

# The Houston A+ Challenge

## *Staying the Course*



**Authored by Collaborative Communications Group**

**Funded by Public Education Network**

**PUBLIC  
EDUCATION  
NETWORK**

**Public Education Network (PEN)** is a national organization of local education funds (LEFs) and individuals working to improve public schools and build citizen support for quality public education in low-income communities across the nation. PEN and its 82 LEF members work in 34 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico on behalf of 11.5 million children in more than 1,600 school districts, seeking to bring the community voice into the debate on quality public education in the firm belief that an active, vocal constituency will ensure every child, in every community, a quality public education.

**The Houston A+ Challenge** is dedicated to improving education in public schools by investing in people, rather than programs. We build human capacity by coaching Houston-area educators to acquire the ability to increase student performance.

Houston A+ Challenge initiatives are guided by three imperatives. First, we promote personalization of classrooms and working communities. Second, we facilitate networks and relationships, so that educators and schools can work in collaboration. And third, we focus on teaching and learning: teaching teachers to assess different learning styles and offering effective teaching strategies to increase student learning.

**Collaborative Communications Group** is a communications consulting practice that forms partnerships with national foundations, the public sector, nonprofit education and community-based organizations and school districts to create initiatives, distinctive products and sustainable solutions that can improve the performance of groups serving public education.

## **Introduction**

With support from the Ford Foundation, the Houston A+ Challenge participated in Public Education Network's Gulf States Initiative, designed to enlarge the role of the public in school improvement in the Gulf States region. Public Education Network (PEN) is a network of local education funds (LEFs) across the nation. In PEN's view, "public responsibility" will not emerge from conventional, smaller-scale efforts to involve parents more closely with their children's schools or to inform the community about a superintendent's program. Instead, PEN initiatives take as their premise that in a democracy, public schools can only improve in a sustainable way if a broad-based coalition of community members pushes them to improve and holds them accountable. The Gulf States Initiative charged six LEFs, including the Houston A+ Challenge, with moving their communities toward different and more substantial forms of responsibility for their schools.

Wendy Puriefoy, PEN's president, has written: "...without citizen mobilization, reform and continuous improvement in public education cannot occur" (2005, p. 236). She goes on to connect this mobilization to broad civic purposes: "The ultimate aim of citizen mobilization in the context of school reform is to reshape the relationships people have with one another, with their community, their neighborhood, their state, and their country" (p. 250).

What was achieved in Houston has greatly impressed everyone involved with the initiative. The hard work done by Houston A+ and the entire community has constituted a process of widespread public engagement that will carry on in Houston beyond the initiative.

### **Accomplishments of the Houston A+ Challenge Gulf States Initiative:**

- Connections between students and adults eased the transition of hurricane survivors into their new life in Houston.
- Partnerships between Houston A+ and other organizations gave New Orleans teachers jobs, and student survivors support in schools.
- Town hall meetings kept the community focused on building good schools for Houston-area youth.
- Relationships built in professional learning communities ensured that teaching and learning remained at the forefront throughout the relief efforts.

### ***The Houston A+ Challenge***

From its inception in 1997, the Houston A+ Challenge has improved student learning by investing in schools and the people who lead and work in schools. The organization was formed under the auspices of the Annenberg Challenge, a \$500 million venture of the Annenberg Foundation that gave grants to community-based organizations to support schools and improve public education. When Annenberg seed money ran out in 2002, the organization considered ceasing operations. However, the results of focus groups with school district leaders, community members, business leaders and others proved its value to the community and its students. “People told us, it’s not about you doing the work of reforming schools,” says Michele Pola, Houston A+ Challenge executive director. “It’s about giving us the knowledge, skills and tools so that we can all work to improve schools.”

The organization pushed forward, changing its name from the Houston Annenberg Challenge to the Houston A+ Challenge. Annenberg acknowledged Houston A+’s good work with another major round of funding, and the organization secured additional funds from other local and national sources committed to improving public schools. Throughout this shift, Houston A+ maintained its focus on improving student learning and putting kids first. “Houston A+ offers a funnel and a focus,” explains Lynn Parsons, consultant to many Houston-area schools and districts. “They keep the focus on student learning, and funnel resources to where they will make the most impact.”

