

Dear Neighbors,

We have an amazing opportunity before us, a chance to enhance our children's education and make Garden Oaks Elementary School (GOES) one of Houston Independent School District's (HISD) premier institutions. *It is an opportunity not only for our children's future, but also for the future of a great neighborhood asset, our elementary school.* And it is an opportunity to offer world-class curriculum to low- and middle-income families who might never have access to private schools, with thousands of dollars a year in tuition and long waiting lists.

Just as important, it is an opportunity to keep GOES full of students, vibrant and alive, while avoiding the steady potential decline of enrollment and consolidation that occurred before the Montessori program was introduced 16 years ago.

Under a current HISD proposal, Garden Oaks – with its thriving Montessori program – would become an all Montessori Magnet with an emphasis on Environmental Sciences, beginning in fall 2011. HISD's vision, which Friends of Montessori (FOM) shares, is world-class Montessori in all-Montessori schools, where resources can be efficiently focused on one method. District-wide, HISD's vision will also affect Dodson and Whidby Elementary, and some 1,800 students.

With \$2-3 million in federal grant funds, our campus would be furnished with high-quality Montessori materials, and our indoor and outdoor environments overhauled to better foster our children's education. Technology updates campus-wide and a new media center would be possible. Gardens and outdoor spaces, already beautiful, could be added to and improved. Teachers and administrators would be trained and certified in the Montessori method. Ongoing expenses after the grant period would be met with magnet funds, which Garden Oaks has not received in the past. ***When people around the country ask where is the best public Montessori program, we would proudly point to Garden Oaks!***

There is some opposition to this idea. You may even have received letters with a return address from a teacher's union decrying it. Here are the facts to consider:

- **The plan at Garden Oaks is for TRANSITION.** It is a slow, measured process over 5 years that will not "force" anyone into Montessori that is currently in a traditional class. Children enrolling in traditional Kindergarten in 2010 will be able to stay through 5th grade at GOES. In 2011, Garden Oaks would not enroll new traditional kindergarteners.
- **Currently 105 students are zoned to Garden Oaks but choose other HISD schools.** There are many more who choose private, charter or home-schooling. Out of a capacity of 575, only 239 zoned students choose Garden Oaks' traditional program. That is alarming, and portends a steady enrollment decline. More telling: Already 171 Montessori students attend GOES, yet there are 131 new applications for only 44 spaces this fall – plus 26 traditional GOES students who wish to enroll in Montessori.
- On standardized tests, Montessori students generally outperform traditional students at GOES. You may access this report at <http://tinyurl.com/hisdmagnetgrant>.
- **Montessori at GOES will eventually disappear if this proposal fails.** Why? HISD will not commit to the future additional funding the Montessori program needs to survive.

- A coalition called “Neighborhood Children First” sent out letters. In reality, this coalition is made up of a relatively small number of traditional teachers and parents, some of whom do not live in the GOES zone.
- Teachers will not be terminated. The proposal would provide Montessori training to those interested. HISD has assured that teachers who choose otherwise would be given assistance to find jobs elsewhere in the district.
- **Four Exemplary or Recognized schools within a 2.5-mile radius have space for 496 traditional students.** Each offers Neighborhood Vanguard, Bilingual/ESL and Special Education. Durham, an Exemplary-rated Leadership Magnet, has capacity for 94 more students. Sinclair, an Exemplary Communications Magnet, has capacity for 265 more students. Stevens, a Recognized campus, has capacity for 43 more students. Love Elementary, also a Recognized school, has capacity for 94 more students.
- **Demand for public Montessori is great in Houston.** Not only is there a long waiting list for GOES Montessori, but at Wilson Elementary – a Montessori campus – 240 children await acceptance.
- The Montessori Program is the heart of Garden Oaks Elementary. Since its inception, the program has quadrupled in size. Every year there is a waiting list. Montessori makes up a third of the school because its growth has been limited by budget constraints. Meanwhile, Montessori parents support the entire school. GOES Montessori parents:
 - Contributed 2,500 volunteer hours this school year
 - Make up the majority of active PTA Board and committee chairs
 - Raise and contribute tens of thousands of school dollars

Without Montessori at Garden Oaks, enrollment would be 373 students and the school may eventually be considered for closure. If the issue is about choice, what choice does this leave?

If this proposal slips away, what choice will there be for the hundreds of students seeking public Montessori? What choice will minority and lower income students have, those who make up much of GOES Montessori? What choice will our neighborhood’s newest families have who desire alternative public education?

Most of our community supports this opportunity. They see the benefit of having a Magnet school that can add to property values. And they recognize the proposal for what it is: ***An exciting opportunity to better our neighborhood, our public schools and our children’s educational prospects.***

Friends of Montessori, representing more than 100 teachers and assistants, along with 800 students and their families, believes passionately in this effort. We ask that you embrace this *once in a lifetime chance* to make Garden Oaks Elementary and the Garden Oaks neighborhood even more special; to have a school that serves all students with world-class education; to help GOES become what HISD envisions: a school recognized nationally for its innovative and successful curriculum.

Sincerely,

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