

## 2002 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**"All, regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance and to the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost. This promise means that all children by virtue of their own efforts, competently guided, can hope to attain the mature and informed judgment needed to secure gainful employment, and to manage their own lives, thereby serving not only their own interests but also the progress of society itself."**

*A Nation At Risk, April 1983*

The publication of the landmark report, *A Nation at Risk*, began the age of "reform and accountability" that we continue to be engaged in today. This report, issued by the United States Department of Education, awoke our nation with impassioned cries to improve the quality of education we provide our nation's children. School districts and educators throughout the country responded to this call for change and improvement. We are still responding today.

Dr. Pedro Garcia arrived in Nashville little more than a year ago bringing with him the hope that Nashvillians would soon be proud of the work of its school system. Rather than slowly studying the terrain, Dr. Garcia stepped up to the plate and immediately began swinging for the fences. In a relatively short time, it became obvious to all that he was an action-driven man with vision, commitment, and passion. He shared his vision and immediately began acting on his beliefs. He assembled an intellectually capable and talented team of professionals and established himself as a catalyst for change and improvement. Our community welcomed with enthusiasm his emphatically repeated mantra that "all kids can learn" and his constant reminders that we must set high learning standards for all children to meet. Our community, including members of the Citizens Panel for a Community Report Card, embraced Dr. Garcia's commitment to educational improvement in Davidson County. In fact, we begin our Executive Summary by reviewing many of the positive steps that were taken during the past year.

Although this year's panel began its work with realistic dreams for a better tomorrow, we struggled with defining our role. On the one hand, we felt committed to focusing our report on assessing the success at meeting the recommendations set forth in last year's report. In addition, we felt it was our responsibility to assess progress with the indicators for success used by previous panels. However, given all that has taken place in Metro Schools, we felt equally compelled to comment on and assess the foundation for change that was laid this past year, both with regard to the things that deserve applause and the concerns that have arisen. With this in mind, our panel approached its work using an expanded set of lenses. We felt it important to applaud positive efforts and initiatives, cheer substantive changes and improvements, and, as representatives of the community-at-large, ask important questions about the very direction we embrace and celebrate. We found this to be of intrinsic importance because along with change and improvement comes corresponding sets of issues and concerns that merit attention. Accordingly, the report that follows includes commentary on the things we believe deserve commendation, the concerns that we believe have arisen, as well as recommendations for actions regarding several vital issues we believe need to be considered.

Our panel worked long and hard. We met weekly since the start of the school year, have interviewed and spoken with a variety of people, and studied the data and information we gathered. From the outset we realized that we had an intellectual dilemma to address. While Dr. Garcia began his tenure with the promise of immediate academic improvement, he tempered his prediction, as do we, with the reality that significant change and improvement require time to take hold and become culturally imbedded. While we do expect to see consistent, incremental signs of improvement, we suggest that the body of his work, and that of his colleagues, be viewed over a reasonable period of time. Given this qualification, our panel adopted the theme "The Journey Begins."

*The Citizens Panel represents the voice of the community ... a voice that we hope will be heard and responded to, and a voice that will be considered to be of utility.*

### **Areas of Greatest Encouragement**

The information and data our committee has gathered, along with our own reflections and assessments, have led us to feel hopeful about the direction in which the Metro school system is moving. The following represent some of the things about which we feel best and for which we commend the board, administration, and staff.

