

**How long have you been Spring Branch ISD's superintendent?**

My first official day on the job was July 1, 2015.

**What are the benefits to Spring Branch ISD becoming a District of Innovation? What compelled you to go through the process?**

It's about data and local control.

It starts with data. We need to really look at the needs of students and staff and think about how we can effectively meet those needs and recognize the barriers that prevent children from achieving all they need to achieve. We have data that say we've got to be different, we've got to be better. District of Innovation is a tool that we will use to help us be better.

A couple of things are interesting to us. One of them is time. What I mean by that is the ability of kids to move through the curriculum at a pace that's appropriate for them. We want to get rid of the "time in seat" requirements mandated by the state. Some kids may spend more time in school because their learning needs say that they need more time than the regular year allows. Others might need less time. We want kids to be able to move at their own pace. In a personalized learning environment, students progress at their own pace based upon mastery of standards. This opportunity makes it easier for school districts attempting to personalize learning for students.

The most important benefit is the increased freedom, flexibility and local control we will have to address barriers, like time, that hinder our ability to best serve our students.

**Can you give me some examples of the data you've looked at?**

Sure. We have data that say academically we've been flat...that our student achievement needs to improve, particularly when we focus on some of our subpopulations. When we compare the performance of our students of poverty with others around the state, we aren't performing as well. We are also currently underperforming with English-Language Learners, so we need to demonstrate some growth. Even for our highest achieving students, there is room for growth. Our academic data indicate that our students are capable of performing at a much higher level but the system is preventing their growth.

**Can you walk me through the steps you've taken to this point?**

I came from the state of Georgia, where I was deputy superintendent in Fulton County schools, the largest charter district in the nation. Districts of Innovation and charter districts are similar concepts. Fulton County was the largest district to have this level of freedom and flexibility in the state. We knew the power and potential of gaining local control.

Our board was intrigued by the local control concept to help the district more effectively influence learning outcomes for kids. In September 2015, the Trustees approved a resolution to explore the

opportunity to become a District of Innovation. In November, the Board appointed a 90-member Strategic Planning Committee. The Committee, supported by more than 100 staff members in its work, developed our Local Innovation Plan/Strategic Plan. The Plan was unanimously approved by the SBISD District Improvement Team on April 21, 2016, and by our Trustees on April 25.

We have engaged our community all along the way. When I first arrived, I launched a Look, Listen and Learn Tour to identify the district's strengths and opportunities for growth and nearly 3,000 students, parents, staff and community members participated. We held four community meetings in the fall. Four more community meetings were held this spring in conjunction with the posting of our Strategic Plan for the required 30-day comment period.

### **Have you encountered challenges along the way?**

I think the most exciting part has been the incredible support from TEA. Associate Commissioner of Accreditation and School Improvement Sally Partridge is helping and supporting districts in this process. We also received support from TASB and from Region 4. That doesn't happen in every state. Even Commissioner of Education Mike Morath has been engaged and supportive of our work. Really the process has been logical for us, and it's all been relatively smooth.

The challenge comes in communicating this effectively and helping people understand what this opportunity means. Staff and parents are eager to know what comes next. We have written our plan in such a way that it will give us the power and potential to evolve so we can continue what's working and change what's not working.

In Spring Branch ISD, we work as a community, and our board has committed to a transparent, engaging process before any policy changes as a result of our District of Innovation distinction.

### **What has been the reaction of staff?**

They are excited and want to begin the work tomorrow. Our staff has a real sense of urgency to engage in good work for children. We have an incredible group of people here and they are so hungry to meet the needs of kids. That's exciting as a superintendent.