Rosena J. Willis Memorial Award (Local Affiliate)
Association Forges New Ties to Community in Time of Crisis

♦ El Paso Teachers Association ♦

True leaders rise to the occasion in times of crisis. That is precisely what the El Paso Teachers Association (EPTA) has done as the El Paso Independent School District struggles to regain the confidence of the public after a scandal.

In October, 2012, the school district’s superintendent, Lorenzo García, pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit fraud and was led off in handcuffs to serve three and a half years in federal prison.

In an effort to inflate the district’s standardized test scores, meet the Adequate Yearly Progress requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind law, and collect bonuses for improved test scores, García and some of his administrators, targeted Hispanic students in the lowest performing schools. Specifically, they put some students in the wrong grade, pushed some out of school, and prevented others from enrolling. Teachers or administrators who objected to García’s scheme were either fired or demoted.

To re-engage the public and confront the challenges facing the district, the El Paso Teachers Association sponsored a public forum, which they called “Social Justice in Public Education: A Call to Action from Ground Zero.” They invited parents, students, educators and concerned community members and more than 400 people attended. For two days, some very difficult but necessary discussions were held, with special emphasis on meeting the needs of the most economically disadvantaged students, many of whom are English language learners in this border community.

Since the Social Justice in Public Education Forum, a Parent Task Force has gone door to door conducting interviews with parents. Among the questions on the survey: What needs to change, so that the public schools can serve your children better? The Task Force is also holding “reading circles” at three housing projects with parents.

At the same time as it builds its membership, the EPTA is forging strong relationships with the community and rebuilding the public’s trust in El Paso’s public schools.