



Austin Succeeds AISD School Board Candidate Questionnaire

Respondent: John Mckiernan-Gonzalez, Candidate District 2 Board of Trustees

Leadership & Governance

1. What perspectives or experiences do you bring to the school board and what is your broader vision for the district? *Please cite both the challenges and opportunities for Austin ISD that you would like to address as a trustee.*

I am running for D2 board of trustees because of (1) the decision to involve the whole school year in pushing to close 12 majority Black and Latina/o schools in East Austin and the urban core and (2) the community that stepped forth to defend the students, the staff and the communities these 12 schools anchor. I got involved because of my family history in education. My parents were teachers. My siblings are teachers. My brother went through a similar battle defending his school in California. Moreover, the decision to close and consolidate to save costs in a district where wealth is growing, population is growing and the number of kids under 18 is growing is short-sighted, expensive, goes against most other school closure situations and assumes low income minority students and schools are burdens, not the central mission of a majority low-income minority school district.

I bring my experiences arriving in this country twice as a Spanish-dominant student, my years researching and teaching Latino history and migration studies, and my time working with organizations advocating for immigrant families in Central Texas. I also hope to carry along some of the wisdom I learned from the other parents and staff who came together to defend students and schools.

Austin ISD is facing a crisis of confidence, where teachers, staff and parents do not have faith that the high reaches of administration have their back and their best interests in mind. The district needs to take active affirmative steps – like it has with school lunches and health ed reform – to demonstrate that it stands with most students in the district. I realize that recapture means sharing resources with other districts; recapture should not stop the district from out-competing charter schools, since they already do a better job at educating a wider variety of



students than charters and private schools. Moreover, Austin ISD has a stellar credit rating. It is time for the district to invest in its students, not look good to credit rating agencies or realtors.

2. How long have you been in the Austin ISD community and what is your history in advocating for changes or improvements in the district? *Include specific examples, like organizing groups for a specific purpose, advocating for a policy, lobbying for/against a particular change in state/district policy, etc.*

I have lived in Austin at my current address since 2005, with one-year hiatus for work in 2009. My child attended dual immersion programs since pre-k through first grade. While at Travis Heights, I worked on a joint interfaith/grassroots development program helping to defend mixed-status families. Since September 2019, I have been involved and active in trying to stop the attack on integrated Black and Latino schools mounted by the district by its own self, as part of Dawson, as part of Save Austin Schools, and as a regular interviewee for Telemundo and Univision for school closing matters.

When I headed down from Dawson to the first board meeting after announcement of the closure plan, I ended up giving testimony in Spanish on behalf of the evidence-based, more gender-inclusive, sexual harassment aware health education reforms. I did this to challenge the idea pushed by conservative Latino Spanish speaking witnesses that the new curriculum was an affront and an attack on Latino values. *Las vidas trans cuentan.*

3. Describe how you see the current relationship between the board and these key stakeholders and how should it change, if at all:

- a. Superintendent

The board of trustees – as the oversight of the richest school district in Texas – ceded their leadership position when they refused to share their list of finalists – or the way they arrived at the list. This commitment to secrecy in executive decisions colors the kind of debate and oversight a board of trustees should encourage across the district.



b. High admin

In the previous regime, Superintendent Cruz ceded policy making authority to CFO Nicole Conley and ex-Aecom employee Matias Segura. These two very capable and charismatic staff members helped push the district to embrace the kind of chaos and disruption that you could come to expect from embracing changes that affect close to 20% of the district (24 schools out of 129 schools, and 20 of 84 elementary schools). The pay off – fewer employees, open classrooms, no environmental sustainability mandate, larger elementaries – was regularly hidden from view and had very little pedagogical grounding and, of course, placed the burden of the transition on already slammed minority communities east of Lamar. The decision and process raised questions regarding on whose behalf was the school board gambling its reputation as advocates.

