2002.