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## Urban Education Reform- Case Study: North Forest Independent School District

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# **URBAN EDUCATION REFORM**

## **Case Study: North Forest Independent School District**

**By: Jay K. Aiyer, Michael O. Adams**

**Edited by: Subria Lapps**

Education reformers and advocates have conducted extensive studies and produced significant research around various models of school turnaround and reform. As a case study for policy in relation to models for school district turnaround, we will explore Houston's North Forest Independent School District (NFISD). The purpose of this paper is threefold. First, as a study of policy we will retroactively explore the key factors that led to the proposed closure of NFISD. Second, using existing strategies of school turnaround, we will explore potential models of reform that may be applied to NFISD. Third, we will discuss biases and recommendations concerning a proposed annexation of NFISD by the Houston Independent School District (HISD) and how those biases and recommendations could potentially influence policy and ultimately increase student achievement.

### **North Forest Independent School District**

**Demographic Information:** NFISD is located in Harris County and encompasses approximately 33 square miles inside the Houston city limits (North Forest ISD, 2009). As of 2011, the district was comprised of nine schools. One high school (North Forest High School the result of the 2008 merger of Forest Brook and Smiley High School), two middle schools (B.C. Elmore Middle School, Forest Brook Middle School), five elementary schools (Fonwood Elementary School, A.G. Hilliard Elementary School, Lakewood Elementary School, W.E. Rogers Elementary School, Shadydale Elementary School) and an early childhood center (Thurgood Marshall Early Childhood Center). The district's 2010-2011 budget was more than \$49.3 million (North Forest ISD, 2010) and NFISD has more than 1,089 full-time employees; 61.2 percent were teachers (TEA, 2011). For over a decade, student enrollment has continually declined throughout the school district. According to the Texas Education Agency (TEA), NFISD served 7,507 students during the 2010-2011 academic year (2011). During the 2000-2001 school year, 12,487 students were enrolled highlighting a 40 percent decline in enrollment over the last ten years (2011). During the 2010-2011 academic year, NFISD's students were 66.7 percent African American, 31.1 percent Hispanic, and less than 1 percent White (2011).

Table 1: NFISD Enrollment History 2000-2001 through 2010-11

| School Year | Student Enrollment | African American (%) | Hispanic (%) | White (%) | Economically Disadvantaged (%) |
|-------------|--------------------|----------------------|--------------|-----------|--------------------------------|
| 2000-2001   | 12,487             | 80.6                 | 18.3         | 1.0       |                                |
| 2001-2002   | 11,699             | 79.1                 | 20.1         | 0.8       | 80.1                           |
| 2002-2003   | 11,170             | 76.8                 | 22.6         | 0.6       | 83.6                           |
| 2003-2004   | 10,811             | 75.6                 | 23.6         | 0.8       | 88.0                           |
| 2004-2005   | 9,967              | 73.7                 | 25.6         | 0.6       | 94.8                           |
| 2005-2006   | 9,953              | 72.8                 | 26.4         | 0.8       | 95.1                           |
| 2006-2007   | 8,957              | 71.8                 | 27.3         | 0.8       | 97.0                           |
| 2007-2008   | 8,369              | 70.4                 | 28.9         | 0.6       | 99.5                           |
| 2008-2009   | 7,897              | 68.6                 | 30.8         | 0.5       | 100                            |
| 2009-2010   | 7,662              | 68.2                 | 30.9         | 0.7       | 99.9                           |
| 2010-2011   | 7,507              | 66.7                 | 31.1         | 0.7       | 99.8                           |

Source: TEA, Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS), 2000-2001 through 2010-2011

Of the 26 major school districts residing within or immediately outside of the Harris County boundary line, NFISD is considered one of the most economically challenged. The school district serves both an urban and rural student population with household incomes often well below the poverty line. At 99.8 percent, almost all of the students were economically disadvantaged, a data point considerably higher than the state average of 59.2 percent. Additionally, NFISD has had a high percentage of students that were classified as economically disadvantaged and eligible for free or reduced-price meals. Eligibility for free or reduced lunch is a reliable indicator of the socio-economic makeup of the school district. Children from families with incomes between 130 and 185 percent, considered at or below the poverty level, are eligible for free or reduced price meals (TEA, 2010). Table 2 illustrates that during the 2010-2011 academic year, 99.8% of students at North Forest High School were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (NCES).