There are also other highly capable and empathetic staff who do the best to elicit feedback, examine equity, develop food sustainability for the district, connect restorative justice measures to discipline questions. It is the role of the board of trustees that these offices can do their mission relatively independently of the superintendent or the board's intentions or desires for conclusions. Trustee Mathias' desire to have the equity office publicly endorse school closures is a recent egregious example of this kinds of interference.

It is the role of the board of trustees to ensure that the work of teaching is the work of the district, not something else. It should also ensure that the superintendent and other board members are not breaking their trust.

c. Teachers

In my experience, teachers at Austin ISD love teaching, really like their kids, and are willing to find ways – given constraints on their time, schedule, and skill set – to help students in their classroom succeed.



Teachers also have an inordinate impact on students' understanding of school – and may make difficult decisions very quickly. I support training and capacitation for staff and teachers to help them be inclusive to all students and all communities, in a way that respects the skills and abilities/disabilities students bring to the classroom.

Teachers are the interstitial tissue that connects all parts of Austin ISD. They should be given a stronger role in shaping their workplaces, attendance zones, policies, district wide advisory communities. This can and should happen at the contract level. If public schools are where democracy grows, teachers should have contract language and policies that supports and models democracy in action in the workplace.

d. Families/community

Every day in Austin, there are more residents in the city. Many of these will become part of Austin ISD, as employees, staff, or parents of students. Part of this growth also puts inordinate pressure on low income parents, who already have rent or housing as a disproportionate – compared to every other city in the United States – expense of their household budgets. The community feels the pressure; it is my hope that a school district can become a place where students and staff are valued based on their presence and commitment to shared learning.

Moreover, it is very difficult for parents to challenge policies, procedures, and decision that they experience and understand as unjust. That has been my experience and this is particularly true for families with disabilities, racialized communities, low income or who are using English as a second language, There must be training to help parents negotiate institutional norms, something that becomes clearer as parents find ways to get involved and active.



e. Other board members

I do not know why Austin ISD subscribes to an elitist & patrician model of democratic governance. It is a holdover from other undemocratic policies in Austin, like the gentleman's agreement 5-member city council and the 1928 Master Plan. The board of trustees should be composed of single-member districts, like the current version of city council. They should have paid staff and they should be paid. There should be caps on individual donations and support for candidates who meet support thresholds. The responsibilities of one of the larger and more complicated school districts in Texas should be reflected in the institutional respect trustees get for their unpaid labor, networks and expertise from the district.

Almost every board member has to hold down a full time job and exercise daily to weekly oversight over 11,000 staff members and 88,000 students. All for free. This is an exercise in frustration at the very best, an invitation for corruption and an unrewarded stress on family life. It is my understanding that each trustee sees their service on the board as a mission and a vocation, and they have made immense sacrifices to be part of this democratic governance. If you are a parent and a trustee, you must be rich and/or have an impressive child & parent support system. If you are a teacher, you have to be retired, because the board schedule is deeply hostile to teachers' time and schedule

That said, trustees are devoted to their position and should be treated with that kind of respect and responsibility. Most of the voters in their district trusted them with responsibility for oversight of close to 90,000 students and a 1.6-billion-dollar budget. In other districts, all residents of a city are also able to vote in school board elections – and I would encourage our district to discuss building that kind of buy-in and endorsement from all the adults in the city.



4. Define educational and racial equity. How will you use an equity lens in your policy decision-making? *If you have a specific example of an equitable/inequitable policy directly related to Austin ISD, please include it here.*

Evaluating a situation through an equity lens means starting with the most vulnerable – students of color, mixed status, refugees, students with disabilities – and building out from there in your evaluation. In my experience as a teacher and museum worker, increasing access to people with specific disabilities enhances access for more. The same holds for dual immersion or full immersion schools, students who experience faculty of color at a younger age, and a democratic and engaged workplace culture where staff and students share an overlapping mission.