- Our panel applauds and welcomes the commitment to developing a standards-based curriculum aligned with state standards. In order for children to achieve it is essential to discern and focus on what children *need* to know as opposed to spending excessive time on what is *nice* for them to know.
- Our panel welcomes the district's emphasis on improvement and change. While we recognize that change is difficult to manage and implement, and while we recognize that our school district, certainly our administrators and teachers, have a finite capacity for how much change they can address and implement at one time, we are enthusiastic about the movement to do things differently, more efficiently, more effectively. No profession can afford to rest, regardless of its performance. To evolve and succeed, all professions, particularly the field of education, must work hard to do things at a higher level. While we recognize the pressures and challenges substantive change brings to a school system, we support and are encouraged by what is taking place.
- The development of a detailed strategic plan is essential to the long term improvement of our school system. Previous panels have recommended that an expansive plan be developed. The current administration has done just that. We believe the plan developed by Dr. Garcia and his team, and subsequently approved by the Board of Education, will serve as a solid blueprint for action. While we have some questions about the implementation and dissemination of this plan, and the degree to which its formation included key stakeholders, we are encouraged by its breath and depth.
- From our panel's perspective, many teachers have embraced the efforts being initiated. Our panel is impressed with the dedication of hundreds upon hundreds of teachers who participated in staff development programs (both during the school year and the summer),

served on curriculum and standards development committees, and served on a large variety of study and advisory groups. We commend teachers for their willingness to be reflective and to implement changes and improvements in their classrooms. It is progressive thinking and behavior like this that will lead to significant and permanent improvement in our school system.

- Metro has recognized the need to develop alternative assessment instruments and programs. While state and nationally normed data is important, more diagnostically focused assessments are needed. Commendably, movement in this area has already begun.
- The district's commitment to instructional improvement through administrative and teacher professional development is laudable. For systemic change to become institutionalized it is essential that teachers and administrators embrace and facilitate change. Given how far we have to travel, our future success will be totally dependent on the ability of our school personnel to implement improvement and change. Dr. Garcia shared with our panel that he believes that "emphasis needs to be placed on what to teach, how to teach it, and how to assess what we teach." We agree.
- We commend the district for attending first to basic literacy, particularly at the early stages of learning. While we recognize that attention must also be given to other areas of instructional concern, we are encouraged by the positive steps being taken to improve reading skills in particular, both across the curriculum and grade levels, but particularly during the primary years. We applaud the appointment of dedicated reading specialists at each of our elementary schools as an important step in this direction.
- We are encouraged by the system's identification of critical areas that need immediate attention. We, too, believe it was wise to begin by focusing on strengthening primary grade literacy. However, Metro administrators have also identified several other areas of concern that will require immediate attention, including, but not limited to, middle school reading, high school literacy, math, the sciences, enrichment opportunities, and special education.
- The difficult opening of the school year, to which our community had become accustomed, led to a clear goal of improving the planning that takes place before the first day of school. This increased attention, and corresponding problem-solving, led to marked improvement. Parents received more timely and pertinent information prior to the start of the school year, transportation issues were more effectively addressed, materials needed by teachers were more timely available, and scheduling issues were better resolved. While the current administration admits that improvement is still needed, we believe the efforts put forth made for a more positive start of school this year.
- There is increased confidence in our school system. Our School Board has done an excellent job developing a vision and course of action for our schools. Our Director of Schools has demonstrated strong leadership, and our administrators have made stalwart efforts at improving our system. As a result, our community has renewed confidence in the direction our school system is headed and increased optimism that improvement will occur.