For Houston A+, change is driven by three imperatives: personalization, collaboration, and quality teaching and learning. Its investments and initiatives reflect these imperatives. For example, Houston A+ works in partnership with five school districts to restructure comprehensive high schools into small learning communities. It also creates and coaches teams of professionals to better prepare students for college and work, cooperating with area businesses to determine what skills graduates will need to master before graduation. It also works local colleges and universities to ensure that teachers are effectively prepared to teach those skills. Lastly, it engages the community and youth in substantive conversations about education and its reforms.

Through all of its work, Houston A+ sets the stage for education stakeholders to improve learning for Houston-area youth. Many people credit the organization for focusing stakeholders on what matters most in schools. Westside High School Principal Paul Castro describes how Houston A+ has affected Houston schools. “Since Houston A+ became involved with the schools, ‘the course’ has become about learning.”

### ***An Unprecedented Challenge for Houston***

When Hurricane Katrina survivors poured out of New Orleans and surrounding areas, Houston welcomed more than 150,000 evacuees in a disaster response that received national acclaim. When Hurricane Rita hit one month later, the city absorbed another surge of evacuees. The George R. Brown Convention Center and the Astrodome were transformed into temporary shelters and medical relief centers. Volunteers came in droves to help the thousands suffering from physical, mental and emotional trauma.

In the beginning, city and county officials worked to provide the basics to evacuees: food, shelter and medical attention. For the tens of thousands of children new to the city, these officials also needed to provide schooling. The Houston Independent School District (HISD) worked with city leaders to create its own disaster response plan. They established a phone bank to handle questions about how and where to enroll children. They directed calls from organizations across the country wanting to donate resources—mostly in the form of backpacks and school supplies—to young people who had lost everything. In a matter of days, new schools were opened to serve “Katrina kids.” Classroom space and schools were dedicated to young hurricane survivors. Schools near the Brown Center and the Astrodome enrolled nearly 700 students in one week, most of whom did not have school records. As families began moving into temporary housing, schools in those areas began the same daunting task.

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As the realization set in that many of the evacuees would stay in the city much longer than expected, new challenges surfaced. “We found that the gap in learning between a public school student in Houston and one from New Orleans is about two grade levels,” estimates Castro. Some Houston students resented the extra attention and resources dedicated to hurricane survivors. Students resisted integration, and as turf issues, unrest and violence ensued, a question arose: How will the district be able to embrace and educate this new group of students, along with the Houston students already in the system?

Houston A+ leadership and staff considered how they could best help in the coordinated disaster response effort. Their decision: keep improving student learning and help everyone stay focused on meeting the needs of all kids. “If we are doing the right thing for kids—building good schools—that’s the best thing we can do,” Pola says. “Our organizational decision was to be the compass to the districts, stay the course, and help *them* stay the course so that together, we can do right by kids.”

When Public Education Network (PEN) began its Gulf States Initiative—offering support to

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some members struggling to overcome hurricane-related challenges—A+ received a grant to continue its efforts to engage a broad stakeholder base to keep students at the center of school reforms.

### ***Staying the Course***

As Houston-area school districts coped with the mounting challenges of adopting thousands of new students, Houston A+ continued to focus on its three imperatives. Suzanne Sutherland, the organization’s associate director and director of programs, says the city’s response effort helped identify this essential need. “Houston residents started trying to access the services offered to evacuees at the Brown site,” she recalls. “It makes you question: how do you determine who is the poorest? How do you decide which life is worse? How do you serve a new population that will later become our population, while serving the current need?” For Houston A+, staying the course meant continuing their role as convener, partner and supporter of people working in and connected to schools.

### **Personalization**

Through its high school restructuring initiative, Houston A+ helps support the transformation of high schools into personalized learning environments, where students are connected to the opportunities and people they need to be academically and emotionally prepared for life after high school. Partnerships between Houston A+, Communities In Schools Houston (CIS), HISD and social service providers place counselors in schools. High schools have adopted their own unique structures for making sure student advocates meet with students regularly, thus creating informal relationships that better ensure that students receive necessary supports.

The importance of connections between students and adults was highlighted when evacuees entered Houston high schools. Eula Course, the literacy coach at Scarborough High School, speaks passionately about the relationship she developed with New Orleans evacuee Antoine Stoval. Upon arrival in Houston, Stoval, an orphan since age seven, was placed in various temporary living arrangements. The parent of a former Scarborough High School student eventually invited him to live in her home. Since his shaky entry into the Houston area, Stoval has flourished, thanks to the support of adults in the community and school. “His counselors, his surrogate mom and I are his family,” Course says. In his senior year, Stoval was unanimously selected as president of the student council as well as homecoming king.