Table 2: Students eligible for free/reduced-price lunch at North Forest High School (NFHS)

| School Year | Student Enrollment | Free / Discount Lunch (%) |
|-------------|--------------------|---------------------------|
| 2000-2001   | 1427               | 37.4                      |
| 2001-2002   | 1266               | 33.9                      |
| 2002-2003   | 1170               | 54.3                      |
| 2003-2004   | 1170               | 54.3                      |
| 2004-2005   | 1123               | 72.8                      |
| 2005-2006   | 1047               | 76.7                      |
| 2006-2007   | 1090               | 67.3                      |
| 2007-2008   | 1048               | 69.7                      |
| 2008-2009   | 896                | 99.7                      |
| 2009-2010   | 1832               | 99.8                      |
| 2010-2011   | 1629               | 99.8                      |

Source: Texas Education Agency (TEA, 2012)

### STUDENT PERFORMANCE AT NFISD

In 2003, the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) test was administered throughout Texas school districts to assess student competency in reading, writing,

mathematics, social studies and science. The test replaced the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) test (TEA, 2011). In addition to measuring student proficiency, the TAKS test also serves as the primary indicator in determining a district’s and school’s accountability rating which affects a district’s accreditation status. Accountability standards include four ratings for districts (Exemplary, Recognized, Academically Acceptable and Academically Unacceptable) and four ratings for schools (Exemplary, Recognized, Acceptable, and Low Performing).

The passage rates for NFISD in 2009 and 2010 were lower than those statewide in all areas. NFISD has continued to see minor improvements in their testing scores; however, drastic change is needed to earn higher accountability ratings. In 2009, 29 percent of students in grade 10 met math standards and in 2010 this number grew to 47 percent. Although the data represents a significant increase of 18 percent, it also illustrates that still less than half of the students met the standard. This is a constant challenge that NFISD faces. The school district was able to improve, but the improvements were not drastic enough to positively impact the district’s accreditation and accountability ratings. Passage rates on TAKS reading and mathematics for 2009 and 2010 are provided in Table 3.

Table 3: 2009 and 2010 - English Version - All Students - Percent Met Standard by Grade and Subject

| School Year | Mathematics / ELA |              | Reading / ELA |              | School Year | Mathematics / ELA |              | Reading / ELA |              |
|-------------|-------------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|-------------|-------------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|
|             | Number Tested     | Pct. Met Std | Number Tested | Pct. Met Std |             | Number Tested     | Pct. Met Std | Number Tested | Pct. Met Std |
| 2009        |                   |              |               |              | 2010        |                   |              |               |              |
| Grade 03    | 540               | 73%          | 542           | 85%          | Grade 03    | 501               | 74%          | 500           | 82%          |
| Grade 04    | 537               | 85%          | 533           | 80%          | Grade 04    | 480               | 84%          | 479           | 81%          |
| Grade 05    | 478               | 86%          | 485           | 82%          | Grade 05    | 463               | 91%          | 461           | 91%          |
| Grade 06    | 450               | 67%          | 448           | 82%          | Grade 06    | 408               | 66%          | 410           | 72%          |
| Grade 07    | 495               | 60%          | 496           | 66%          | Grade 07    | 418               | 69%          | 418           | 79%          |
| Grade 08    | 541               | 86%          | 536           | 92%          | Grade 08    | 446               | 76%          | 448           | 84%          |
| Grade 09    | 444               | 27%          | 475           | 60%          | Grade 09    | 474               | 27%          | 501           | 66%          |
| Grade 10    | 373               | 29%          | 387           | 62%          | Grade 10    | 259               | 47%          | 258           | 67%          |
| Grade 11    | 275               | 57%          | 274           | 77%          | Grade 11    | 283               | 82%          | 288           | 79%          |

Source: Texas Education Agency Lonestar Reporting (TEA, 2009)

**DISTRICT ACCREDITATION & CLOSURE**

In addition to poor TAKS scores, many other factors led to TEA’s ultimate decision to revoke NFISD accreditation and recommend closing the district. North Forest has been burdened with fiscal mismanagement, inadequate administration, and governance issues within the school district for decades.

