



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.***

My experience as an Austin High graduate and now parent gives me the unique insight of what has improved in our schools over the last 25 years and what work remains to be done. My AISD education provided me with the academic and life skills to succeed in law school while competing with students from elite private schools across the nation. Then and now, not all students in AISD benefit from the same educational opportunities. We must work to ensure that our public schools continue to provide a world class education while expanding those benefits to every student. The district is a critical juncture as it faces COVID-19, a new principal, significant board turnover, equity concerns, and budget constraints. These challenges present an opportunity to embrace a culture of resiliency and innovation to build something better than what we had before. We can do this by leveraging community public and private partnerships, identifying and addressing equity gaps that will be exacerbated by the pandemic, and investing in the academic and extra-curricular programs that attract families to AISD schools.

- 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 am a native Austinite and graduate of Austin High School. I now have two children that attend District 5 schools.

Over the past six years, I have served on the AISD Boundary Advisory Committee (BAC) and the AISD FABPAC. I have seen the good, the bad, and the ugly in AISD's decision making processes. The 2017 bond succeeded because it was a community driven initiative that set out a strategic vision for creating 21st century modernized learning spaces.

The bond included funding for one-to-one technology for students in grades 8-12. This investment was vital to helping teachers and students quickly shift to online learning. This was a fiscally responsible investment because AISD keeps 100% of bond dollars, whereas the state keeps nearly half of all local school property tax dollars. Another prudent investment of the bond is the \$66 million in HVAC ventilation upgrades across the district. In 2017, no one knew the



importance that school ventilation systems would play just a few years later. The new ventilation systems will help us safely return to in-person learning as soon as possible. Ensuring that students have access to technology and are able to return to in-person learning in a safe and timely manner is critical for providing robust academics throughout the unpredictable course of the pandemic.

This is the type of nuts-and-bolts strategic planning planning I support. I believe strong community engagement is the core building block of public trust. It is an essential element of success in tackling equity issues and other challenges.

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

It is important that the board and new superintendent establish a strong working relationship. The role of a trustee is to provide clear guidance to the superintendent about the goals and priorities of the district. I plan to accomplish this by ensuring that policies set by the board include transparent and consistent directives, benchmarks to measure progress, and clearly defined expectations for community engagement.

b. Teachers & c. Families/community

I am addressing these groups together because the teachers and parents both need the board to provide direct communications regarding reopening. That is the most pressing issue for teachers and parents at this time. One role of a trustee is establishing a culture of mutual respect among administrators, staff, teachers, and families. It is important that all teachers and parents feel valued within AISD and have a voice in campus and district level decisions.

c. Other board members

The board has done an excellent job working together to address COVID-19 and ensure that students and families receive food services and technology. The board is more effective when members work cooperatively and demonstrate mutual respect for one another.

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 equity means that each child receives what they need to develop to their full academic and social potential. Inequity is manifested in the achievement gap differential and disproportionate disciplinary actions among white, Hispanic, and Black students. I plan to address systemic racism and inequity by ensuring that AISD recruits and retains teachers of color; implements restorative justice practices and cultural sensitivity training; provides sliding-scale, high-quality before and after school care for working families; and transitions focus from school policing to mental health services.

A recent report in the Austin American-Statesman found that Black students were suspended at five times the rate of white students during the 2017-2018 school year. In addition to the disproportionate rates of punishment, students of color have also been found to receive harsher punishments than their white peers for the same conduct violations, with students of color being sent to AISD's Alternative Learning Center for 20-30 days while white students are sent for only 2-3 days. Students who receive special education services also incur a disproportionate share of disciplinary actions.

To address these issues, I would implement the school policing reforms described above, as well as cultural competency training for teachers and school administrators. Further, I would leverage community partnerships with mental healthcare providers and social workers to expand the community schools model, conduct parent trainings to ensure parents of students in special education know their rights regarding appeals of disciplinary actions, and direct the Superintendent to conduct a root-cause analysis of the disproportionate punitive actions occurring at the Alternative Learning Center. These systemic changes must be evaluated on a periodic basis to measure progress and hold the district accountable if the recommended policy changes do not produce the desired result.

- 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.***



Managing AISD’s funding should be a two-pronged approach of finding innovative ways to increase funds while ensuring that dollars are wisely spent.

To spend its dollars wisely, AISD must prioritize funding for teachers and staff. An effective teacher is the single most important component of educational quality for students. Having teachers that live and work in Austin is a value to school communities. Because it is increasingly difficult to find affordable housing in Austin, AISD must be vigilant in maintaining competitive teacher salaries. AISD should also work with local officials and regional planning organizations to find innovative opportunities for teacher housing.

Strategic programming investments are another key piece of building strong school communities. This means investing in the parts of school that students and families are passionate about. Fine arts, athletics, Career and Technology Education, and dual language programs are what draws many families to AISD. Investment in these areas pays for itself many times over because these programs attract families to AISD.