While I was at Travis Heights, Austin Interfaith and Grassroots Leadership encouraged parents to participate in immigration workshops, with support from Principal Robertson. I worked on that project from day one, every Wednesday morning, translating between regular folks and arcane legal matters, working as an advocate in those situations. This was made possible because the Travis Heights principal and staff made the school relevant to community needs. I also saw the Travis Heights community work with an apartment complex owner to ensure that families stayed housed and were able to return to their apartment complex after massive renovations and construction. Both projects demonstrated way in which schools can be vehicles for advocacy for surrounding communities, something that also happens with Parent Support Specialists and the Communities in Schools program.

5. One of the major responsibilities of being a Trustee involves approving the budget. What are your current thoughts on how the budget is allocated and how would you change it, if at all, to support the students who need resources the most? How would you determine the best way to allocate resources? *Please be specific around where you think more resources are needed and where you would acquire more resources to support those students and communities that are underfunded and/or in higher need.*

When using STAAR test scores as a metric, the results make it very clear that there is a



massive skills gap in reading and math test skills across different racialized communities. Even though Latinos and African Americans may be doing better in Austin ISD than in other Texas districts, what is clear is that majority of students in the district are not demonstrating the skills to participate effectively in this rigged, Eurocentric, narrow evaluation of learning that the state of Texas legislature has imposed on its students.

It is clear to me that teaching to this narrow definition of learning is heart-sapping and deeply frustrating. There needs to be a discussion – schoolwide, districtwide, statewide – of the learning and evaluation environments that best foster empathy, engagement, and knowledgeable understanding of the world we share and in which we operate. There need to be ways that ensure minority students – in minority majority settings and in PWI settings – get to participate and learn and demonstrate their learning. Given that rote memorization and dictionary dives are rare and infrequent, schools need to strengthen literacies and numeracies across the different language and learning communities in schools. I take this cue from recent Macarthur award winners like Edwidge Danticat, Junot Diaz, Ramon Gutierrez and Jason de Leon.

6. What metrics should we be looking at to determine student and district success and to guide the policy decisions that the Austin ISD board makes?

There should be grade-level evaluations of writing, math, social studies, group projects and general evaluations that are submitted and then used to gauge growth in different communities. Standardized tests can be useful for this kind of evaluation, but they must have ways of acknowledging the challenges faced by lower-income families in the schools.

There need to be ways to demonstrate engagement with the surrounding community, particularly given the sustainability and climate crisis that frames our present and future.

Given that most surveys of disabilities in broad communities estimate that maybe 20% of a community has a diagnosed disability, I would encourage principals to encourage



teachers to evaluate the ways dis/abilities among their students shape their access to the learning communities in the schools.

Policymaking

7. What are your thoughts on Austin ISD's current pandemic plan regarding student learning and a potential return to in-person instruction? What, if any, changes need to be made to ensure that distance learning better meets the needs of all students and that students, teachers, and staff are safe when in-person instruction resumes?

Austin ISD is dealing with the rank irresponsibility and hostility to public interventions demonstrated by the White House and Senate; the governor, lieutenant governor and attorney general; and vocal parts of the public. Given the historic low interest rates (close to zero), the federal government could be providing more resources to keep people fed, housed, and physically isolated. But it is what it is. The executive branches consider 200,000 people and more an acceptable loss of life. I can only assume the lieutenant governor and attorney general agree.

In this way, I want to celebrate the school lunch program, the quick transition students and teachers did in March to move to remote teaching, and the way schools became central to providing resources and services across the city. Those actions are still inspiring and the product of numerous advocates in the district, the city and community organizations.

As life with the 'Rona continues, it is also becoming clear that a significant percentage (more than 10?) suffer undetermined long-term impacts on their lung, heart and nervous system. COVID19 is not the flu. It is also clear that COVID19 is becoming more like pre-antibiotic tuberculosis, where publicly funded workspaces included ventilation, open air arrangements, wide and open walkways, all to reduce the risk of mutual exposure especially to children and staff. We are going to move back to the golden age of infection mitigation of the Progressive Era.