The Texas Education Agency (TEA) commissioner, Robert Scott, announced he was officially revoking NFISD’s accreditation status following an unacceptable performance for several years and closing the school district effective July 2012 (R. Scott, personal communication, July 8, 2011). Under state law, the accreditation statuses that may be assigned to districts include Accredited, Accredited-Warning, Accredited-Probation and Not Accredited-Revoked. The TEA determined that the North Forest ISD and the North Forest High School have earned a rating of Academically Unacceptable (AU). The district has received this rating for three consecutive years and the high school for six consecutive years. It was also determined by TEA that the district has earned a substandard financial accountability rating for the fourth consecutive year. The district also earned its fourth consecutive substandard financial rating. While the merits of annexation have been called into question by some policymakers, the reality is that the current educational delivery model at NFISD has not produced academic results that are in compliance with state and federal regulations. The

proposed solution was the merger of NFISD with HISD. NFISD administrators appealed the decision; the TEA has postponed the dissolution giving NFISD an additional year to demonstrate improvements in student performance.

### **MERGER WITH HISD**

On July 11, 2011, TEA Commissioner Robert Scott ordered HISD to absorb NFISD schools and begin the process of educating the district's 7,500 students (2011). At first glance, the merger would appear to greatly benefit the students in the North Forest area. HISD is the state's largest school district with a large and diverse tax base. However, an analysis of the HISD schools adjacent to NFISD with similar student populations casts doubt on that assumption. A review of the TEA's Performance Reporting of HISD (TEA, 2011) indicates that six of the eight traditional African-American high schools in HISD are designated as Academically Unacceptable under TEA guidelines. Additionally, a majority of middle and elementary schools with large (over 75%) economically disadvantaged student populations are academically unacceptable. When comparing North Forest HS to HISD's Kashmere and Washington High Schools, which are geographically close to North Forest HS and have similar student demographics, North Forest has demonstrated equal or better performance on the TAKS test. It is also important to note that both Kashmere HS and Washington HS received Academically Unacceptable TEA ratings for the 2010-2011 academic school year, and four other HISD high schools with high minority populations were rated Academically Unacceptable as well (TEA, 2011). When examining HISD's handling of student performance for populations that are like that of NFISD, it is difficult to confidently state that NFISD students will perform significantly better if assimilated into HISD versus remaining in their current district.

When taking into account the various changes in HISD, there is significant reason for the community to be concerned. That concern should not simply be centered around what the plans are for HISD to handle the annexation of NFISD, but whether or not the students of North Forest ISD will experience more of the same. It is also important to note that since NFISD would be in a turnaround phase, it is more likely that student achievement will increase with new programming and innovation as opposed to what would happen if they were in HISD. Thus far, HISD has not come forth with any concrete plans to specifically help the NFISD student population that they would inherit. It is our recommendation that North Forest ISD does not merge with Houston ISD, but rather implement a strategy to turnaround the school district. We believe NFISD should implement a model that directly focuses on a comprehensive Restart Model.

### **TEA ROLE**

While many state and local leaders have leveled criticism at NFISD, it would be inappropriate to lay the blame entirely upon NFISD's leadership. From 2007 until 2011, TEA conservators were in charge of NFISD. During this period, a lack of attention was given to the actual academic performance of students in the school district. While TEA selected the individuals who had complete control over NFISD for several years, their focus was mostly on addressing administrative and fiscal issues. While TEA assigned a conservator to oversee continued implementation of school improvement plans for the Academically Unacceptable campuses, there are few examples of successful policies or programs that were implemented during this time period to address the declining student achievement or to support schools in providing students with a higher quality of education. Of the five NFISD schools that were rated Academically Unacceptable for the 2007 school year, the two high schools (Smiley and Forest Brook) were merged into North Forest High School which is

still Unacceptable, Oak Village Middle School was closed, and Hilliard Elementary School remains Academically Unacceptable (TEA, 2007) (TEA, 2011). Currently, only Elmore Middle School holds the rating of Academically Acceptable. It can be argued that NFISD should not be held completely responsible for the declines that occurred between 2007 and 2011, especially in the area of academic performance since TEA also remained unsuccessful in rectifying the aforementioned issues.

