



Austin Succeeds AISD School Board Candidate Questionnaire

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 bring the perspectives and experiences of an educator, educational researcher, program founder, program builder, board member for several academic and civic organizations, and an Executive Branch Policy Fellow assigned to the National Science Foundation in the Obama Administration. I have specific expertise in building programs and teaching practices that promote the academic success of historically and routinely marginalized students. I am the Past President of the Council on Anthropology and Education, Past President of the Association of Black Anthropologists, current Board member for Grassroots Leadership in Austin, current Director of Graduate Studies for the Black Studies Department at UT Austin and Founding Executive Producer of PBS Blackademics Television, which shares information on Black life and culture to a nationwide popular audience

AISD has a beautifully diverse student population with families committed to their children's academic attainment and career success. At present, district leaders have tried, but not understood how to build on the work, love and commitment of students and families in order to promote student success for all. We have served some students extremely well and some students extremely poorly, which has contributed to families disengaging. Thousands of Black students and families have fled AISD and enrolled in neighboring districts like Pflugerville, Round Rock, Del Valley and Manor. Likewise thousands of Hispanic families have fled AISD and turned to charter schools. Stabilizing enrollment during a pandemic and growing our district following the pandemic is a priority and a challenge.



Because of the rich tapestry of families in the district, we have the opportunity for excellence through diversity -- with programming that reflects our diversity and is designed by and for our students, families and teachers. Currently, too many of our spaces of academic excellence are Eurocentric, reflecting individualistic, competition-based Eurocentric values and traditions and neglecting the lifeways, interests and values of community members. This is a challenge but also an opportunity. We can dramatically alter the academic fortunes of our Black and Brown and other non-white students through culturall responsive practices and programs designed in partnership with community and a more diverse teacher core and administrative leadership than we currently have.

- 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 ran student programs in partnership with the District for a decade. These were co-founded with students and contributed to academic outcomes and college going rates for Black and Brown students that were dramatically better than the district achieved. Our students embodied characteristics of academic engagement, brothers and sisters in mutual support, conflict resolution, critical consciousness, and the capacity to define oneself for oneself. Our programs were more than non-racist and more than anti-racist. They were pro-student, and pro-student excellence with results that reflected those values.

I sat on the District's previous Strategic Planning group. I've been on the McCallum High School CAC. I have led dozens of professional development workshops for teachers and administrators over the years.



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 has started well, being part of the effort to slow down our opening so that there is more time to prepare, significantly including time to support teacher professional development, and time to re-open with reasonable health protocols in place and a reasonable likelihood of being able to staff and train such that they can be followed.

b. Teachers

Despite effort, leadership has not yet done well enough honoring teachers through providing adequate staffing, providing adequate balance in terms of the distribution of experienced teachers, adequately staffing and training in special areas like Special Education, multilingualism and mental health counseling for students. We have not yet adequately supported teachers in terms of what they are expected to achieve and the supports we give them to realize the success we desire. Our central administrators are of good will and working hard, but have not done well enough in providing academic vision, leadership and support. This directly impacts teachers and makes their work more difficult.

c. Families/community

The improvement in AISD leadership is that they have chosen to listen more to community, and their failure is that they are more than willing to ignore what they hear if it does not suit their vision. The debacle that was the school changes plan set the District back by years in terms of community standing. It accelerated disengagement and disenrollment, produced anger and inspired cynicism.

d. Other board members

The Board is in need of multiple reforms to restore transparency, collegiality between board members, basic principles of representative democracy, and overall efficiency. They meet for too many hours, meet for too many hours in private, and they have short-circuited practices that ensure that all board members have a voice, and that all Board members can raise issues that actually make it to the agenda. They are



hard-working, dedicated people who are showing signs of stress and fatigue and they are in need of rejuvenation, healing and a substantial re-imagining of what it looks like to work together.

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.*

In the context of a history of serving some students well and doing so at the expense of others, equity means first attending to the needs of the least- privileged, most-vulnerable, historically-marginalized, and special needs students and then working to ensure the needs of the historically privileged are attended to as well. Decision-making power should be shared among the constituencies. Budgetary sacrifices should be shared, and never borne disproportionately by the most vulnerable or historically marginalized. Racial Equity will also require hiring and training for not just competence, but excellence in serving all students well. A capacity to serve Brown and Black kids well is not an add-on, but a starting point in terms of determining who to hire and promote, who to train, and where necessary, who to counsel out of the profession.

Note: My opinion in this area comes not only from decades in this work, but more recently, work with several hundred community members who worked to produce an alternative understanding of equity than embodied in Board and Administrative action. Thus, my answers here are also reflected in the Reframe the Game document, which is widely available, and that I can send if desired.

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.*



We need to place greater emphasis on robust, innovative programming that serves the range of our diverse student body. This means investing in programmatic areas. Our budget should reflect an emphasis on unique circumstances -- those of students, those of communities, those of sections of town. Contrary to the thinking of neo-liberal, efficiency-model thinkers, this means going away from one-size, one-configuration fits all.

We need greater investment in supporting staff like nurses, counselors, and mental health professionals, and we need to rethink safety in schools such that excellent service to the holistic needs of the child becomes the foundation for classroom work and academic achievement.

We need to carefully scrutinize central office alignment and corresponding expenditures. As we reimagine and reinvest, we should invest in technology, and spend less on fancy offices in a big expensive, hard-to-reach central office building that discourages community members from being present and engaged.

Finally, we should be partnering with the City and County where possible to underwrite our education efforts that also serve the general good.

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?

(1) Academic Excellence -- The elimination of achievement gaps between student populations.

