

George McShan: Proving “Every Student Can Succeed”

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Public education, when it was first conceived, was revolutionary. It catalyzed change in society, breaking the barriers that once separated those born into privilege and those who were not. As more and more oppressed groups have gained the right to an education, humanity has furthered their potential tenfold and transformed the world. Education, much like travel, opens up the mind to new ideas and allows humans to acquire experience and knowledge. It is, as Mark Twain once said, “fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness.” Thus, the enhancement of public education is the mission of the noblest of individuals. George McShan is one man who has travelled through the years on a journey to help others and improve public education to make the world a better place. He has encountered many obstacles like racism, segregation, and unexpected changes to his career, but he has faced them head-on, rising to the top of his field as a lifelong public servant. By becoming the first African-American to serve as President of the Texas Association of School Boards and restoring the name of a former segregation-era school in his community, McShan has honored his cultural roots and reminded everyone that public education is the great equalizer. Moreover, by serving as President of the National School Board Association and President of the Harlingen Consolidated Independent School District Board of Trustees, McShan has been able to make lasting impact on the public education of students in his community, his state, and even his nation.

McShan’s journey began in August 4, 1947, in Taylor, Texas, when he was born to Otha and Marie Bell McShan. He grew up on a farm in rural Elgin, Texas. Although his parents had not received much schooling, largely due to the segregation of their time, they stressed to McShan that the path to success was education. He received “lots of family support,” recalling advice from his late grandfather that reminded him, “If you use that energy you have in the right way, you can achieve right things, but if you use it in the wrong way, it will be your demise”

(McShan). Unfortunately, due to the absence of Civil Rights for black people, McShan encountered hardships that served as speedbumps on his road to achieve success (McShan). He states, “As a student, experiences I had made it clear to me that the playing field was not level. I noticed that my textbooks were second-hand, dog-eared, and scribbled in. When I noticed that one of my texts had the name of a white student who was my age and in my grade, I knew that the education I was getting was not the same” (“Reflections”). Despite the limited and worn resources available to him, McShan applied himself diligently to learn as much as he could.

Although there were challenges, McShan was fortunate to grow up with the encouragement of his parents. Striving for his best throughout high school, he obtained leadership positions, which offered valuable training for his future career as an educational leader. He also was elected class president, captain of his sports teams, and even State Secretary of the organization New Farmers of America, which he described as “Future Farmers of America for black kids” (McShan). His limitations in a segregated society taught him that all people deserved opportunities, regardless of class, race, gender, or any other divider, and this was a message that he would spread throughout his career in public education.

After graduating from Washington High School in 1965, McShan attended Prairie View A&M University, a historically black university, to obtain a Bachelors in Agricultural Science. Just three years later, in 1968, he graduated Cum Laude, and then proceeded to Oklahoma State University for a graduate fellowship. However, before he was able to complete his master’s degree, he was reclassified by the U.S. military during the Vietnam War. His life took an unexpected direction when he received an occupational deferment to teach high school science in a low socioeconomic school district (McShan). “I was told by my selective service board that it was more important to the nation for me to teach children of poverty than for me to go into the

military. It was unheard of, but I thought it was good deal,” McShan stated (Anderson). The poverty that surrounded his students in Brownsville, Texas, did not stop McShan from attempting to connect with his students and give them the best education that he could, and he found that if he “won their hearts, they would give [him] their minds” (McShan). McShan’s emphasis on the significance of empathy in public education is something that he has maintained over the years and a quality that he hopes future generations will preserve in this age of fast-paced digital communication and technology.

Two years teaching at Brownsville High School lead him to a successful application to become an academic head of the vocational school now known as Texas State Technical College in Harlingen, Texas. He taught chemistry there from 1970, and was promoted in 1976 to Assistant Dean of the college and eventually, to Dean in 1982. Besides assisting the college with accreditation by the Southern Association of Colleges and Universities, McShan gained a breadth of knowledge about the benefits of career technical education that he would later bring to school boards across the state. His vision was that “If [Texas] was going to have a highly skilled labor force, [schools] had to have programs in careers that were in demand” (McShan). Thus, he expanded programs in health care training, computer technology, aviation technology, and in various other fields that were on the rise. Satisfied with the progress of these programs, he retired from Texas State Technical College in 2002 to serve his community full-time.

Meanwhile, in 1988, after much encouragement from colleagues and friends, McShan decided to run for the Harlingen Consolidated Independent School District Board of Trustees. McShan describes his campaign as “one that looked like a rainbow, [with] people from the wealthiest part of town to the poorest” helping him get his campaign message out that “Every Student Can Succeed” (McShan). Despite the lack of trust for black people at that time,

McShan's community-minded approach paid off, and he won a position on the school board. He has since served thirty years, and his retirement from the board this year will come with knowledge that he has brought vision, change, energy, knowledge, and a high moral compass to the community and its schoolchildren (McShan). "I can't tell you what's going on in Chicago or other cities, but I can tell you what's going on in Harlingen, Texas. The local school board has the best interests of the community at heart," McShan asserts (Dahlkemper). He plans to continue his advancement of the "strategic vision of the district" even after retirement because he has a "deep, deep interest in it" (Whitehead).

When McShan first joined the school board, he was bothered by the district's tracking system that divided students into three plans, separating them into the gifted and talented, average, and underachievers based on a single aptitude test. Because of his experiences with segregation in Texas public schools, he realized this type of grouping detracted from students' self-esteem and was unacceptable. He believed that "If [a student] wanted to take a class and had a great desire to do it, that was fine" (McShan). Thus, this tracking system was eliminated and replaced with a system that gave students with the motivation to succeed the opportunity to do so without restriction of course choice (Whitehead).

