



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.*

As a Trustee, I will also be a Champion for AISD school communities by saying and doing the right things when it comes to equity, fairness and safety for students. I am ready to have uncomfortable conversations around difficult topics, such as the budget differences that exist among our district PTAs and the impact that has on our schools; school and mascot renaming and the impact that has on our communities; and on returning to school physically following this pandemic in a way that is safe and respectful for our children and teachers and employees.

I will also work with all AISD School Board Trustees to enact transformative policies that produce necessary and sometimes radical changes in the district, changes that will have a positive impact on the current disparate academic outcomes. I will do this by creating relationships with the other Trustees, and building a culture of respect that filters out to not just the Superintendent but all of her senior staff. I will encourage anti-racism training and difficult conversations on the board, which we can use to grow as a group and inform our decision-making. It would be my hope that the four new Trustees could be part of an effort to grow the awareness of the Board in order to work collectively towards improved student outcomes.

Working with coalitions and building relationships has been a hallmark of my career thus far. As publisher at *The Texas Observer* I was tasked with marrying the needs of the young, passionate staff with the interests of an older, more traditional board and readership. I did this by traveling the state, listening to readers and donors, and bringing those ideas back to the office for discussion. At Annie's List, I again traveled the state building local steering committees to identify and support local women running for political office. Hearing the concerns of the local leaders, I created structures that were unique to the needs of each community.

The process of building trust with the community and creating coalitions is laborious, time-consuming, and sometimes emotional. Gathering input and taking diverse concerns into account may not always mean that every stakeholder is happy with the results; but if you can build coalitions and truly listen to those impacted by the decision, you can hope to end up with most stakeholders respecting the decision made.

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 went to elementary school at Bryker Woods Elementary School. After leaving Austin for college, I returned to live with my family and enrolled my kids into AISD schools.

When my daughter started elementary school, I got involved – it's what I do. I took gifts to the teachers and volunteered for the parties. Her second year, I joined the school's PTA executive board and spent a year managing PTA memberships and another year fundraising for the school, raising over \$100K for the school's PTA.

In addition to learning more about myself and my community, one of the most eye opening components of the experience was our school's relationship with another elementary school in Dove Springs, our "sister school." The \$100K that my kids' school PTA raises each year allows the school to hire an extra reading specialist and a writing specialist and ensure that teachers do not have to spend their money on supplies and decorations. These are all contributions that should happen in EVERY school. At the elementary school in Dove Springs, the PTA raises \$700 or so a year. To that end, teachers pay for their own classroom decorations, there are no extra specialists, and, in fact, the PSS pays for lunch to get parents to come to the PTA meetings. We did work to partner between the schools and pieces of that partnership were successful; the cultural exchanges between the students and families felt real and genuine. But the bottom line is that no school should have to rely on their PTA to provide the academic and teacher support that every educator and student deserves.

It was this realization that caused me to begin work to effect positive change in AISD - first locally and then more systemically.

At our 85-year-old elementary school, there are many traditions that have been carried forward for literally decades. For example, the grade level program performances are annual events attended by the school community, including school alumni. Those performances had been the same for quite some time - the same theme, the same script, the same costumes. Tradition. But tradition frequently comes with racism, sexism and historical oppression baked in. The performances had numerous components that needed to change.

After every performance, I took notes on the problems that I saw with the performance, I checked my notes with a trusted group of other parents, ensuring that the concerns I had were mostly valid. Then I sent a note to the principal and the music teacher, outlining the issues and the potential alterations that the play would need to remove the cultural and gender concerns I saw. And it worked – in great part because mine was not the only voice. My feedback and that of other parents – both publicly and in private – joined together into a chorus that eventually encouraged the school to make significant changes and develop new programs.

In addition, when the pandemic began, SAFE saw a 33% increase in the number of calls to our SAFEline around domestic violence. We knew that this meant that there were also increasing numbers of children in violent homes. Normally children facing violence get help when their teachers, assistant principals, counselors, etc. notice a need and provide help. But with virtual learning, that was impossible. To that end, we reached out to the district to offer ways that SAFE could help: we could create a **Need Help?** page/tile for the AISD portal, train teachers on how to recognize warning signs by zoom, or develop safety planning videos for children. But we



received no response. It was heartbreaking to realize not only that children in danger had no recourse, but that the district was unable to respond to this need.

