



Austin Succeeds AISD School Board Candidate Questionnaire
Ofelia Maldonado Zapata Responses/September 3, 2020

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.*

As a grassroots community leader and organizer, I bring the experiences of meeting with parents and gathering the community's perspective on inequities that need to be addressed.

My broader vision for the district is to ensure consistency of processes with accountability measures for high-quality education for all students, including students with special needs.

The greatest opportunity at hand is also our greatest challenge: to face the impact of systemic racism in Austin ISD. I am ready to work with the superintendent, her leadership, and the rest of the AISD trustees to do this.

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 particular policy, lobbying for/against a particular change in state/district policy, etc.*

I've lived in my district for 25 years. In the 1990s, I successfully organized the AISD Priority school fight that secured \$6 million in funding for our 16 low-income schools to stay intact. I was instrumental in getting AISD to adopt the first "Site Based Management" policy that opened the door for parents and community leaders to participate in their local school decision-making process; that policy is still in use, and is now called Campus Advisory Councils. I also successfully organized Sanchez Elementary to become the first AISD year-round school. I was part of leading our schools to secure \$250,000 from the City of Austin to invest in our children's education through the creation of the "Prime Time Afterschool" enrichment program. I was also instrumental in securing an additional \$100,000 of city funds to invest in a Summer Youth Employment program, a gang-prevention strategy for 14-17 year olds to connect the world of work to the importance of their education. For the parents and adults in our school communities, I helped organize English as a Second Language and GED classes with our congregation leaders as instructors. This project reorganized AISD Community Education funding to remove fee-based classes and transition to all free classes.

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 Superintendent is open and accessible to the board.

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b. Teachers

The board has been generally supportive of teachers. However, the board must increasingly prioritize teachers, particularly in this pandemic; a pay raise to fairly compensate teachers for pandemic work, and to place their pay on par with teacher pay in surrounding areas, is where we should start. Virtual, vertical team meetings might be a way to engage with teachers, listen to their concerns and develop ideas that can support their work.

c. Families/community

When I have asked families to describe their relationship with their trustee, the overwhelming response is, "What is a trustee?" This shows how large the disconnect is between the board and most families and community members. This is the most important relationship a trustee should have. A trustee making every effort to meet with families and communities is critical to ensure our children are getting high quality and equitable learning experiences. Monthly vertical team meetings are billed as community engagement, but are currently performative. These meetings are held during working hours, at the convenience of nonprofit leaders who get paid to attend, when they should be held when the working people of the community are able to attend and provide the input that would actually be useful to making necessary school improvements.

d. Other board members

I recently heard from current board members and it sounds like there is a good working relationship with each other. I would challenge our board members to attend a vertical team meeting not in their district to learn from others' experiences and recognize differences so that we can address inequities as a full board.

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.*

Educational and racial equity means holding the bar of educational experiences at the same level for all students regardless of race, economic status, or physical or mental ability.

I would rewrite current policy to monitor, evaluate and measure academic success for students of low-income schools, and students with dyslexia and disabilities.

For example, I would expect dyslexic students and students with disabilities to be given the same level of classroom time and homework as their peers with necessary accommodations to do the work. I would also increase community involvement in the school decision-making processes to break down barriers between



school administration and the community. Giving everyone a seat at the table and empowering all voices and perspectives is key to overcoming systemic racism.

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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.*

I have to learn first where the shortfalls are in my district and why. This would provide the foundation for determining the best way to allocate resources. I would also encourage the district to perform an audit of how much money was saved during the shutdown of AISD's central office, in order to identify which administrative positions are nonessential. The fact is that so much of the current budget is allocated to administrative roles that don't do anything to improve educational experiences or outcomes for students. We should examine the function and performance of these roles and be unafraid to cut those that are not contributing to the district's success. Funds could then be re-allocated to providing resources that directly serve students and support teachers.

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?

Attendance (high attendance, low attendance, increased or decreased) is an important metric to determine student and district success. Poor attendance means loss of state funds. More importantly, a red flag here means something is going on with the student and/or their family that AISD needs to investigate to ensure the student stays in school. We should be using a holistic approach to evaluating student success. This means that we need to build and implement systems that address physical and mental health and wellness, student learning styles, and success beyond standardized test scores.

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?



Because I survived the coronavirus, I oppose students returning to school in person. We are still in the pandemic and until there is a cure for it, we should not risk our children or our teachers when education can still continue virtually. However, for this to work we have to make a few changes. First, we need to erase Pg 4 (omz responses/Austin Succeed)

(question 7 continued)

unequal access to quality internet. Students need fast, reliable internet in their homes to succeed in virtual learning, but that is not always the case for low-income families. The district should partner with internet service providers to ensure that every student who needs home internet access, gets it. Moreover, we need to emphasize virtual learning because teachers are trained to teach, not to prevent the spread of a virus. It is fundamentally unfair to burden teachers with the responsibility of keeping classrooms virus-free while also being responsible for providing high-quality education. While virtual learning is the safest option, we must also be vigilant about preventing “screen fatigue” that can negatively impact students’ attention spans and jeopardize learning. Lastly, parent support specialists must be reclassified as full-time positions in order to build relationships with parents and provide them with the necessary training and resources to support their students.

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.*

My decision-making process for deciding on future school changes centers the affected community and how any proposed change will meet its needs. The 2019 School Changes Plan is an example of a decision being made with no respect for the community it will impact. To remedy this going forward, the board must increase the transparency around the school closure process and respect the affected communities by committing to reinvesting funds in the districts where school closures occur.

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? Because I am a community leader, I would defer to teachers on this issue. No one knows teacher’s needs better than teachers do, and I would invite them to work with me on developing policies to recruit, retain, and reward teachers throughout the district. We also need to recruit our local talent by partnering with Austin



universities to provide a pathway for graduating teachers to transition into positions with AISD. This is a solution for recruiting a diverse group of educators who have ties to the communities they teach in.

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*
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11. *populations of students, including special education students, bilingual/ELL students, low-income students, and Black, Indigenous, and students of color.*

My background is graduating from high school in AISD, without a single teacher or administrator throughout my education noticing my visual impairment. My son graduated in 1999 in special education without a pathway to higher education or skill sets for employment. My grandson graduated in 2019 as a dyslexic student and was not challenged to meet his highest potential or given a pathway to higher education. I know firsthand that students in special populations often get ignored and left behind, and are not given the attention and resources to reach their potential. School administrators must require staff to NOT lower the bar of teaching because the student is low income, a minority, or has special needs. There should be extra effort during student registration to learn of all a student's needs—inside and outside the classroom—to ensure each student is given the resources they need to thrive.

12. 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.*

The challenge of this question is how we hold eligible partners under SB 1882 accountable for providing excellent education while maintaining transparency around how extra funding is being spent. In my district, I look to Mendez Middle School as an example of the partnership program. In all honesty, I cannot describe a notable improvement besides only allowing the school to remain open. These partners do not listen to the needs of the communities they enter, and that leaves the students who don't have a choice but to attend that school at the mercy of an organization that's largely free to operate without oversight. As a Trustee, I would champion policies that explicitly prioritize utilizing local talent, not takeovers by outside groups, to improve our struggling schools and keep resources in the communities that need them most.



As for HB 3, I will again be honest: I'm not a policy analyst, and HB 3 is a document that I don't fully understand. However, I view this as an opportunity to learn about the finer points of public school funding and use that knowledge better serve my community.