Perhaps McShan's greatest contribution to HCISD is his leadership and guidance that led to the passing of the Texas Ratification Election. This initiative has made a world of difference not only at HCISD but also across the state of Texas as a model of what opportunities public schools can provide for their students (McShan). HCISD Board of Trustees Vice President and former colleague at Texas State Technical College Javier De Leon states of McShan's involvement, "The passing of the Tax Ratification Election was largely due to the leadership and hard work of McShan. The passing of the TRE has allowed our district the opportunity to change

our classrooms, buildings and even construct new schools, allowing the latest and greatest for our students. HCISD is becoming a showcase for all other ISD's throughout the state due to the passing of the TRE" (DeLeon). By generating over ten million dollars a year, the TRE has allowed HCISD to develop a strategical plan for building infrastructure, such as the construction of several new academies such as a fine arts elementary school, an International Baccalaureate Academy, a STEM-focused middle school, a health professions high school, and a media arts and communications academy, to give students of all ages broader choices ("Tax Ratification"). McShan predicts that this wise investment in students through the TRE will "overall increase graduation rates and student achievement so students will become tax payers, not tax users" (McShan). He wants to see students discovering their passions for vocations that will benefit themselves, their families, and society.

McShan has clearly impacted Harlingen in many ways, and through his work in restoring the name of a segregation-era school, he has also helped commemorate the history of African-Americans in Texas. The Booker T. Washington School was the name of the campus that African-Americans in Harlingen were forced to attend until the landmark Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* that started integration; however, over the years, the school had been forgotten. Therefore, when Lonnie Davis, local businessman and an alumnus of the Booker T. Washington School, came up with the idea to place a plaque in the location of the school and restore the segregation-era name, McShan was eager to help, tirelessly advocating for Davis's idea in school board and city council meetings. On May 4, 2013, a ceremony was held to honor the placing of the plaque as a symbol that "we are one community and this river of life affects us all" (Essex).

As he advanced public schools in Harlingen, becoming elected President of the Texas Association of School Boards in 1998 gave McShan the opportunity to improve public education on an even larger level. This huge achievement honored McShan's heritage, as he became the first-ever African American to hold the position. During his presidency at the TASB, he worked closely with the Texas legislature and advocated for all types of schools, whether rich or poor, urban or rural, to address the diversity in Texas and "advance equity and excellence in public education" (McShan). He especially campaigned for more flexibility in local school boards throughout his term. In fact, these desires came into fruition in his own community when HCISD became a district of innovation. This designation allows the district to have local control over hiring teachers in courses that require specialized certifications, start date flexibility, and much more, leveling the playing field with charter schools. Superintendent Dr. Arturo Cavazos states that McShan's involvement in the advancement of the district of innovation plan has allowed the "district to meet the specialized needs of the community's children" (Cavazos).

McShan's career success reached new heights with his election as President of the National Association of School Boards in 2004. This allowed him to work closely with President George W. Bush and other officials to push forward the passing of legislation such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. The IDEA ensured that students with disabilities would have the accommodations they needed within the public education system- whether that be more time on tests, diagnosticians, or specialized plans for education of individuals. McShan's ultimate message was that within public education, "One size does not fit all" (McShan). During his presidency at the NASB, he traveled all around the country and even internationally, stressing the importance of collaborative partnerships, communication, and both an academic and character education to prepare students not only to be good career employees,

but good citizens in the world. Most importantly, McShan's "model of proactive, creative board involvement in developing agreement on the district's core values and mission, building and maintaining the board-superintendent team, and encouraging parent involvement and community engagement" (Eadie) guided school boards everywhere so that they could focus their efforts on student achievement. Moreover, McShan's time at the TASB and NSBA allowed him and other public education officials to "get [legislators] informed and educated about the value of supporting local initiatives to connect to a state and national agenda, so there's not a disconnect" ("Your Voice"). McShan's passion for education has given him the drive to call to action school boards across the state and nation to realize that only quality education will allow the United States and the world to progress. Because the future of democracy is dependent upon how well the children of today are educated, the enhancement of public education can be considered the work of true humanitarians such as George McShan (Mitra).

McShan was able to lead as president of both the TASB and NASB, yet he was also grounded in his local HCISD Board of Trustees and remained connected with the citizens who elected him to represent Harlingen. He feels immensely thankful that he was able to touch so many lives, from students to staff, and give them a chance to reach their hopes and dreams. He states that he desires to help "people to be empowered, and feel like they are valued- whether they're cleaning the floors or the superintendent" (McShan) and wants to "see the dreams of all children become a reality" (Trustee). By helping reinvent and transform the landscape of public education, George McShan has helped shape the future of America to produce a well-educated citizenry that will protect democracy.

McShan's life has had him navigate unique places, from his African American farming community in Elgin, Texas, to the primarily Caucasian Oklahoma State University, to the largely

Hispanic Rio Grande Valley. This smorgasbord of experience has undoubtedly made the very man that his late Grandfather envisioned of him, as he has always followed the right path and harnessed his energy in a positive manner. Indeed, McShan's experiences in such diverse communities have helped him learn that public education is transformational and, in the words of Condoleezza Rice, "erases arbitrary divisions of race and class and culture and unlocks every person's God-given potential." George McShan's heart and judgment is the same for all people and his influence on public education has allowed millions of children to dream big and believe his message that "Every student can succeed."

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