

## Georgetown Texas Leadership Class

January 20, 2016

Thank you for asking me to come and share the story of Orenda Education and the U.S. education reform movement of the 1990's that gave it life. I have lived in Georgetown since 1988, when the company I worked for, Hospital Corporation of America, transferred me here to oversee some behavioral healthcare facilities in the Belton/Temple/Killeen area. I came with a baby girl, had a boy six years later, and both of my children have been raised here and graduated from public schools in the area. Soon after settling I quickly fell in love with our Texas hill country, spring wild flowers (I favor the orange Indian Paintbrush), blue hole and the wonderful hike and bike trails leading from our beautiful San Gabriel Park. Thank you for caring for our fantastic town. It has only gotten better over these years. Yes, increased traffic is a by-product, but I like the development, especially the new restaurants on the square. The Cajun Rubbed Grilled Ahi Tuna at Wildfire restaurant is to die for. And may the price of our real estate continue to go up.

As a Georgetown Leadership class member, you know how vital a high quality K-12 education system is to a better future and a growing local economy. We should all be concerned when we see studies like this one showing how our American students have fallen behind many other developed countries in math, science and reading. Our government is so concerned about this decline over the past several decades that they commissioned a special task force, led by former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, and former New York City Public Schools Commissioner Joel Klein, to study its impact on national security (slide). Here are some of the key statistics (slide of PISA scores). Not a pretty picture. One question I normally get with I show this slide is about the country of Finland that does so well.

While I don't have time to cover the Finland system in too much detail, one thing I can point to from my research, is that in Finland less is more. Here in America we are used to having big things and lots of choices. In our U.S. education system, we believe in more testing, longer school days, more assignments, more tutoring, rating the schools, etc. In Finland it's the opposite. Formal schooling doesn't begin until age 7 and they only have nine years of compulsory schooling. Everything after 9<sup>th</sup> grade is optional, and at the age of 16 students can chose from three tracks: Upper Secondary, Vocational Ed, or join the work force. A Matriculation Test determines if one will be accepted into the University after these three year programs for those who will go on to more professional careers.

Here in the US, policy makers concerned about our low international rankings, started to get serious about education reform. Many of us look at our traditional US education system as a big cruise ship (slide of cruise ship) on course to hit an ice berg (slide of ice berg) of low expectations. Obviously our system is failing too many of our children, especially from low socio-economic areas. But even here in Williamson County we see lower than acceptable graduation rates, and far too many students falling off the boat into to the cold waters of apathy and a lack of skills that will eventually lead to stubborn poverty for those kids.

A lot of ideas to improve the system have been tossed about over the years, some more radical (like vouchers), and some less so. [slide of 1990's Reform] One reform idea that did catch on started in Minnesota, and came a few years later in 1995 to Texas, is the public charter school model. [slide of pie slice] In this reform model they take a slice of the traditional public education system, already firmly established with laws and regulations, and allow the new carve group to be free from some of these laws and regulations, in hopes to [slide of 5 charter law objectives], improve learning, increase choice, attract new teachers, raise accountability, and encourage innovation and creativity. Those of us that come from the business world (as you do, and I as well as a former small biz owner and healthcare executive), know how difficult and messy innovation will be. When you want to accelerate creativity and new ideas from a well-entrenched bureaucracy, sometimes you get this [slide of child hanging on the bunk bed railing]. Of course, not all innovations work as intended.

These new schools for innovation, called charter schools, are public schools, but for the most part, are owned and operated by private not-for-profit corporations. There a few charter schools operated by Texas public colleges and traditional ISD's, but the vast majority in Texas are NFPs. These NFP corporations must apply to the charter school authorizer (In Texas that is the State Board of Education) to be accepted to open a charter campus. To do so the NFP enters into a contract agreement with the authorizer stipulating the agreed upon terms. Since public funds will be used to pay for the cost of the charter schools operations, the charter schools are held accountable through the charter contract. Non-compliance, including poor academic performance, does lead to contract termination and charter school closure. Here in Texas, if a charter school operator has three consecutive years of failure, either academic or financial, it is automatically closed.

[slide of coast guard boat] I see charter schools as a coast guard rescue boat. Charter schools are supposed to be quick, nimble, able to change directions quickly and pick up and save many of the students who are falling off the traditional education cruise ship into the cold waters of low expectations. Therefore, charter schools are to serve a niche, not take over or replace the current public school system, but to compliment and add a benefit to the overall Texas system. Another benefit of the new charter school competition, is that it has forced the traditional schools to "up their game", and many have made improvements and innovations themselves.

While charter school have been in existence since 1995, many still don't know about them, or they are misunderstood. [slide of myths] Charter schools are public schools, but operated by private incorporated entities. While not required, most charter schools only employ certified and highly qualified teachers. Charter schools are actually held more accountable through the "three strikes and you're out policy" that I mentioned earlier. They are not a panacea and will not fix what ails the bigger system, but studies do show some significant academic improvements, [slide of TX scores] especially among the lower social-eco groups attending charter schools.

[slide about OE] Our Orenda Education was incorporated in 1995 and is headquartered here in Georgetown off Williams Drive. We have five charter school campuses. Two here in

Georgetown, Gateway College Preparatory School on Westinghouse Road, and Gateway Tech School on Williams Drive. These are highly rated academic schools. [Slide of OE philosophy] Our Orenda Charter Schools are based on the “Circle of Courage” philosophy with an emphasis on the four values of Independence, Mastery, Belonging and Generosity. We utilize next generation instructional methods to implement our values. [slide of Independence]. We want our students to take ownership over their learning, to be independent learners. The national program of AVID, Advancement Via Individual Determination, is incorporated into our curriculum offerings to help nurture independence. For our students to gain mastery, we utilize the College Board AP curriculum in all core courses.

We also are unique and innovative in that we are far ahead of most schools to blend technology with great teachers. All our schools use the Blackboard teacher instructional platform, also used by most college and universities in the area, allowing our teachers to place all their curriculum and lesson plan content on-line to be view by the students and parents 24/7, seven days a week. We are a “BYOD” Bring Your Own Device school, whereby all student in grades 5 – 12 have a personal laptop or other learning device that allow them to connect at school to the teacher’s syllabus, including multi-media presentations that help explain difficult content.

We purposely operate small campuses (limited to 150 per graduating class) so that our students get the time and attention they need to discover their unique talents and gifts, and feel like they belong. Our Gateway Prep School was the first charter school in the greater Austin area (Georgetown down to San Marcos) to be a member of the UIL, offering a highly competitive athletic program. We also have a service requirement to help promote the value of generosity.