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
- b. Teachers
- c. Families/community
- d. Other board members

A. Superintendent- Having served on the staff side and on 4 boards and commissions, I understand how a healthy relationship between a board and an executive should work. A trustee must hold the Superintendent accountable, creating clear and strong expectations and metrics that allow the Superintendent to successfully serve the needs of all AISD students. When a Trustee raises an issue, asks a question or requests additional information, those items should be heeded and addressed by the Superintendent (and/or her staff). In return, the Trustees must entrust the Superintendent to address the details necessary to fulfill the established expectations. For example, the Trustees can ask repeatedly about the district conducting an equity audit for the district; they can ask about the resources, they can identify external sources, they can bring in experts to speak at meetings. If it does not happen simply by pressing the issue with the Superintendent, the Trustees can utilize performance evaluations, ask the community and the Teachers' and Employees' Unions to intervene, as well as call on the media to encourage the implementation of the audit. They can, however, implement leadership changes – i.e. find a new Superintendent - if that audit does not occur.

B. Teachers - We must prioritize teacher and staff voices in the decision-making that directly affects them. Again and again, I hear from teachers that they have not been asked what they want, what they need. These same teachers are not given any information about reopening, what to expect or what support they may receive. One teacher had not heard anything from her principal even two weeks before the start of school. We must contact teachers and staff to see how they want to reopen, what their needs, wants, and concerns are and use that information to inform decisions about reopening. We must work to earn the trust of teachers and staff who feel disrespected and disenfranchised by the district. If this sounds similar to the first priority, it's because teachers and staff – who are frequently also parents - are impacted just as much in the reopening – if not more. The staff are at higher risk of both contracting and dying of COVID-19.

C. Families/Community - AISD historically plans for school communities and not with them. Respect means asking students, families, staff, teachers, and community members what they need, what they have received from the district and what they have not, how they have felt heard and respected by the district and how they have not. It also means asking how we can address the mistrust and create meaningful two-way communication between AISD leadership and the community, which includes respecting the communities' wishes for their schools. School



closures were a prime example of the district talking at families and not with them. And, unfortunately, we have seen that again with the communications (and often lack thereof) coming from the district around their response to the pandemic.

D. Other Board Members - I will also work with all AISD School Board Trustees to enact transformative policies that produce necessary and sometimes radical changes in the district, changes that will have a positive impact on the current disparate academic outcomes. I will do this by creating relationships with the other Trustees, and building a culture of respect that filters out to not just the Superintendent but all of her senior staff. I will encourage anti-racism training and difficult conversations on the board, which we can use to grow as a group and inform our decision-making.

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.*

Inequity is manifested in so many aspects of AISD. These include differences of curriculum and instruction, as well as the overutilization of worksheets and test prep, at different schools; how the campus police respond to certain students at certain campuses; which sports teams have enough uniforms for their players; booster club funds; which families are benefitting from dual language programming at which schools; which elementary, middle, and high schools truly teach science and social studies; which middle and high schools are still missing bathroom stall doors; which school names were changed due to their association with the confederacy, and which remain unchanged (Austin, Bowie, Lamar); which students are suspended and expelled more than others; how certain students, from certain schools, are being sent to the Alternative Learning Center (ALC) for discretionary removals, and what is the reason; how magnet schools further segregation and inequity; which schools get their repairs done/service orders completed more quickly; how teacher turnover in Title I schools creates instability for students and families, many of whom are already facing food and housing insecurities; and how the voices of privileged parents have overshadowed those of underprivileged parents which contributes to the cycle of inequity and oppression. And, of course, which schools are chosen for closure. My desire to serve as a Trustee is fueled by my growing awareness of the inequities in our district, and my conviction that AISD must prioritize equity if we are to truly serve families.

I will confront these first by demonstrating that these issues are more important than my electability, which means that I will raise the issues and be willing to lean in to difficult conversations. We need to have dialogue about all of these issues and more, and resolve them by prioritizing the voices of those who've been most victimized by them. This does include an Equity Audit of the entire District – that is imperative. But we must also work to educate our leadership (Trustees and senior district staff) on the root cause of these inequities that already exist, so that we can address them in earnest.

Gathering input and taking diverse concerns into account may not always mean that every stakeholder is happy with the results; but if you can build coalitions and truly listen to those



impacted by the decision, you can hope to end up with most stakeholders respecting the decision made - even if it means closing a school.

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.*

As a nonprofit executive, I have created and managed budgets for both departments and organizations. I have a strong sense of how to create realistic and success-driven budgets. There are, however, specific and unique approaches that I would integrate to manage the school district budget with the goal of increasing educational quality and equity. These include:

- Investing in professional learning and in the success of principals, teachers and district leadership
- Using high quality data (disaggregated, quantitative and qualitative, and data that is community-driven) as one method to determine student and school success.
- Directing resources to the schools and grades with the highest needs.
- In parallel, providing principals and individual school communities with the discretionary funds necessary to make local decisions about local priorities.