The district could have been more sanguine about the community spread of COVID19 and started modeling ways of providing sustainable remote learning environments. First, counties in Republican Kansas and Iowa have made internet a public utility, something that comes with the electric bill. The district and the county should have challenged the tech sector and pushed to make Wi-Fi-access the public good it is. Given that the YMCA in Austin seems to have been reasonably successful at preventing clusters of infections in their buildings, planning for similar measures in low income zip codes could have facilitated 'pods' for working-class families. Finding ways to do so in communities east of I-35 could have created models for other parts of Austin of sustainable community and learning environments. I would have liked to have seen regular broadcasts in Telemundo and Univision helping parents learn how to use the technology throughout the summer. I would call that project Dos Minutos con la Doctora E.

Second, Latino families constitute most students in the district. Latino families constitute most front-line and essential workers in Austin. Latino families have suffered half the deaths and half the hospitalizations, when Latino adults are probably less than 25% of the working population. Even though the general positivity rate in Austin is falling, the positivity rate is close to 25% for Latina/os, and that is an improvement on the 49% reported earlier. Moreover, the county has not done the kind of community testing necessary to determine what the general community spread of COVID 19 is in the city of Austin. Schools cannot open safely if the majority population in Austin – and frontline workers in general – are treated like disposable tools. Any discussion of positivity rates and community spread needs to keep the structured vulnerability of Latino communities in any discussion of re-opening.

That said, Latina/o, Black, refugee and Southeast Asian families east of Lamar are the families in most need of creative and community-based efforts to provide accessible computers and software, child care/pods for working parents, city services, general capacitation. Other places have moved to convert parks and playing fields into learning environments.



Finally, there is the question of co-morbidity. Does sending kids to school risk the health of adults? Yes. Students will expose their households to the illnesses they acquired in school, even with risk mitigation. Teachers and staff will expose themselves and their households to the illnesses at school. This happens every time after summer break, thanksgiving, winter break and spring break. Given that there is no vaccination and there is community spread, the district should – at the very least – protect people that even the CDC considers imperiled by COVID19 and provide the salary and staffing necessary to run a less occupied school. Again, this is where the txlege’s rainy day fund and the federal government’s ability borrow money at zero interest should step in to turn schools into safer spaces. Till then, maybe HEROES salary WHEN it is safe is a start.

8. School closures are a contentious issue. What does your decision-making process look like for making impactful decisions and how would you go about deciding on future school changes? *Please also include specific thoughts around the 2019 School Changes Plan released by the District.*

I am on the record that the school closures process was immensely short sighted, expensive and a direct attack on the integrated Black and Latino majority schools built for World War II vets, Vietnam vets and – in the case of Pease – a school that gave state employees a school close to their workplaces downtown. Moreover, the school sites chosen mirrored major transportation corridors and had higher resale values.

The district played an updated version of Shirley Jackson’s *The Lottery*, where every parent was promised dual immersion programs, teaching retention bonuses, enhanced SPED resources, open 21st century learning classrooms, and maybe even better hair. All Austin ISD parents had to do was click their heels and some schools would become fungible property and turn into cash that could become a non-recapture support for programs in their school.

Unlike the lottery where death was distributed randomly, the district plan targeted poorer, smaller schools in the politically vulnerable districts 1, 2, and 3. School closures – IN A GROWING CITY – were like the lottery, except people in D4, D5, and D6 knew who the



victims were and could rest easy that their hard choice would only affect other parents and other schools. In none of the scenarios presented – and I went to four scenario presentations over the summer – did they ask, would you give up your school community to provide district wide improvements? Or even, whose school would you close?

9. Which policies do you support to improve diverse teacher recruitment, retention, and compensation in Austin ISD and how would you reward and retain teachers who demonstrate their proficiency in the classroom?

First, I endorse having the board of trustees officially recognize Education Austin as the union representing staff interests. Having a union defend you, with union foremen at each school and agency would add to retention.

Second, there should be bonuses for teachers who teach at title I or low-income schools across the district, not because it is an onerous task, but because these schools and these students are the central mission of the district.