The small high school initiative aims to keep students engaged in learning. To that end, Houston A+ recognizes that young people should have a voice in identifying school and

classroom practices that work for them. According to Pola, youth involvement in education reforms has evolved in recent years. “Student involvement used to be about performance. Students would sing, or play their instruments at meetings. Now they are the ones speaking at events. They are the spokespeople for the district.” Stoval speaks to the importance of student input on school practice. “If teachers and other people understand what works for youth, they can do their jobs better,” he says.

## **Collaboration**

Houston A+ believes in the power of partnerships and working collaboratively to improve student learning. The organization developed many of its community-level partnerships, including those with five local school districts, at its inception. “When Annenberg started, all the big money was at the table,” recalls Harriet Arvey, former district employee and current consultant to CIS. “When Annenberg invited you to something, you had 100 percent attendance.” However, what gave those partnerships staying power was the Houston A+ approach. “Houston A+ value added is so high because it brings people with relevant interests together at such a comprehensive level,” says Bob Wimpelberg, dean of the University of Houston’s College of Education. “If Houston A+ is involved, you want to pay attention to it and be involved with it.”

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As a resource to school districts in the Houston metropolitan area, Houston A+ has supported, monitored and often helped set the direction for district-level decisions and reforms. The organization also brings stakeholders from the community together to develop programs and partnerships that lead to student success. The Partnership for Quality Education, co-coordinated by the University of Houston, Texas Southern University and Houston A+, connected school districts and higher education institutions to discuss teacher preparation, and to set learning standards for students.

Houston A+’s success in building and sustaining partnerships between community groups and education stakeholders was demonstrated in the hurricane relief effort. In September 2005, the City of Houston asked Houston A+ to join CIS and The WorkSource (a Houston-based provider of human-resource services) in developing a tutoring program for relocated students. “We already had those relationships in place, so when we were asked, we were able to develop a program relatively easily and quickly,” says Pola. Through this program, former New Orleans teachers received stipends of up to \$2,000 per month to tutor young people affected by the storms. Before being deployed to schools, tutors underwent specialized adult advocacy training, developed through a partnership between Houston A+ and HISD. According to Houston A+ and its partners, this program was government money

well spent. “Adults were appreciative that they had a job, and knew that they could start paying bills,” says Pola. “They also liked the idea that they could help kids who had gone through the same experience as them.”

As students became better integrated into Houston-area school districts, Houston A+ used PEN Gulf States Initiative funds to re-focus the community on student achievement and create a collective response to the high school dropout issue, an issue A+ has targeted in its high school reform efforts. In 2004, Houston A+ partnered with HISD to host Reach Out to Dropouts day. On this day, community volunteers visit students’ homes and ask them to commit to returning to high school.

In August 2006, the Aldine Independent School District (AISD), which enrolls primarily minority and economically disadvantaged students, joined HISD’s 23 high schools to participate in the third annual Reach Out to Dropouts day. Nearly 1,500 volunteers, including the mayor, visited about 1,250 homes. A total of 72 students re-enrolled that very day, and more than 500 others committed to enroll in the future.

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AISD, also sought to solicit a community-wide commitment to addressing those challenges.

The town hall meetings were developed by a planning committee with representatives from HISD, the mayor’s office, Parents for Public Schools, The Metropolitan Organization (a local community-organizing group) and the Texas Association of Partners in Education. Melissa Milios, Houston A+ director of public affairs, says the engagement effort began at the planning committee table: “We knew that this needed to be co-designed so that others could own it and so it would be successful.”

**THURSDAY  
FEBRUARY 22  
6 – 8 p.m.**  
at  
**Aldine High School**  
11101 Airline  
Houston, TX 77088

**THURSDAY,  
FEBRUARY 27  
6 – 8 p.m.**  
at  
**Austin High School**  
1700 Dumble  
Houston, TX 77023

**TUESDAY,  
MARCH 1  
6 – 8 p.m.**  
at  
**Wheatley High School**  
4901 Providence  
Houston, TX 77020

You Can Help Houston  
**GIVE KIDS GOOD SCHOOLS**

Please come to a town hall to share your ideas on how to engage all of our community to better serve our children to lower the dropout rate and ensure that all are prepared to enter the workforce or college.