### **NFISD RESPONSE**

NFISD has identified its high school as the primary source of its accreditation woes, and is in the process of implementing a set of reform principles it calls North Forest HS “Project Transformation,” as well as working with noted sociologist Pedro Noguero. This initiative focuses on many of the administrative and performance culture issues that have existed at the high school. The plan focuses on three broad areas (NFISD, 2012):

#### **Student Achievement and Success**

- Clear vision for College & Career Readiness
- Student centered data conferences set with high expectations
- Offering support instruction/intervention with specialist for students showing some improvement but not yet mastering the objectives

#### **Faculty and Staff**

- Working with national consultants that have expertise with similar student demographics with emphasis on student success
- Teaming with professional learning communities
- New discipline management system

#### **Community and Stakeholders**

- Conferences including parents/guardians
- Volunteers

While we applaud the basic structure of the plan, a more comprehensive approach that deals with the curriculum and content delivery methods needs to be addressed. It is possible that by incorporating all of or some of the reform recommendations outlined below, NFISD can readily create a plan that is both feasible, given the timeframe, and able to yield results. Additionally, the district can attempt to partner with outside institutions and organizations to help in the development of a plan that can be effectively implemented for the upcoming school year.

## **Four Strategies For School Turnaround**

### **School Improvement Turnaround Models:**

The Mass Insight Education described the term turnaround as “a dramatic and comprehensive intervention in a low performing school that: a) produces significant gains in achievement within two years; and b) readies the school for the longer process of transformation into a high performance organization.” There are currently four strategies: turnaround, restart, transformation, and school closures. The following definitions are directly from the Foundation Strategy Group’s School Turnaround Field Guide (2010):

**Turnarounds:** Replace the principal and rehire no more than 50 percent of the school’s staff; adopt a new governance structure; provide job-embedded professional development; offer staff financial and career advancement incentives; implement a research-based,

aligned instructional program; extend learning and teacher planning time; create a community-orientation; and provide operating flexibility.

**Restarts:** Transfer control of, or close and reopen, a school under a school operator that has been selected through a rigorous review process. A restart model must enroll, within the grades it serves, any former student who wishes to attend.

**Transformations:** Replace the principal (no requirement for staff replacement); provide job-embedded professional development; implement a rigorous teacher evaluation and reward system; offer financial and career advancement incentives; implement comprehensive instructional reform; extend learning- and teacher-planning time; create a community-orientation; and provide operating flexibility and sustained support.

**School Closures:** Close the school and enroll students in other, higher-achieving schools.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **District wide reform**

While the most recent TEA Accountability ratings illustrate that not all schools in NFISD are academically unacceptable, the entire district, not just North Forest High School (NFHS), is in need of reform. NFHS was rated Academically Unacceptable for the 2010– 2011 school year. Of the remaining 10 schools that make up the district, including one YES Prep charter school and an alternative school, Fonwood Elementary and Shadydale Elementary were Recognized, Lakewood Elementary, YES Prep NF Campus, Forest Brook Middle School, and Elmore Middle School were Academically Acceptable, and Hilliard Elementary and Rogers Elementary were Academically Unacceptable. The district's alternative campus, High Point was not rated and neither was Thurgood Marshall Elementary. No school in NFISD received TEA's highest distinction of Exemplary (2011). With three Unacceptable schools, four Acceptable schools, only two Recognized schools, and no Exemplary schools, every campus in NFISD could stand to benefit from reforms that would elevate them to higher levels of student success and achievement. Looking further into the Gold Performance Acknowledgements, only four schools received acknowledgements for commended performance on the TAKS tests.

The successes of the two Recognized elementary schools could certainly serve as initial examples for the other schools in the district. Fonwood has experienced positive upward growth trends for student performance in all TAKS subject levels, and Shadydale has rapidly improved each year in all testing areas as well. Additionally, strengthening the elementary and middle schools in the district can yield more positive results for students by the time they reach the high school. In order to produce students that can be academically competitive in today's global society, NFISD will need to implement a strategy that will restart and turnaround the district so that all of its schools are equipped to reach at least Recognized status within the next two years, and Exemplary in the long term.