- We believe that the reassignment of principals was a positive step. While the process used and assignments made did cause some alarm, the reality is that building principals are the key to improvement and should be assigned to settings that best fit their skills. Change is difficult, even inconvenient, for everyone, but change can indeed bring needed, new perspectives and renewed energy, as well.
- We feel comforted by the district's commitment to address practices that inhibit learning. The reduction out-of-school suspensions, the formal elimination of corporal punishment in favor of more positive practices, the continued attention to revising other existing policies and practices that negatively impact on learning, are meritorious efforts. While our committee recognizes how challenging it is to work with children, we endorse disciplinary practices that treat children with dignity, help children learn from the developmental mistakes they make, and influence behavioral changes.
- The district's movement towards student-based budgets is commendable. This past year additional monies were given to school sites to spend, at their discretion, on needed materials and supplies. In fact, continued movement in this direction is needed.
- We salute the efforts being made to develop both district-wide and site-based technology plans. The district has assigned technology support personnel to work with schools in assigned school clusters. Our committee strongly endorses the movement towards equalizing the availability of technology across the district as well as the district's commitment to providing multiple computers and on-line access in every classroom.
- Our panel commends Mayor Purcell and the Metro Council for their continued support of our schools, particularly their generous funding of capital projects. It is vital that our district maintain a strong commitment to preventative maintenance programs and remain steadfast in its commitment to provide our children and teachers with first class physical plants and facilities. If expect our teachers and students to work harder and achieve more, then it is incumbent on us to provide them with the physical conditions that best allow this to occur.
- We are delighted that increased attention has been given to improving master scheduling at both middle schools and high schools, as well as to develop improved mechanisms for gathering and sharing information. We need to be better prepared to place children appropriately, effectively organize daily schedules, and make the best use of instructional time during the school day. At the same time, however, care must be taken to protect the important role electives play in both the academic and developmental growth of our children.
- Volunteerism continues to be a vital asset of our school system. Metro is blessed with numerous community and business partners who work in our schools daily. Volunteers and community partners have been impacted by all of the changes in our system. Their willingness to adjust and maintain commitment has not gone unnoticed.

### **Areas of Greatest Concern**

As noted, along with change and improvement comes corresponding issues and concerns. We realize that some of these concerns are natural outgrowths of a system-wide change effort, but nevertheless merit attention.

- Although there have been noted improvements in the teaching of basic literacy at the primary grades, several other curricular areas and grade levels need immediate attention. The most significant concern is improving reading and writing across the school system. Children entering high school have to be better equipped in basic skills than they currently are. High school students not demonstrating acceptable skills in basic literacy need to be provided with the support and interventions needed to bring them up to at least grade level.
- Overall achievement across the district needs to improve. As Dr. Garcia and Dr. Johnson have noted, we still have a distance to travel. We are not satisfied with current achievement levels. We expect immediate and incremental results during each year of the journey on which we embark.
- We do not see evidence of the gap closing between struggling and achieving students and schools. This has been a repeated concern of past panels and remains a major concern of this year's panel. Evidence of successful intervention programs must be documented and ultimately expanded into other schools. The emphasis of the *No Child Left Behind* school reform law places on isolating data by demographics will help us better understand how our struggling students not only compare against our local standards, but against national performance in other similar communities. Increased efforts to close the gap, however, should not negatively affect the attention promised to helping raise the bar for achieving students.
- It is obvious that middle school instruction needs attention. Some steps have been taken, e.g. the training of middle school reading teachers, improvements in master scheduling, and decreasing the number of teachers who work with our students in grades 5-6. Middle school improvement needs to remain a focal area both this school year and beyond. Studying and implementing the recommendations made in *Turning Points 2000* (Carnegie Foundation) would be just one of several routes to take.
- Teachers need increased training in instructional strategies. All teachers must be equipped with a wide-range of instructional delivery practices and assessment strategies. All teachers must expertly use the best practices known in their profession. While we are encouraged by the increased staff development that took place this past year, training must continue to be a primary focus.
- If we are going to require increased achievement from teachers, we must, at the same time, insure that they have the necessary materials and equipment available to them, not just in core areas of instruction, but in the arts and elective subjects as well. Although the system has begun to respond to this need, our panel strongly encourages that there be increased attention to meeting this need.