**Attend a town hall meeting!**

**Speak Up and Get Involved!**

**Bring a friend, neighbor or co-worker!**

Light refreshments and child care will be provided.





Together, the team organized parents and community members to attend the events. They conducted surveys and focus groups with students to determine the meeting content and crafted the agenda. At the meetings, students presented key issues to attendees and Houston A+ facilitators guided solution-focused conversations. “People really appreciate

the way we structured the conversations,” says Milios. “There was a high level of dialogue, and issues and solutions were presented to the group in a way that raised people’s level of thinking and speech.”

Conversations with hundreds of parents, students, educators and community members at town hall meetings have helped galvanize public support for tackling the dropout issue. Participants collectively identified five areas for improvement that will provide a new focus

**JUEVES**  
22 DE FEBRERO  
6 – 8 p.m.  
at  
**Preparatoria Aldine**  
11101 Airline  
Houston, TX 77088

**MARTES**  
27 DE FEBRERO  
6 – 8 p.m.  
at  
**Preparatoria Austin**  
1700 Dumble  
Houston, TX 77023

**JUEVES**  
1 DE MARZO  
6 – 8 p.m.  
at  
**Preparatoria Wheatley**  
4901 Providence  
Houston, TX 77020

Ayude a que Houston les de  
**BUENAS ESCUELAS**  
**A TODOS NUESTROS NIÑOS**

Acompañe a nuestra comunidad a compartir sus ideas en como mejor ayudar a nuestros niños para reducir el abandono escolar y asegurarnos que todo alumno este preparado para entrar a la universidad o al empleo.

**Asista a una importante reunión!**

**¡Participe y deje que su voz sea escuchada!**

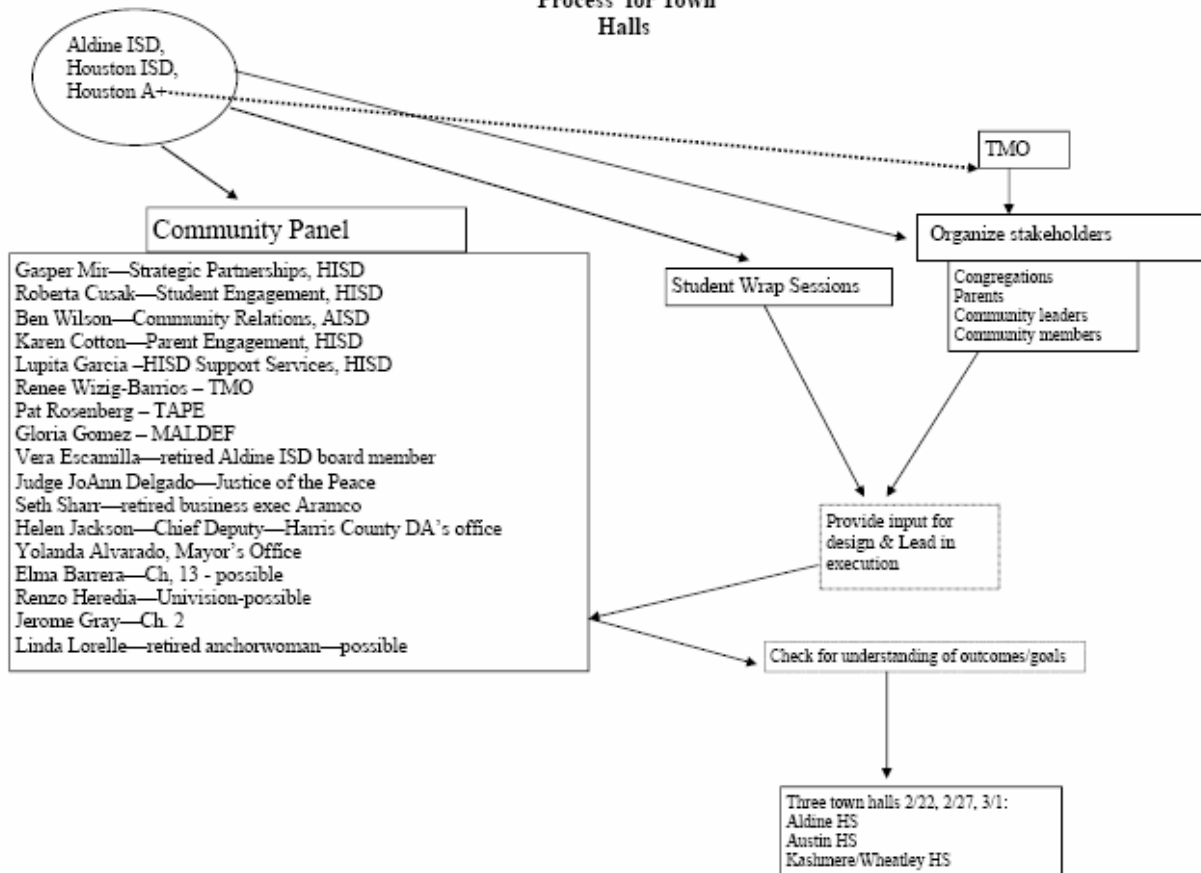
**Invite a un amigo, vecino o compañero de trabajo!**