### **NORTH FOREST EARLY COLLEGE HIGH SCHOOL**

While we do not believe that the root causes of NFISD's academic troubles lie completely with the district's one high school, it is critical to address the underperformance issues at North Forest HS if the district is to dramatically improve. From that vantage point, the best way of doing so would be to model the school after the early college programs that have

shown to be successful for Houston ISD and Aldine ISD (AISD). For several years, HISD has partnered with the Houston Community College System (HCCS) to allow students to take college courses and high school classes simultaneously at one of their five Early College High Schools. All five of HISD's early college schools were Exemplary in 2011 (TEA). Aldine's Victory Early College High School opened in 2007, and has received a TEA Exemplary rating every year since the 2007-2008 school year. Students at Victory are able to simultaneously earn their high school diploma and their Associate's Degree from Lone Star College while receiving support from an intimate community of teachers and administrators (Victory Early College, 2012). Not only do these early college schools offer improved academic support for students, but they also do an exceptional job of graduating students and preparing them for success in college and university.

All of the early college high schools in HISD and AISD are relatively small, with none of them serving more than 500 students. The small size of the campus allows for students to receive more individualized attention and support from teachers, counselors, and administrators. In order for NFISD to effectively replicate an early college high school, the district would need to either split North Forest HS into at least three smaller schools or hire enough staff to keep a low staff to teacher ratio like at the successful schools. In considering space and resources, NFISD could establish three separate schools within the North Forest HS building, which would create the necessary learning communities without significantly increasing costs. The political boundaries of NFISD were recently added to the HCCS taxing district, making HCCS the natural partner for an early college model. Additionally, the district could explore other ways to partner with other local colleges and universities.

Transforming North Forest HS into an early college would require significant restructuring. Prior to the new school year, new administrators would need to be secured that could effectively transition the school into an early college program. These administrators would then have the power to retain or hire staff that would be able to establish the foundation for the program. Students in grades 10 through 12 would be randomly split into the three schools, and incoming students in grade 9 would be placed as they entered. Other than the restructuring of the campuses and staffing changes, North Forest HS could continue to function as a regular high school with students taking courses and engaging in traditional programs and activities.

In terms of academics, transforming North Forest HS into an early college campus would have significant impacts on the academic culture of the school. Early college high schools are typically structured so that students are held to the highest of academic expectations. Because one of the chief aims of early college high schools is to prepare students to be successful in college, courses are structured so that they rigorously promote learning. NFISD would have to be sure to hire teachers who demonstrate the ability to design engaging and effective lesson plans, that will move students to reach the necessary learning goals in all subject areas. An early college high school would also need to be data driven so that student progress is monitored and teachers and administrators are able to meet the ever-changing needs of students. Beyond what would occur during the regular school day, students at an early college high school would also benefit from tutoring programs that help support their learning, academic and career related field trips, test prep for college admission exams, and other mechanisms that would better prepare them for the future.

## **Partnership with the Early College High School Initiative**

Through its partnership with the Early College High School Initiative (ECHSI), HISD has opened five Early College High Schools throughout the district that have resulted in increased student achievement among demographic groups that are similar to those represented in NFISD. The Early College High School Initiative has partnered with a number of organizations to either start or redesign over 240 schools around the county. The schools are designed so that low-income youth, first-generation college goers, English language learners, students of color, and other underrepresented populations are able to earn both their high school diploma and an Associate's degree or up to two years of college credit for free (Early College High School Initiative, 2012). Adopting an early college high school model in NFISD would offer a number of advantages for NFISD students and the community at large. With more rigorous standards and an increased focus on academic achievement and college preparedness, NFISD would undoubtedly experience a significant turnaround (The following information marked by a bullet point, in the ECHSI section of this report, is directly from the ECHSI website).

### **The Early College High School Initiative Model**

The ECHSI model is one that is adaptable to fit the needs of the areas that they serve. Each early college high school is able to develop a unique vision and learning environment that represents the needs of the students and the interest of the greater community. Even in partnering with ECHSI, NFISD would be able to design its early college high school in a manner that best addresses the pressing needs at hand. Although there would be significant room for flexibility, there are core characteristics which all ECHSI schools share (2012):

- Students have the opportunity to earn an Associate's degree or up to two years of transferable college credit while in high school.
- Mastery and competence are rewarded with enrollment in college-level courses and the opportunity to earn two years of college credit for free.
- The years to a postsecondary degree are compressed.
- The middle grades are included in the school, or there is outreach to middle-grade students to promote academic preparation and awareness of the early college high school option.
- Schools provide academic and social supports that help students succeed in a challenging course of study.
- Learning takes place in small learning environments that demand rigorous, high quality work and provide extensive support.
- The physical transition between high school and college is eliminated—and with it the need to apply for college and for financial aid during the last year of high school. After graduation many students continue to pursue a credential at the partner college.