- There is some public concern regarding the Board of Education's and Dr. Garcia's staying on course. We are encouraged by Dr. Garcia's commitment to remain at the helm of our system until needed improvements have permanently taken hold. We are also encouraged by the vision of the Board of Education and its demonstrated support for the journey we are on. We are encouraged by the Board of Education's improved sense of cooperation and unity. Our panel realizes that substantive improvement efforts require time, focus, investment, and effort. We are concerned, however, as to whether or not the Board of Education will have the strength to sustain its commitment when faced with pressures from various interest and stakeholder groups who may object to, or struggle with, the direction in which Metro is moving. The board must remain supportive of the vision and mission to which they have committed themselves.
- Panel members want to make certain that the mission and function of schools as a social system is not lost in the battle to increase achievement. While academic achievement is of paramount importance to the Citizens Panel, we also realize that there is a need to address issues related to the social and emotional development of children in all grades. The Citizens Panel believes that character development - the development of respect, responsibility, integrity, dependability, and accountability - is part of providing a balanced approach to effectively teach the whole child. The Panel believes that the emotional intelligence of children is important. While academic achievement is vital, so is the development of positive character traits. In fact, a focus on the development of emotional intelligence will lead to a consistently safe, orderly, and drug-free environment in which all children can learn and reach their maximum potential. The high-stakes testing environment need not deter efforts to help students develop the all-important affective skills needed to function successfully in a diverse culture.
- The implementation of special education reform and improvement is of utmost importance. Our panel would like to see more attention given to early intervention and the implementation of inclusion practices, and believe this should begin as soon as possible. These are action steps administrators have acknowledged are important.
- The development of an action-oriented strategic plan should help guide reform and improvement in our school system. However, we are concerned about the degree to which input from all stakeholders was sought in its creation. We are also concerned that, once developed, the plan was not more widely shared with the public, and, in particular, the rank and file employees of the district. Successful implementation of the strategic plan will depend, to a large degree, on the shared commitment of all stakeholders.
- For school reform to be permanently grounded and imbedded in our school district culture, strong alliances with all stakeholders must be formed. In particular, we are concerned about the ongoing conflicts between MNEA and the district central office. MNEA officials have appeared to be obstructionist, rather than partners. We are not pleased that MNEA leadership has not boldly linked with the district to recognize the need for change and improvement. We are also dismayed by the lack of success on the part of administrators to work more effectively and communicate better with the teachers' union. While some success has been recently noted, this needs to be a continuing focus of attention.

- Concerns were raised regarding the potential negative impact on school and classroom culture that can be an outgrowth of an intensified high-stakes testing environment. While our panel is totally committed to improving test scores, and values the information test data provides, there is some concern that an environment that places too much emphasis on the results of nationally and state normed data will beget school and classroom climates that are steered too closely to teaching for test results. Schools need to be learning laboratories in which students are given a variety of opportunities to demonstrate what they have learned. These demonstrations of learning should play a large role in assessing how our students are progressing.
- There is concern about teacher morale. The teaching profession can be difficult and challenging under the most favorable conditions. However, increased expectations require extraordinary effort. We understand that demands for change and improvement can create conditions of stress and pressure. Dr. Garcia has noted that care must be taken to avoid overly taxing the capacity of teachers and administrators to implement improvement initiatives. To facilitate change efforts efficiently, alliances with stakeholders need to be formed. Many teachers have voluntarily participated in study and improvement efforts. The more involved teachers are in helping to direct change the more they will lend their support and energy. The degree to which this has taken place is in question. The need for more attention to this seems apparent.
- Another serious concern is the availability of experienced and talented teachers in our struggling schools. Too often teachers opt not to work in struggling schools, believing that placement in higher-achieving schools would be less taxing. We are concerned about the success at recruiting and sustaining talented teachers to work in schools where they are most needed.
- The bilingual population in Metro is expanding at a rapid rate. Increased attention will be needed to work successfully with this population, as well as to integrate this population into our general student population.
- Our panel recognizes that efforts at improving communications with parents and the community have been made. However, communication continues to be a source of concern, especially given all of the initiatives and changes that have taken place. Parents need timely and easy to understand information about district improvement efforts, curriculum and organization changes, new initiatives, and issues related to management and operation. Efforts to do this have been made. Continued effort is needed.
- College attendance rates continue to be a concern. Dr. Garcia has commented on this and has recommended that Metro engage in efforts with institutions of higher learning in order to understand better what skills and knowledge our graduates need. Similar collaboration should be considered in conversations with the business community.