(2) Growth -- Stabilizing enrollment during than pandemic, then growing it.

(3) Balance -- Equity-driven distribution of resources, teachers, and programmatic opportunities for students. This includes expecting to see the hiring, support and equitable apportionment of a more diverse teaching staff, including more bilingual teachers and more certified specialists in key areas.

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?

The move to alter the calendar year in order to delay our first class day was a brilliant, yet simple bureaucratic maneuver that bought the district invaluable time to gather, plan, put procedures in place and train. The effort to open up safely and with an emphasis on effectiveness is nothing short of heroic.

All of that said, it is also hard to discern a “plan” because so much is necessarily in flux. This is not automatically a criticism, but a reflection of the contemporary complex and quickly changing situation and a reflection of the fact that all planning has to take place amidst a state leadership that seems at times simultaneously bewildered and yet resolute that we march down a certain path.

Efforts to emphasize the quality and effectiveness of the online instruction, while creating space for students to learn with the online instruction while physically in-school will help make the effort to serve our students even possible for teachers and administrators.

We need to be 100% committed to doing what we believe keeps students safe and promotes their education, because not only is it not clear that the state will do so, it is possible that the state will require us to do things that are wrong for our community and harmful for our kids. Our ethical north star *must* remain clear so that we can do what is right by kids and community.

The return to in-person instruction must prioritize physical safety and emotional well being (or recovery in some cases) as a prerequisite to learning. Our students will be grateful to be back and we must recognize and leverage the sense of relief and positive excitement to promote student full-engagement and academic dedication in order to accelerate learning and help students catch-up where needed.



- 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.**

The school closure plan did not reflect the will of the impacted community. The plan provided precious little economic savings compared to the massive ill-will they inspired. The plan went against principles I believe in about having schools of the size and nature that best suits students in a given community, and instead went towards an efficiency model that identifies a magic and dubious ideal number of students and staff per building. The plan also lacked overarching vision. There was nothing about the core of the plan that I could discern directly had to do with promoting student achievement. The enhanced achievement would, at best, be a byproduct of new facilities, but since the benefits of new facilities were just a thrown around idea instead of something directly attached to specific desired outcomes, the whole thing looked like a farce.

Going forward I would look towards boundary changes, transfer policies and transportation policies as a way to balance enrollment and ensure viability before I would close another school.

Decision-making should be about consensus building. We should approach the community with our goals and our constraints and work with community members to develop solutions. As part of that, we should revamp how we run advisory committees and other community-based deliberative bodies so that they actually help develop solutions and vet ideas instead of just being asked to rubber stamp, or just being listened to in order to be 100% rebuffed (as happened with the schools closures).

- 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?**

I favor programs that develop teachers from our existing student body.



I favor partnerships with universities to develop teachers and staff with experience and skills uniquely aligned with the needs of our students and community.

I favor balancing schools so that all schools have veteran teachers and new teachers.

I favor stipends (and time allotted in each week) for excellent teachers to mentor new teachers and teachers in need of professional development.

I favor more money, closer to the ground. Excellent teachers should be incentivized to stay on their campus where their impact is direct. At the same time, no one should be allowed to “fail up.” Someone not performing well or caught in controversy should not be brought in to the central office to retain their employment.

I favor proficiency demonstrated not just by test scores, but also by student growth.

I favor hiring more multilingual teachers.

I favor hiring more teachers who come from the same backgrounds as our students.

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.*

I developed and ran student programs for a decade and before that worked in different student serving organizations, and along with that have spent twenty five years as an educational researcher focused on minority student success. I have taught and otherwise worked directly with students facing a wide range of challenges, including homelessness, death of family members, deported parents, physical impairments, injury, displacement and abuse. My experience working with students and teachers during Hurricane Katrina was some of the most challenging of my career but, in watching expert teachers, taught me enduring lessons about how to support and expect the best from students in even the most difficult and horrible circumstances.

We should absolutely be investing in our various populations by hiring and supporting staff with expertise working with different populations including the wide range of special education students, recent immigrants, English Language Learners, and students facing various



hardships. Dual language programming should be a standard aspect of our schools as should programming and classes that resonate with different student populations. The rich diversity of our schools should be understood as a primary asset and we should construct and sustain our communities with the power of diversity as our centerpiece.

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.

It is important to recognize that “Independent” in the name “Austin Independent School District” is inaccurate. Our community invests well over one billion dollars per year to support schools, and the State keeps nearly half of that. That leaves us in an economic bind no matter how responsible we are with our funds. In essence then, we must be wiser and more fiscally prudent than we would have to be without the state’s “help.” From this powerful example, and in many others, it is clear that the State will not consistently act in our interests. The State vision of how to promote the “general diffusion of knowledge” as required in Article 7 of our State Constitution is one that too often hinders, undermines or otherwise subverts our local efforts to serve our students well.

Accordingly, leveraging state legislation to our benefit first requires that any State policy or legislation to “help” us must be viewed with the greatest scrutiny. It must be viewed with special attention to the likelihood of consequences that we do not intend or desire, but that the State, without earnest consideration or interest in our well-being, does.

I will champion partnerships for innovation.

I will champion community-grounded innovation.

I will champion support for programmatic ideas that resonate with our students and promote academic engagement and then achievement.

I will at times accept money for partnerships, especially for, from and with local partners, but not in such a manner or under such a structure that we are seeding our own demise by expanding the footprint of structures that will lead to further disenrollment in our district.



I will champion the use of dollars for mentoring programs, dual language programs, early childhood education and anything that benefits our students.

I do not support tax reforms that further facilitate the disinvestment of the State and the public from the system of free schools that is guaranteed in our constitution.