### **Early College High School Partnerships**

A key benefit of NFISD working with ECHSI to create an early college high school in the district would be the partnership with a postsecondary partner, HCCS. As with other early college high schools, HCCS would have an involved role in the design and day-to-day operation of the early college high school. Within the HISD early college high schools, HCCS is involved in a number of roles including (2012):

- School planning processes and governing boards;
- Curriculum committees;

- Syllabus planning activities;
- Co-delivery of courses with high school faculty;
- Provision of tutors;
- Mentors and student teachers; and
- The creation of “scaffolded” learning experiences, such as “bridge” courses to ease the transition to college-level work and mini-seminars for younger students In using HISD as a model, NFISD would not be alone in the process of transiting the school, and instead would be able to rely on assistance from HCCS as well as ECHSI.

### **Funding Early College High Schools**

While an early college high school will certainly come with a significant amount of advantages, the cost of operating a program do come into question. The early college high school in NFISD would still be a public school, so it would still be able to receive state and local funding. However, there would be some additional costs beyond what it would take to operate a traditional public high school. A pilot study of budgets suggests that costs for fully implemented early college high school can range from 5 percent to 12 percent more than the cost of a regular public high school; however, another study shows that the return on investment from early college high schools yields significant benefits for students, communities, and states (Webb, 2004) (Palaich, 2006). In order to address added costs of early college high schools, many districts seek funding from various foundations such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Ford Foundation, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, and others. HISD receives funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation as well as other sources to supplement the costs of operating its early college high schools.

### **Success of Early College High Schools**

Nationally, the early college high school movement has yielded significant results in student achievement over the last several years. In 2010, 5,414 students graduated from early college high schools around the country and data shows that they surpassed their peers who attended traditional high schools in a number of ways:

- More than 250 early college high school graduates earned merit-based college scholarships. Four earned the prestigious Gates Millennium Scholarship, awarded to 1,000 high-achieving, low-income students each year.
- 23.3% of graduates earned an associate’s degree or technical certificate.
- 77% of graduates went on to some form of postsecondary education: enrolled in four year colleges (52%), two year colleges (23%), and technical programs (2%).
- Of 109 schools reporting data on graduates, more than half (56%) said that students had earned two or more years of college credit.
- 80% of early college schools had a graduation rate equal to or higher than their school district (54 out of 68).
- The average graduation rate for early colleges was 84%, compared to 76% for their school district.

HISD opened its first early college high school in 2004, and since then there has been a total of five campuses spread throughout each region in the district. These campuses are in areas with similar student demographics as NFISD, and have achieved great success in student test scores as well as college readiness. For the 2010-2011 school year, all five early college

high schools in the district received a TEA rating of “Exemplary,” the highest possible rating that a school can earn (HISD Research & Accountability, 2011). In addition to their academic successes, HISD’s early college high schools have been in the media for other successes. For example, Challenge ECHS was recently recognized as a 2011 National Blue Ribbon School in addition to making Newsweek’s list of best high schools in the country.

### **ADDRESSING DECLINING ENROLLMENT**

It can be argued that the enrollment in NFISD schools has declined because students do not want to attend North Forest HS, which has underperformed for several years. The high school’s failure to support student achievement should be of concern for parents and students; however, if the district were to turnaround the school, this view would ultimately change. By turning North Forest HS into multiple early college campuses, parents and their children would be drawn to the school because it would offer the benefits of increased attention to student needs, access to college courses, and the possibility of a more promising future post graduation. With a more intimate school setting, students would have more access to their teachers which would increase their learning and achievement on tests such as the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) and Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). Additionally, by being able to earn college credit for free in high school, both parents and students would be happy with the potential for lower college costs post graduation.