Refrescos, aperitivos y cuidado de niños serán proporcionados.






**Process for Town Halls**



to school and district leaders and other stakeholders. Houston A+ will continue to build on the momentum of these events and support others leading the charge.

### **Teaching and Learning**

Much of Houston A+'s work at the school level involves helping teachers "break down" walls between classrooms and build professional learning communities through systems, structures and supports. Using a similar approach, Houston A+ helps principals move beyond managerial issues to focus on teaching and learning. "Houston A+ is the catalyst for transformation in that they help transform adult practices to focus on student learning," says Donna Reid, a consultant to Houston A+'s Critical Friends Group initiative and former classroom teacher.

Since 1998, Critical Friends Group trainings have offered coaching to more than 800 teachers and administrators on how to work together to improve their practice. In monthly, two-hour meetings, coaches help teachers and administrators sharpen their craft by building trust, sharing successes, and helping one another overcome individual and collective challenges. Critical Friends Group members conduct classroom visits and participate in annual peer reviews. In debriefs, Critical Friends share constructive feedback and ideas for improvement.

**Since 1999, Critical Friends Group trainings have offered coaching to more than 900 teachers and administrators.**

**About 200 school leaders from Houston-area districts have taken part in Houston A+'s Leadership Academy, created in 1999.**

**Networks help principals in 23 HISD and 16 regional high schools connect around similar goals.**

The Critical Friends Group method filtered into HISD's 23 high schools as part of Houston A+'s high school reform work. Teachers began meeting regularly with principals and literacy coaches, sharing best classroom practices and helping teachers improve their craft through peer reviews and mentoring. According to high school principals and school staff, it has been a slow but worthwhile process. "It's new for teachers to see what's happening in the field of education and working together to improve their practice," says AnneElise Richards, Westside High School's school improvement facilitator. "They are realizing that it doesn't have to be a 'gotcha' thing."

Critical Friends Group alumni say this approach is not only empowering, but also effective. "Houston A+ trusts me to do professional development with my peers. It's not coming from a school board or a legislator," says Reid. "There's a far greater impact in learning as professionals than participating in prescriptive programs." For many of the teachers who have participated in Houston A+ professional development trainings, the key word is "professional." "When I attend a Houston A+ training, I am treated like a professional," says Stephanie Sandefore, school improvement facilitator at Scarborough High School. "Houston A+ has changed ... what I expect from a professional environment."

Principals also work to improve their practice through Houston A+'s Leadership Academy and Principal Network. About 200 school leaders from Houston-area districts have taken part in the Leadership Academy, created in 1999 to help administrators become more effective school leaders. Networks help principals in 23 HISD and 16 regional high schools connect around similar goals. Participants in both programs say that the regular meetings and opportunities to learn about what it takes to improve high schools has had an invaluable impact on principals, schools and districts. "I have grown personally and professionally through these initiatives," says Richard Barajas, principal of Houston's Milby High School. "My professional practice has changed. The focus within the school is on curriculum, instruction, rigor and relevance, and that focus is being embedded within the culture."

