

This legacy to DISD is exemplary

Students better equipped because of Ison-Newsome, community leaders say

We are deeply disturbed by The Dallas Morning News' editorial and news coverage regarding the retirement of DISD Assistant Superintendent Shirley Ison-Newsome. Your caricature of her legacy and the examples you cite are off the mark, unlikely to help transform DISD and certainly not representative of her contribution to public education in Dallas.

We counter with an abbreviated overview of an extraordinary career we have witnessed first hand, three of us as cochairs of the Dallas Achieves Commission, which has worked to try to transform the district, and all of us through decades of work to strengthen DISD. It's one thing to know what works for public education; it's another to actually do it.

Ison-Newsome's career with DISD began with the desegregation efforts in the 1970s, a turbulent time in Dallas history. Recruited to help examine the efficacy of instruction, she authored a chapter of the 1974 report to the board titled "A Study of Instruction." Superintendent Nolan Estes then appointed her as the first dean of instruction.

Subsequent milestones include her appointment as senior planner for the nationally recognized East Oak Cliff Sub-District, under the leadership of Dr. Yvonne Ewell. In this role, she designed the nation's first programmatic desegregation efforts. She later planned, alongside Ewell, DISD's magnet programs (counted among the best in the nation) and program components for the court-ordered learning centers.

Ison-Newsome was then appointed principal of Harry Stone Middle

School, creating the model for DISD's middle school initiative. Later, as Area 2 superintendent, she led academic gains that were so significant that her model was used throughout DISD. Moreover, the elementary schools Ison-Newsome oversaw consistently ranked high in the district, with over half designated as recognized or exemplary each year.

Her schools also have been recognized as national Blue Ribbon schools, including the first — and only — Blue Ribbon school in South Dallas. As examples under her leadership, J.J. Rhoads became DISD's first learning center to earn a recognized rating, and Frazier Elementary earned an exemplary rating. In 2007 and 2008, Frazier was the only DISD elementary school in which 100 percent of third-graders passed the reading test on their first attempt. Elementary schools overseen by Ison-Newsome in predominantly Hispanic Pleasant Grove improved from only one with a recognized rating to 11 rated either recognized or exemplary.

She also served as the primary architect of the innovative program components of the Barack Obama Male Leadership School, which after just two years is receiving national attention as a model for educating young men from diverse backgrounds. Most recently, she served on interim Superintendent Alan King's transition team at a time when DISD produced record-low dropout rates.

Ison-Newsome also established outside partnerships with foundations, businesses and churches, and she instituted activities ranging from sports to the arts, from chess and book clubs to gardening. And so much more.

Ison-Newsome's legacy is defined by academic excellence in traditionally underachieving schools, principal and teacher development, community partnerships and advocacy for children. She has been the voice for the underserved, courageously speaking truth to power and standing up on behalf of children, even in the face of sexist, racist and personal attacks, as affirmed by the many principals who speak of her as "the visionary advocate for students" and "The Voice."

In her stellar 37-year career with DISD, Ison-Newsome has set the standard of leadership that our public schools need and deserve. She did not “leave quietly” — as a lightning rod for good, she left with thunderous applause in the form of thousands of better-equipped young people. Her legacy is a benefit to our city and society at large — a benefit we need in order to thrive as a democratic society. She has been weighed in the balance and been found exemplary!

Four community leaders contributed to this essay. Arcilia Acosta is CEO of CARCON Industries/STL Engineers. Pettis Norman is president and CEO of PNI Industries. J. McDonald Williams is former chairman and CEO of Trammell Crow Co. Zan W. Holmes Jr. is pastor emeritus of St. Luke Community United Methodist Church.