## **OTHER EXAMPLES OF SCHOOL & DISTRICT TURNAROUND MODELS**

### **APOLLO 20 MODEL**

Another option that NFISD could take in reforming the entire district could be to implement a regionally based initiative like HISD’s Apollo 20 Program that is aimed at improving student performance in priority schools. Although the program is relatively new, having been launched during the 2010-2011 school year, participating schools are already showing results and improvements in student achievement. The Apollo 20 Program is currently operating in partnership with Harvard University’s Education Innovation Laboratory (EdLabs) and is centered around five research-based tenets that were identified by Dr. Roland Fryer of EdLabs. The five tenets are (HISD, 2011):

- Effective Principal and Teachers in Every School
- More Instructional Time
- Use of Data to Drive Instruction
- High-dosage Tutoring
- A Culture of High Expectations for All

Apollo 20 also includes a pipeline to recruit effective teachers and principals to serve in the priority schools, which ensures that individuals who committed to turnaround schools for at least two years teach students. With more teachers and administrators who are focused on making transformative changes in their schools, students would benefit from enhanced learning environments with high academic expectations and the resources to meet them.

With one year of data collected on the Apollo 20 program in HISD, there is room to say that

the program can offer a realistic model for NFISD. Dr. Roland Fryer recently released a report on the Apollo 20 schools where he found there to be important gains in student achievement, particularly in the area of math. After examining the first year's test scores, it was determined that the extra tutoring in math for students in sixth and ninth grades yielded significant results. In math, sixth grade students gained the equivalent of six extra months of schooling while ninth graders earned between five and nine months. Fryer found that the individualized tutoring made more of a difference in math performance than with any other type of intervention.

### **Effective Administrators and Teachers**

The first tenet focuses on having effective principals and teachers in every Apollo 20 School. Principals would need to possess both strong instructional leadership skills as well as the administrative and management skills necessary to effectively run schools. NFISD would need to develop a strategy to either provide training for currently employed principals to help them develop these skills or recruit effective principals to work in the district.

### **Increased Instructional Time**

The second Apollo 20 tenet is to provide more instructional time, particularly in the areas of math and reading. If NFISD were to adopt this aspect of Apollo 20, the district could either extend the school day or experiment with various types of scheduling formats that would allow more instructional time for key subjects. If the school day were extended, the district would have to consider the possible added financial costs of operating schools and paying staff, but that is not necessarily a deterrent. Additionally, the district could consider altering the schedule so that there are early release days to balance out the extra time spent in class.

### **Data Driven Instruction**

The use of data to drive instruction is something that has enabled the Apollo 20 schools to measure their progress and achieve results. Teachers in HISD Apollo 20 schools closely monitor the progress of every student and adjust instruction to meet the needs of their students. With proper training on data collection and instructional methods, teachers in NFISD could be capable of performing these tasks as well. The district could also look into purchasing data management software to help collect and analyze data quickly and easily for teachers and classroom support staff.

### **Culture of High Expectations**

All Apollo 20 schools are expected to have a culture of high expectations. This means that the staff members hold students to high standards and work tirelessly to ensure that students meet and exceed them. While each Apollo 20 School has its own unique culture, it is understood that all stakeholders will work to ready students for the future.

In order to promote these high expectations, it is not uncommon for teachers and students to put in longer hours or work harder to get results; however, part of the culture also includes being part of a supportive and tight-knit community that is working towards a common goal. NFISD is quite capable of getting its schools to develop cultures of high expectations. Administrators at the district and campus levels would need to outline and build the type of culture that is ideal for the district and their individual schools and come up with strategies to ensure that the culture is nurtured overtime. One immediate way to get ideas on how to foster a certain type of culture would be to do field observations at schools and replicate best practices.

### **In-School Tutoring**

In-school tutoring has proven to be the most effective of the five tenets. In Apollo 20 schools, students in specific grade levels receive extra personalized tutoring in math and reading which has yielded substantial results on student achievement as evidenced by test scores. Tutors in the Apollo 20 program are paid fellows who commit to a year of working for HISD. They receive a salary of \$20,000 per year and benefits. If funding were available, NFISD could replicate this model and hire individuals specifically to tutor students. An alternative would be to implement an in school tutoring program by partnering with outside organizations such as universities or non-profit organizations to bring tutors to NFISD campuses to work with students. The district could reach out to local colleges and universities such as Texas Southern University, the University of Houston, Rice University, as well as community organizations.

