

## **An Open Letter to Our Community from FBISD Board President Sonal Bhuchar**

In light of the rapidly evolving and constantly changing financial situation associated with the state's funding of public education, I feel it is important to communicate with you on behalf of the Board of Trustees. Within the next few weeks, the Board will begin its budget-creating deliberations for the 2011-12 school year. Under the dark shadow of a projected 27 billion dollar shortfall in the State of Texas' budget, we can all expect that the state's financial crisis will severely affect public education unlike anything we have ever seen or experienced before. In spite of Governor Perry's commitment to use a small portion of the state's multi-billion dollar Rainy Day Fund to reduce the state's deficit, this unprecedented shortage will equate to a 30 to 74 million dollar shortfall for Fort Bend ISD.

As we continue to wrestle with the inequitable state funding formula created by the Texas Legislature in 2006 and look to the consequences of the imminent state legislative decisions and federal mandates, every School Board member is about to be called upon to make very difficult choices regarding the services and opportunities the district will be able to offer its students and patrons for the coming school year. With the bulk of our budget dedicated to salaries, we may be forced to reduce some workforce positions and eliminate some programs to create the 2011-12 budget. Certainly, it is very distressing for us all, and those decisions will be made with the full realization that there will always be those who are critical of our choices.

Amidst the discussions about financial crises and budget shortfalls shared by many states across our nation, and Texas, in particular, some basic questions about our priorities have emerged. Be assured that we have never taken our eye off the real target – the education of each and every child in this community. While balancing fiscal conservatism with the investment in our children creates a challenging situation, our decisions will reflect our belief in the mission that every child can and must learn ... learn not only to read and write, but to succeed as a productive, contributing citizen in a world economy.

Please know that we are in constant contact with our state legislators to learn as soon as possible how much funding we will receive for next year. So far no concrete decisions have been made and we have told them that not knowing this information makes our job of budgeting for next year increasingly difficult. You need to know that we have not been idle during this Legislative Session. Board members have visited Austin multiple times for face-to-face meetings with our elected officials; we have developed a Legislative Agenda; we have provided information to you on how to contact your lawmakers and legislators; we have joined other districts to make our voices stronger.

Five years ago, Fort Bend ISD made a commitment through its five-year district strategic plan to narrow the achievement gap, raise all campuses to a rating of *Acceptable* or above as rated by the state accountability system, reduce the number of PEG campuses to zero, support all campuses to achieve Adequate Yearly Progress as defined by federal standards of the No Child Left Behind Act, and institutionalize a character education program. Fort Bend ISD also made a commitment to becoming "a district of choice" for attracting and retaining highly qualified staff, creating and instituting transparent processes in all its operations, and providing high quality, exceptional learning opportunities for all students.

The journey has resulted in hard work, but we stand with pride today as we are now a “Recognized District” by the TEA, have 100 percent of our campuses meeting AYP, have reduced our PEG campuses from eight to none, have been identified as one of only two school district finalists in the nation as a “District of Character,” have 50 National Merit Scholars, and have five (5) of our high schools listed among the top six percent of high schools in the nation to name just a few of our Points of Pride.

These are truly remarkable accomplishments for any district, especially for one as large, transient, and diverse as ours. I want you to know how proud the Board members are of these achievements. We recognize and honor the involvement every family has had in the successes of their children and pay tribute to all of the district’s staff members for their contributions to these remarkable gains.

We will return to Austin on the 30<sup>th</sup> of April to be heard again. Our message to the lawmakers each time is the same as it has always been with regard to public education – *Do no harm!*

*Do no harm!* – Authorize dipping into the state’s billion dollar Rainy Day Fund to help us save jobs and keep teachers in the classrooms.

*Do no harm!* – Delay the new STAARS Accountability Program for at least another year until funding for the new instructional materials and training for our staff can be provided.

*Do no harm!* – Guarantee that Texas school children will receive the public education they deserve for the years to come by honestly “Making Education a Priority.”

We ask each and every one of you to join us in supporting the education and future of our children, because, first and foremost, our main focus is our students and their educational success. We cannot fail them. We must invest in our community and their future.

Thank you for your commitment to our district, our students, and this community.

Sincerely,

Sonal Bhuchar