

March 22, 2010

**TESTIMONY OF LAURA WHEAT
MAYOR, TOWN OF WESTLAKE, and
PRESIDENT OF THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES OF WESTLAKE
ACADEMY**

Good morning. My name is Laura Wheat, and I serve both as the Mayor of the Town of Westlake, and the President of the Board of Trustees governing Westlake Academy, the only municipally-owned charter school in Texas. We are very grateful for the opportunity to speak to you today about Westlake Academy's best practices. I also want to thank you for your willingness to focus today on the impact of charter schools and their potential for best serving the educational needs of Texas children. There is nothing less at stake in public education today than the future of this State and nation. A recent *New York Times* article illustrates the urgency of the clarion call to improve our public education system when it reported that only seven out of ten students in this country receive a high school diploma.

First, some background on Westlake Academy. We are an open enrollment charter school. As such, we cannot screen or pre-select our students. Residency is our only enrollment criteria. Our students must live in Westlake or in one of our TEA approved secondary boundaries. Secondary boundary students must enter Westlake Academy through an annual lottery, which also establishes our waiting list. Because we are a small town with only 703 residents, the majority of our students come from outside the Town of Westlake.

Now in our seventh year, Westlake Academy provides K-12 education to 485 students. We started with Grades 1-6 in 2003, and have added at least one grade per year since then. This May, we will graduate our first senior class of 24 students! The Academy is so unique and the quality of our education is so outstanding, that there are nearly 900 students on our waiting list every year. Our class size averages 18 students. We have 50 teachers, and of course provide education for special needs students. We offer a wide range of both athletic and non-athletic extra-curricular activities. We have a very diverse student body with Asian, Hispanic, Caucasian, and African American children.

The Town of Westlake is divided among three independent school district boundaries. When the Town made the decision to form an open enrollment charter school, an important motivating factor was the desire to have a school of our own that would serve as a real community focal point from which to build and strengthen community relationships. An even more important reason, however, was the Town's desire to educate our young people in a different, more effective way.

I am extremely proud to report that the Town's vision has become an amazing reality. Westlake Academy offers an International Baccalaureate degree program and has been consistently re-authorized to do so by the International

Baccalaureate Organization. Westlake Academy recently received its third exemplary rating from the TEA. The school newspaper has won more than 135 awards and accolades in state and national student competitions, and the school's athletic program has grown in both size and competitiveness. And those 24 graduating seniors I mentioned earlier? Collectively, they have already been offered almost \$2 million in scholarships to colleges and universities around the nation, with more sure to follow.

How do we do it? What is our secret? What do we consider our “best practices”? **I believe there are five best practices, and I would like to share them with you this morning.**

ONE: The Board's commitment to “governing and managing for clearly defined outcomes”.

The Board's tenacious adherence to our mission and vision and the Board's use of policy governance have been essential to Westlake Academy's success. Our governance process begins with a well defined mission and vision statement: specifically, “Westlake Academy is a nurturing, community owned International Baccalaureate Charter School whose mission is to achieve academic excellence and to develop life-long learners who become well-balanced, responsible global citizens.”

With our mission and vision defined, we collaboratively built our multi-year strategic plan around it, with input from our entire faculty and management team.

This strategic plan established five desired outcomes for Westlake Academy:

- High student achievement
- Strong Parent and Community Connections
- Financial Stewardship and Sustainability
- Student Engagement-Extracurricular Activities
- Effective Educators and Staff

Each of these outcomes has both quantitative and qualitative metrics to measure its achievement.

Number TWO on our best practice list: Our total commitment to the International Baccalaureate curriculum as the backbone of our educational programs.

The IB curriculum emphasizes an individualized, trans-disciplinary approach to learning that is holistic and inductive. The IB curriculum includes what is called a “Learner Profile” that challenges our students, faculty, and parents to be:

- Thinkers
- Risk takers
- Inquirers
- Communicators
- Knowledgeable
- Caring
- Reflective
- Open-minded
- Principled
- Balanced

We very deliberately work every day to inculcate this Learner Profile into what we teach and how we interact with each other. By consistently adhering to, modeling and promoting these IB Learner traits, we believe we are producing graduates with critical thinking and problem solving skills. As a result, our students will know how to collaborate across networks and to lead by influence. They will be agile and adaptable. They will display initiative and entrepreneurship. They will have effective written and oral communication skills and the ability to access and analyze information. They will be proficient in a second language. They will be attuned to their creativity, their curiosity and their imagination. In other words, they will have what education author Tony Wagner identifies as the seven survival skills our children will need to be successful in the 21st century market place.

Number THREE on our best practice list: strong parental involvement.

Westlake Academy parents are expected to understand the IB Learner Profile and IB Curriculum and to be active partners with the student-teacher team. This means volunteering, donating, and being an active part of the Academy community. There is absolutely no doubt that Westlake Academy would not be enjoying the success that it does today without the incredibly significant gifts of time, talent and treasure from our parent body.

Number FOUR: well defined Board policies and well defined, high expectations of student conduct. We have developed a Board policy manual which is on-line for all parents to read. This is an on-going process, and one the Board gives much emphasis to so that the staff and parents know the policy parameters for achieving our desired outcomes. In addition, we have a parent-student handbook which is also on-line and clearly defines what we expect of our students. Students who fail to adhere to the code of conduct outlined in the handbook are expelled. Honesty and integrity are expected of all. Our student lockers are an oxymoron of sorts as they have no locks on them. Students must wear properly fitting uniforms. They are expected to maintain good manners and to be on time. No bullying, fighting or shouting is allowed. Restrooms must remain clean and free of graffiti. We believe this expectation of a high standard of

personal student conduct , even to an extent that some might consider petty, contributes greatly to the success that we enjoy.

Number FIVE: recruiting and retaining high performing teachers that are passionate about education and holding them accountable.

We believe that teacher effectiveness is THE key to a quality education. We allocate significant funds for teacher professional development and continuous learning. Teachers are evaluated at least yearly and those who are ineffective do not remain on staff . This past year, we initiated a fund raising effort whose sole purpose is to assist in attracting and retaining what we call “legacy teachers” for Westlake Academy.

Do we have our challenges? Absolutely. We are at capacity. Our success has generated a strong demand in our area for the IB education that Westlake Academy offers, but there is no more room at the inn. Our Town government has funded our facilities construction to date, investing over \$20million, but the Town’s financial capacity is at its limit. Thus, unless and until alternative revenue sources are available, we are simply unable to meet the demand demonstrated by our long waiting list. In the meantime, we remain proud of the high quality education that we are able to provide our students – an education that in no way duplicates the educational programs of the ISD’s in which Westlake is situated.

We offer something unique and different --- exactly what the Texas legislature has charged charter schools to do.

Senators, to recap, Westlake Academy's best practices are:

- **Governing and managing for outcomes**
- **Commitment to the IB curriculum**
- **Strong parental involvement**
- **Well-defined Board policies and well defined, high student expectations**
- **Investing in recruiting and retaining high performing, passionate teachers and holding them accountable for their effectiveness in the class room**

These have been the foundation of our success to date and will be our guide posts for the future. At Westlake Academy, we recognize that you have placed your trust in us to help create a bright future for this State, this nation, and indeed this world. Please know that we are doing our very best.

Thank you so much for allowing us to share a bit about Westlake with you this morning. I stand ready to answer any questions you might have.