### **CHARTER SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS**

YES Prep and Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) charter schools have become quite popular in urban communities in Houston, and have been successful in boosting student achievement. School districts like HISD and Spring Branch ISD have partnered with the charter systems in various ways over the last several years. Partnering with an established charter system could be an option for NFISD; however, it is an option that should be approached with caution. While many no-excuses charter schools yield astonishing academic results for students, the disciplinary practices in some schools may be a deterrent for parents, and the ability to remove students at will is an integral part of charter success. Additionally, charter systems are more effective when given the opportunity to develop in zero-based environment, i.e. developing a school from the ground up rather than taking over an existing school. To date, these types of charters have not shown willingness to takeover existing schools.

### **DISTRICT LEVEL TURNAROUND MODELS**

#### **Recovery School District**

The Recovery School District (RSD) was launched in 2003 as a statewide district run by the Louisiana Department of Education. The RSD marks an effort to turn around underperforming schools in New Orleans. Schools were considered eligible if they failed to meet state standards for four consecutive years. One hundred and twelve schools were placed in RSDs and have to remain in the RSD for a minimum of five years. School improvement strategies included: extended school days; rigorous curriculums in alignment with grade-level standards; classroom modernization programs with technology; strong leadership by the state and RSD superintendents; greater flexibility for principals; partnerships with external organizations; five-block high school schedule and dual-enrollment opportunities for upperclassmen. The results of the district have been continually successful. For three consecutive years, RSD students have showed greater gains on state standardized tests than students statewide. To illustrate, during the 2009-2010 school year, RSD scores increased by 6 percent versus the 1 percent increase that occurred statewide.

#### **Renaissance 2010**

Another example of district level turnaround is the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) launch of a two-part reform initiative known as Renaissance 2010. CPS was committed to opening 100 new charter schools and improving the city's worst performing schools. The overall reform strategy is governed by several principles: a core curriculum; extended learning time; after-school tutoring; professional development; staff incentives and community outreach. The

early results are demonstrating some improvement in the areas of discipline, school safety, and the school environment. CPS acknowledges that the turnaround takes five to six years.

### **Harlem Children's Zone/Promise Neighborhood**

An expanded form of the district turnaround model has also been used successfully in the form of New York's Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ). The HCZ is a community-based program centered on the collaboration of community service providers with schools in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City. This community approach marries the high expectations of traditional charter schools with social service programs to supplement deficiencies that may exist because of high levels of poverty. The program has been lauded and federal resources now exist to duplicate its success. The Promise Neighborhoods (PN) program is a federal initiative that began in 2010 to replicate the success of HCZ. The PN program aims to support innovative strategies that improve the outcomes for children in the country's most distressed communities by (Promise Neighborhoods Institute, 2012):

- Supporting efforts to improve outcomes that are communicated and analyzed by leaders and members of the community;
- Identifying and increasing capacity of eligible entities focused on results from cradle through college to career;
- Building a continuum of academic, family and community support with effective school(s) at the center;
- Integrating programs and breaking down silos between agencies;
- Working with local governments to sustain and "scale up" solutions; and
- Learning about overall impact of PN and relationship between particular strategies and student outcomes.

The core of the PN movement is the offering of a "Continuum of Supports." The HCZ has a coordinated pipeline that offers more than just good schools. The pipeline begins with early childhood programs and then moves on to elementary school programs, middle school programs, high school programs, and college programs that are all supported by family, social service, and health programs as well as community-building programs. Administrators and officials in NFISD would need to evaluate the schools in the district as well as the offerings of various programs and bring them all together to support children and families in the community.

The district would need to work with individual administrators to make campus-specific changes to improve the performance of the schools. These changes could include initiatives taken from the turnaround models listed above. NFISD could still implement strategies like the early college high school model or the five tenets of the Apollo 20 program, or the schools could each have their own individual plans for change.

### **CONCLUSION**

The North Forest Independent School District is in a position to make strides moving forward. The postponed dissolution of the district should be used as an opportunity to make significant change in the academic life of the district as well as implement substantial reform in district procedures. The challenge facing NFISD is to look past short-term solutions that may increase student performance for TEA accreditation purposes. It is critical for the district to consider a long-term approach to its reform process in order to secure a sustainable future for students, teachers, staff, and the surrounding community.

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