

Jerel Perez

Field Project- Community Report

Reagan High School is located on the Northeast side of Austin encircled by three major highways (290, 183, and I35) and within walking distance of ITT Technical Institute. This is a highly populated part of town with many shopping areas, churches, banks, bus routes, and neighborhoods of variant social classes. The most notable aspect of the schools location is that it is directly on the boarder of where East Austin divides into the northern and central communities. Having lived in Austin for ten years now one clear distinction can be made about this area of town is that East-central is known for its heavy population of poorer communities and Hispanic culture with sporadic mixes of middle-class neighborhoods to the north. Viewing the area of the high school from Google Earth clearly shows that there is an extreme difference in living areas when comparing the neighborhoods to the north and south of Reagan High. To the south are large portions of small homes and businesses while the neighborhoods to the north are littered with trees, winding streets, and swimming pools. Most of the businesses surrounding the school offer a heaping dose of Hispanic culture including small markets and discotecas. Churches can be found around nearly every corner of the community here.

Just a little research on the web can show the current situation at Reagan High as it faces closure soon due to poor performance and a continual down slope of dropout and attendance rates. A story from news8austin.com states that since the school has received an unacceptable TEA rating over the past three years, “Students at Reagan High School have one more year to improve, and if they don’t, the state could shut the school down,” (10/14/2008). Other articles often compare the problems that Reagan faces with those that led to the closure of Johnston High in east-central Austin last summer. In October of 2008, the Austin Chronicle specifically put side by side Reagan with Johnston High and concluded that though Johnston was much deeper in academic trouble at the time of closure, they share many likenesses such as “high teacher turnover, a lack of clear lines of authority, inconsistent leadership, and

too many competing education reform efforts,” (10/31/2008). Incidentally the school has suffered a rate of four new principals in the past four years. In order to circumvent the closure of the school, Allen Weeks, a volunteer of the community and recently elected principal Anabel Garza have constructed a 21 point action plan that addresses the desperate needs of the school.

In order to get a better understanding of the relationship between the school and the community I sat down with Michael Madison who is the volunteer coordinator at Reagan. As I walked through the hall of the school for the first time I noticed that the mood of the staff and students was very different since it was the last day before spring break and state testing had just been completed. The administrators at the front desk were tense along with the school secretary in her office while many of the students walking the halls were calm and socializing with friends during lunch. This had been my first time on a high school campus in years and I caught myself pondering every detail of the environment such as the students conversing with each other in Spanish, the large playground and daycare area, and the cramped halls filled with newly painted lockers. As I was locating the room to meet with Mr. Madison a janitor spotted me and laughed. “You must be here for him,” she pointing to an office door, “You’re a volunteer aren’t you?” I asked why she thought that was the case. She laughed again, smiled, and looked me up and down clearly pointing out my collared shirt and argyle sweater. All I could say was, “good observation,” with a smile right back. It felt like I was in a movie.

It was to my surprise that Mr. Madison was not quite what I expected as he was a young man in his early twenties who worked in a large office with bare walls, little but a couple of chairs, a small desk, and a laptop. I immediately blurted out while shaking his hand that he was much younger than I expected only to his laughter and warm welcome. I asked him about his part in the school system and he stated that he was paid by the AISD to coordinate and place volunteers into the school system to benefit the enhancement student learning. He mentioned that he sees a great deal of St. Edward University students from his church volunteer to help tutor pregnant teens and that 10% of the student

population at Reagan fall into this category. He and his family are members of Austin Stone Church and when asked why he does what he does, he made a point of saying that their purpose at the school was for “urban-renewal” guided by a strong relationship with the God since he mentioned that “the Lord wants us to be here.”

We continued our discussion and touched on the community aspect of the school and I was not surprised to find that he did not attend Reagan, though he mentioned that his parents went to high school at in the 1970’s. Michael gave me some insight into those times when mentioning that the school was regarded to a higher degree in the past. He said that much of the community, including his parents, talk about the school with such phrasing as “it is just not what it used to be.” When I asked him what he meant, he pointed out that before the opening of LBJ, which pulled away many of the smarter kids to the academy, Reagan used to be “the West Lake” of Austin since it thrived as one of the top performing schools in sports and academics. He also mentioned that the community perception is bracketed into two groups: the parents and the taxpayers. The parents seemed to see the school as a necessity to their children’s education while the taxpayers see it as low-performing and an eyesore for the community’s representation. He did mention, however, that no one actually wants to see the school close, but that the students were fully aware of what is going on at the high school from the emphasis of test scores decreasing and the threat of the school closing.

From this first visit I now realize the seriousness of the situation at Reagan really is when school closing is on the line. Michael pointed out how Texas and Colorado were the only states that would shut down a public school like a business if it did not perform well and confirmed that the testing results were meaningless when it is highlighted that English is a new language for a large percentage of these kids. Evidently it is true when people say that the assessment method should be reevaluated and schools should not be treated as though owned by capitalistic corporations. I now have to wonder if I can ever visit Reagan High after this school year has ended.