

**HANNAH'S VISION – A NCJW Public Affairs Event:
Guest speaker Superintendent Dr. Terry Grier discusses public education in HISD**

On Sunday January 31, 2010 approximately 50 NCJW-GHS members and guests attended Hannah's Vision to hear Dr. Terry Grier talk about his experience since being named Houston Independent School District Superintendent in September 2009.

Named after NCJW's founder Hannah G. Solomon, this event is meant to be a forum to listen and speak about local, national and international issues affecting our ability as a nation to move forward on topics such as immigration reform, public health challenges, education of our children and human trafficking.

Dr. Grier comes to HISD with a long list of accomplishments in prior positions in San Diego and South Carolina – raising test scores, significantly lowering the drop out rate, increasing minority participation in Advanced Placement classes, and initiating a virtual on-line high school which has demonstrably increased graduation rates.

Dr. Grier began by talking about the success of HIPPY (Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters), which is an NCJW project that teaches parents how to help their children prepare for school. He spoke about other successes within HISD such as Honors Programs, International Scholarships, and a Bellaire High School student who was a guest of President Obama at the State of the Union address the week before.

A fascinating piece of information Dr. Grier told us is how the U.S. has a much shorter school year than many other developed nations. In Houston, the calendar includes 180 school days for students. He cited other countries such as Canada, England, Germany, France, Japan, South Korea and many others that range from 200 – 220 school days.

He asked us to imagine a 5 or 6 year old child from a non-English speaking home where public school is their first exposure to the English language. They begin to learn a new language in school and get excited with their progress after their first year. Then, they spend roughly 3 months during the summer in an atmosphere where they do not get a chance to practice what they learned. How much do you think they remember when they go back to school in the fall? *Is it any wonder that we are falling behind?*

A possible remedy to this specific dilemma he discussed is an alternate schedule where students attend classes for 10 consecutive weeks followed by a 3 week break. The 2nd week of the break could include some form of educational enrichment like a computer game or reading project. Repeating 10 weeks of instruction followed by a 3 week break four times throughout the year would increase classroom days from 180 to 200, while at the same time allowing for better retention of new subject matter.

Dr. Grier has begun seeking expert help for the special-education curriculum which begins with a better assessment of special needs students. An example could be a 5th grade student who has difficulty reading at a 4th grade level, but has advanced math skills that put them at the 7th grade level. This student needs extra help with certain subjects and advanced classes for other subjects. This reflects a new approach that is not currently in place within HISD.

Other ideas Dr. Grier shared include:

- Establishing incentive programs to improve attendance. He mentioned that in some low-income schools, those incentives could target families.
- Finding ways to keep seniors motivated so they want to graduate instead of getting bored and dropping out.
- Doing a better job identifying teachers who need help developing required skills, and provide additional training for them.
- Creating on line courses for advanced placement modeled after a program that met with considerable success in South Carolina.

Dr. Grier was an entertaining and informative speaker who punctuated his remarks with personal anecdotes. Several members in the audience who are teachers and education professionals contributed to an enthusiastic Q & A session following his presentation. It was an informative and thought-provoking afternoon in tune with NCJW's mission, and of concern to our members regardless of whether or not they currently have children enrolled in HISD. Dr. Grier's presentation serves to remind us that Houston's tomorrow depends on providing a quality education for all of our children today.

Many thanks to Rosine Chappell who helped secure the party room at her condominium building for the event. The facility was centrally located, lovely and perfectly equipped for tea with a small kitchen, serving bar, and equipment. Members of the GHS Public Affairs committee who planned the event are Lara Valentine Crawford - GB Public Affairs Chair, Liz Morris - CB Public Affairs VP, Aria Tatelman - CYW Public Affairs VP, Rene Kariel - CYW Public Affairs VP, Marion Rosenwald - DB committee member, Andrea Turner - DB Public Affairs VP, Kathy Silverberg - WHEB Public Affairs VP, and Estelle Weissburg - WHEB action alert chair.