### ***The Impact***

Opening Houston to hurricane evacuees raised many questions about how the city addresses the needs of residents in place before the storms. Anger and resentment toward evacuees' special treatment—and the substantial drain on the city's social systems—have forced leaders across the community to look at ways to identify and address the needs of all its members. Houston A+ has examined the needs of the entire community from the beginning. By continuing to do what it does well, and maintaining a strong focus on student learning, it has managed to help others to continue to work toward creating excellent educational opportunities for all children in the Houston area.

Houston A+'s consistent focus on collaboration, personalization, and teaching and learning has influenced the culture and practice of schools, school districts and the larger Houston metropolitan community. Structures and approaches introduced by Houston A+ are being modeled across the districts with which the organization partners. "It has become a philosophy that has been embedded," says Parsons. "We ask different questions of ourselves. People talk and learn together. This work has given people a place to meet and a way to address issues and develop relationships on a deeper, more reflective level than ever before."

Cecilia Hawkins, assistant superintendent of Humble Independent School District, says that the continuity of initiatives such as Critical Friends Groups and the sustained focus on student learning has allowed initiatives to take root within Houston-area school districts. Castro says this also is happening in schools. "We are trying something this year at Westside—that is, trying to do the same thing two years in a row. Next year, we will try to make it three."

The town halls funded by the Gulf States Initiative yielded tangible results. The Houston A+ Challenge led a diverse community planning committee (including The Metropolitan Organization, a local faith-based network and two school districts—Houston ISD and Aldine ISD) in the planning and execution of three town halls on high school reform, with 10 locally-recruited critical friends group facilitators at each town hall. Houston A+’s comprehensive communications and recruitment plans led to attendance of between 120 and 190 community members at each town hall. Houston A+ collected and reviewed high school student data from several hundred students across several high schools.

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Summaries of that data helped in framing questions for the break out sessions during the town halls.

Portions of town halls were videotaped by the school districts, and a videographer interviewed individual participants about their feelings about high school reform in Houston at every town hall. The video is available on Houston A+’s website.

### Looking Forward

Houston A+ plans to build upon the public interest generated from the town halls to establish a community coalition that will launch a campaign for building long-term public support for high school reform in Houston.

Houston will clarify next steps in consultation with the Aldine and Houston school districts and TMO. The work of engaging parents and developing parent leadership will need to be clarified.

Houston A+ plans to work with parents who attended the community forums to develop their leadership capacity to engage their school districts in lowering the dropout rate. What will this model of parent engagement look like? Houston A+ will dig deeper into the parent leadership question. The long-term outcome of Houston A+'s public engagement work is a community-generated plan that addresses the structural, social and operational problems that hinder students from graduating.

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## PEN's Theory of Action

The national office of PEN issued a broad and ambitious charge to LEFs by developing a theory of action for the policy initiatives in 2001. The theory of action asserted that the combination of public engagement and specific school reform goals would result in sustained policy and practice and the public taking responsibility for public schools. It argued that too many school systems lack accountability to their local constituencies, and that the reforms undertaken by school professionals or brokered in back rooms without public engagement are likely to be faddish and ephemeral.

The theory of action identified three categories of the public: policymakers; organized groups; and the public at large. For each, it spelled out strategies and tactics by which LEFs cultivate public engagement: advocacy with policymakers; community strategic planning with organized groups; and community organizing with the public at large. The theory of action went on to provide examples of these strategies in action. It ended with a vision of the long-term goal:

...to create public demand for good public schools and to have this demand actually improve public schools. When we're done, we envision communities with a substantive education agenda making real changes in student achievement. We envision a strong community voice outside the schools — with its own power and constituency — that argues for improvement and helps guide changes. We envision robust community organizations that always are in the process of building new leadership and sustaining involvement. And we envision an accountability system that places shared responsibility for success with everyone in the community. (p. 11).



**Our Mission**

The mission of The Houston A+ Challenge is to promote an academically rich and purposeful education for more of our children and to demonstrate how such an education could become possible for all our children.

A not-for-profit public, private partnership, the Houston A+ Challenge directs the largest single sum of private money ever dedicated to public school reform in the Greater Houston area.

The Challenge develops and funds school programs, professional development and leadership institutes to promote higher academic achievement by all students using the principles of Whole School Reform.



**Our Vision**

Every day, in every community, *every* child in America benefits from a quality public education.

**Our Mission**

To build public demand and mobilize resources for quality public education for *all* children through a national constituency of local education funds and individuals.