

Jerel Perez

School Board Member Interview – A.I.S.D.

Cheryl Bradley is a dynamic human being and has one of those personalities that make you believe that you are going to be friends for a long time. She is a mother of two high school graduates, unmarried, and a full time employee outside of the Austin Independent School District. Eight years has the board seen her as an example leader of school policy and she has been an active advocate of the community before then as she served as vice president of the Austin Council of PTAs. She was also wonderful to speak with about the issues that Reagan High School has been going through over the past few years.

Ms. Bradley is not worried about the concerns that the school is going to close down at the end of this school year. “It’s not going to happen. The ruling won’t be made until next year,” she replied to my concern about Reagan’s TAKS score severely dropping and the threats from the state. The fact that students were not successfully completing these tests were many, but she contests that it is mostly due to these students not being adequately prepared to take them. In response to the language barrier that I have seen and heard so much, she pointed out that many of the students that were coming into Reagan are introduced to a formal, American school system for the first time therefore already have problems with communication.

The mobility rate is very high for this community as well. This term – “mobility” – had I heard since the beginning of my research on this school, but it became more real when I looked at the mathematical equation for determining it:

$$100 * (\text{Entries after First Day} + \text{Reentries} + \text{Withdrawals}) / (\text{First Day Enrollment} + \text{Entries after First Day})$$

This was a very big issue that Cheryl Bradley has had to deal with over the last eight years and now the impact has determined a possible closure for the school. Fortunately the students are often given many opportunities to complete their course work with summer school and the opportunity to complete a high

school diploma until they are twenty one years. Most don't come back is what Ms. Bradley says even though the students realize that they run the risk of not graduating without passing standardized tests. She also suggests that some students figure out that they just have to complete credit requirements and then drop out.

Poverty was another large issue that I saw in the community surrounding Reagan High school which I had viewed as a harmful menace to achievement, though Ms. Bradley immediately attested that the assumption was not necessarily true. She is a firm believer that money is not an achiever of smart students and parental involvement. In addition she added a note of personal truth on the matter since she raised two successful children through high school and now through college without their father's involvement and on low income. "Parents want their children to do better for themselves," she says in reference to my statement of the lack of parental involvement due to issues of poverty. She notes that CEOs of large corporations that send their kids to the best schools also don't have time to help them with school work and get involved. "Resources, tutorials, teachers . . . these are not the only issues here." I mentioned that we as students of education are trained to correlate poverty with underachievement due to the issue of less parental involvement which typically stems from longer work hours and multiple jobs to sustain income.

Her next goal as a board member is focused on the other side of the issue with students not achieving standards: the large percent of novice teachers at low income schools. This new policy that Cheryl Bradley is working on battles the lack of school policy that allows a school such as Reagan to suffer from 66% of its teachers having zero to two years experience. In previous years she has promoted and created policies that welcome a brighter future for parental involvement in her district. She rewrote a policy that stated that a parent had to have direct consent of the teacher and principal in order to visit the school that their children attend. She pointed out that policy was not so welcoming in nature and

that she had seen a number of schools that had large STOP signs at their front doors. Cheryl felt that many schools present an attitude that wants to keep parents and community at arm's length and needed to consider an open-door policy. "If we want parents involved in our students' education, why are we throwing out policies to stop them?" she contests. She is most proud of this policy rewrite since much of the politics involved made it difficult for parents to be involved in the school, especially when there were conflicts between parents and staff.

She made various remarks about how time consuming her business was throughout our conversation to the point of saying that she is concerned about losing her day job. To that I asked her way she then decides to volunteer. She mentions the strain of the job while also raising two kids who are now grown and educated, but it may be the reason for their success. She obviously enjoys being an advocator for the well being of youth and community as it has been her passion for many years. To the question of motivation for her dedication she carefully words her belief of a conspiracy to institutionalize the lower class though she believes that there are more people today that have the passion to help overcome it. She says that there are "tears" that allow only a percentage of Hispanics and Blacks to reach the top because there will always be jobs that educated people do not want to do. "Society determines who can do what. Some do for themselves and their culture," she says and claims that it is built into our system of accountability since so few students had to pass.

Cheryl Bradley gave much insight to how issues are not as cut and dry as they seem when one is involved with the inner workings of the system. "Every day is a challenge," she claims but reflects that being a part of the board is better than watching a superintendent trying to rule all. She does not like the idea of children becoming widgets in the educational world.