Third, there should be bonuses for teachers who do well teaching students in vulnerable situations, be it classrooms with high levels of SPED students, low income students, English learning parents and minority students. Again, this goes back to fulfilling the central mission of the district. This is not merit pay, but continuity pay – in addition to seniority across the district.

10. What is your background and knowledge of the complexities of special populations of students in Austin ISD and what programs/policies do you support to serve these students? *Please address specific special populations of students, including special education students, bilingual/ELL students, low-income students, and Black, Indigenous, and students of color.*



There must be a way to establish an intersectional approach to learning across dis/abilities in Austin ISD. Students do best when they and others feel at home and safe and supported; this must be a shared experience. First, at Dawson Elementary, I experienced a school that embraced gender diversity, variant learning styles, an inclusive teaching culture, dual immersion at all levels and an integration of disabilities among students in the classes. This also happened because of instruction in library, music, art, and P.E, with teachers and specialists who modeled inclusion and engagement. This also happened because of buy-in from experienced and ‘younger’ teachers.

Second, given that 35% of the students in the district have Spanish as one of their home languages, it would be useful and productive to make schools more inclusive to this plurality of students and parents. This would be yet another way to gain the trust of communities here in Austin. I suggest an expansion of dual immersion programs to an 80-20 split for students. The evidence is clear that this can be helpful.

11. From a policy perspective, how would you leverage SB1882 and HB3 to benefit Austin ISD? *Please be specific around your thoughts on both pieces of legislation and your policy plans you would champion as a Trustee.*

In addition to permitting a larger percentage of property taxes to stay in Austin, due to cost-of-living adjustments and property-tax buybacks, HB3 also gives districts the opportunity to identify SPED and 504 students, build programs that enrich and support students learning a second language at school and provide additional support for schools with higher percentages of low-income students. HB3 is putting a thumb on the scale, beginning to move back to the funding levels the state enjoyed before the Great Recession of 2008. Because the bill chooses specific situations, it behooves the district to start reaching out to low income and 2nd language learners and take an assertive step in diagnosing, mainstreaming and transforming general ed classes to make them more welcoming and more able to live up to the letter of the law in the ADA. Using these resources will help Austin ISD compete with charters for more students.



Charters are one of the key reasons working-class families of color are not enrolling in Austin ISD and Austin ISD needs to compete for these students, particularly because Austin ISD specifically and public schools in general outperform charters when compared across income and specific demographics, especially given that Austin ISD must try and meet the teaching needs of all students, regardless of disability, by law.

Parents and staff look to SB1882 charters as a way to institute reforms that they do not see forthcoming from Austin ISD; finding ways to build parent and community buy-in for reforms and keeping the schools under democratic governance – i.e.. elections, PTA, Advisory committees, union representation and investigations – must be key going forward. The opportunity SB1882 give is some leverage – as a threat – to get schools to be more responsive to the parents, students, and surrounding community.

SB1882 also make physical what charter schools do with public funds. Non-profits and for-profit agencies look to SB1882 charters to gain control over school infrastructure and staff and public resources, without the same level of accountability required of public schools. The recent Easter Seals proposal – a disability-specific program proposal put forth for children with disabilities without anyone with a publicly disclosed disability among the organizers – is a good example of the governance and accountability issues that can emerge in the creation of SB1882 charters.

If an SB1882 charter can maintain the same governance and accountability standards maintained by public schools that use public funds; if all staff and faculty in a SB1882 can have union representation and union rights and be represented by a district-wide union that can establish uniform workplace conditions and processes, if rigorous oversight can be provided and all records created in an SB1882 will be public record, like with Austin ISD; if finances and demographics will be reported in the same ways public schools do; if a publicly elected board provides oversight into finances and all other policies and actions taken by chartered organizations; if SB1882 charters receive the same amount of public resources per student (and not more) that public democratically accountable public schools do, and if charters are funded from a pot of



money not generated by tax-payers, I might consider supporting an SB1882 or charter school in Austin ISD.