AISD can increase funds through strong legislative advocacy, maximizing community partnerships, and making smart investments. The top priority for the upcoming legislative session is securing adequate funding in the midst of a projected state budget deficit. Protecting the state’s financial commitment to public education is essential for AISD to offer competitive salaries to teachers, address staffing needs, and cover COVID-19 expenses such as technology, food services, and PPE.

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?

AISD should measure success in a variety of ways. The primary goal of our schools is to graduate students who are college, career, and life ready. To do that, we know students need holistic support from their school communities. Disaggregated data from standardized test scores should be used as one reference point, but should not be a sole determination of success. Other important metrics include the percentage of students enrolled in advanced academics and dual language programs. We must also look at whether schools are providing a full spectrum of fine arts, athletics, and CTE opportunities. The district should adopt a “plan, do, check” model of evaluating progress and ensuring its policies are aligned with its goals.

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?

AISD must ensure that our most vulnerable students are given the necessary academic support, mental health services, and technology for success. In Austin, we are fortunate to have community partners like the Austin Ed Fund and Communities in Schools that provide counseling and mentoring services, telehealth benefits, funding for meals for families, interpretation services for over 100 languages, and more. Strengthening these partnerships is essential to meeting the challenge of meeting the physiological needs (food security, safety), addressing safety concerns related to COVID-19, and ensuring that schools have the people, policies, and practices needed to instill a sense of belonging. This is necessary to keep students engaged in school and on track academically.

AISD’s reopening plans should protect teachers, students, and staff by using public health expertise to guide reopening decisions. The AISD board and staff should be commended for their work equipping tens of thousands of students with Chromebooks, iPads, and wi-fi hotspots, as well as providing meals to students and families throughout the summer. Continuing this whole-child approach is essential to providing equitable learning opportunities for students.

Until all students are able to be back in the classroom together, AISD should prioritize in-person learning for students with highest academic need while providing all students the opportunity for meaningful interaction with peers and teachers. This includes exploring innovative options for in-person interaction with peers and teachers through the use of outdoor learning spaces, city and county facilities such as parks and libraries, and child care centers.

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 prioritizes community engagement and strategic planning. During my volunteer work with AISD, I saw firsthand that families were often not aware of enrollment concerns at their schools. I led an effort to modify enrollment policies so that school communities are informed at earlier stages when enrollment begins to shift up or down. This empowers schools to address overcrowding or underenrollment when a trend first begins, rather



than years later when the problem is more difficult to resolve. I will advocate for maintaining neighborhood schools and I will encourage the City of Austin and regional planning organizations to strategically invest in affordable housing and transportation proposals that enable families to continue to live and work in Austin.

For that campuses have been recently closed, the objective must be to hold the district accountable for its commitment to impacted communities to provide free or sliding scale before-and-after school care, cultural proficiency training, and increased staffing so that students and students are set up for success.

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 support policies to provide mentorship to teachers of color, to promote teachers of color to leadership positions within schools, and to examine hiring practices to ensure that hiring teams are diverse. To retain talented and dedicated teachers, we must ensure teachers are paid a competitive salary and feel valued by administrators. Having strong principals that can efficiently run a school while promoting an inclusive and creative school culture is the most effective way to recruit and retain teachers. I support increasing teacher salaries as well as looking for innovative benefits that may help retain talent, such as flexible schedules, student loan repayment programs, or attending continuing education conferences.

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.*

Achievement gap disparities and the disproportionate rates of disciplinary actions taken against students of color, particularly Black students, show that AISD is not effectively providing a safe, nurturing environment for all students of color. Addressing this problem must be a multi-pronged approach, including:

- Supporting “community schools” model programs like NACER;
- Transitioning funds from school policing to mental health services;



- Implementing restorative justice practices; and
- Increasing access to advanced academics for students of color.

Further, I will continue AISD's investment in dyslexia identification and intervention services. Dyslexic individuals make up 20% of the population, but almost half of the US prison population. Identifying students with dyslexia and providing essential reading intervention is a key tool in disrupting the school to prison pipeline.

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.*

SB 1882 partnerships with non-profit organizations, such as the partnerships with the United Way to provide early childhood education and with Easter Seals to provide services to adult students on the autism spectrum, should be evaluated to determine whether the partnership provides a service that benefits students and is not currently available within AISD. These partnerships have the potential to reach a wider population of students and to better serve the Austin community.

HB 3 provided a much needed investment into AISD. The district should seek to maximize the amount of funding it is eligible to receive by accurately identifying the students who qualify for dyslexia intervention and special education services. Further, the district should invest in teacher training to ensure that elementary teachers are using best practices to teach literacy and develop skilled reading.