I would also like to look at new partnerships with businesses, with the University of Texas, and with the City of Austin to leverage the already existing innovation resources in Austin. In addition, I would work with AISD leadership to continue to lobby the Texas Legislature to ensure that the TEA provides school districts with adequate control over fiduciary and academic issues facing the district.

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?

It is imperative to not just look at disaggregated data, but to drill down on what those numbers mean. For example, in AISD 30% of Black/African American students can read at a 3rd grade level, 73% of White students can read at a 3rd grade level, and 39% of English Language learners can read at a 3rd grade level. Obviously we have some serious work to do. But those numbers do not take into effect the fact that the English Language learners may be reading at a 3rd grade level in English and Portuguese. We must look at the disaggregated data but also look further to see what those numbers mean.

We also need to look at other means of measuring school and student success, and those measures must include both outputs (a number) and outcomes (quality of output assessed by surveys).



At SAFE, we created a training program to teach businesses about sexual harassment prevention. We started by measuring success only by the number of people who completed the training. Soon, however, we realized that we needed more dynamic metrics. To that end, we began implementing a survey at the start and at the end of the training to determine how much people had learned about sexual harassment prevention.

In AISD, other creative means of assessing success could include reviewing portfolios of presentations and projects that show how concepts have been grasped, and allowing for various ways to present the information – such as song, speech, or theater. This allows not only a broader means for assessing success, but also broadening the definition of success.

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?

Schools cannot open for in-person instruction for all students until it is safe to do so. I would like to see the following:

- Ask everyone that is able to learn remotely to do so, ensuring that teachers, students and families have the training, the devices and the support to do so successfully.
- For those students that cannot learn from home (kids with Special Education needs, language needs, without internet or devices, families with jobs and no childcare, and those that need the additional services provided by a school), we must find spaces for those children to be able to safely learn in person.
- For those teachers and staff that are able and willing to be present in person with those children, we must pay a differential in recognition of the risk that they are taking to teach our children.
- We also need to provide PPE and/or ensuring well communicated safety and health planning throughout the facilities
- And, in addition, let's find creative ways to provide for the mental and physical health of our AISD students during this pandemic, ensuring that teachers, staff and students are provided with the trauma-informed support demanded by a global pandemic.
- AISD must also look further ahead than just the next four weeks, and instead create a long-term plan that lets families, students, teachers and staff have a better sense of their plan and preparations for the full 2020-2021 school year. That is only respectful and fair for the single mom with a job and two kids; for the parents with two jobs and three kids in different schools; for the high school senior that wants to understand how he will get the credits, the classes and the guidance they need to graduate; and for teachers and their families who simply need to know how to plan.



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 community must play an important role in the decisions surrounding their school. It seems that while there has been lip service paid to community engagement, the work has not actually been done. The 2019 School Changes Plan was a prime example of the District not engaging the impacted communities in thoughtful ways, thereby leading to a steep erosion of trust. There must now be a rebuilding of trust before community groups and citizens will again be willing to be part of a process to engage with the school district.

That said, as we work to listen to families we must also recognize that the roots of inequity in AISD are steeped in the historical racism and oppression that this country, this state and this city were built upon. Our city likes to deny how our city was designed and planned to further racial segregation, but it does feel like change is finally coming. The question is how we work to serve and thereby earn back the trust of those crushed by our system's racism.

I will confront these first by demonstrating that these issues are more important than my electability, which means I'll actually mention them; I already talk about these issues with every D5 parent I meet. We need to have dialogue about all of these issues and more, and resolve them by prioritizing the voices of those who've been most victimized by them. This does include an Equity Audit of the entire District – that is imperative. But we must also work to educate our leadership (Trustees and senior district staff) on the root cause of these inequities that already exist, so that we can address them in earnest. And I would love to find a way to extend that education to parents throughout the district. Anyone can be an Anti-Racist in words, but we need to be Anti-Racists in work. We need to act now.

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?

One of the best ways that you recruit diverse teachers is by showing them that the district respects people of color. When a Trustee speaks disrespectfully to the Chief Equity Officer, the rest of the board needs to speak up and say, "This is unacceptable." In a clear, public, and widespread way, we need to show that the Board of Trustees and AISD leadership respects everyone.

One of the biggest problems in the district is that it's just not affordable for families, both low and middle-income – meaning that it's not affordable for teachers. Too many staff members in our schools cannot afford to live in AISD. They travel long distances to get to school when it's still dark outside and have to face traffic because they leave late. We need more affordable housing for both families and staff.



In addition, too often, first year teachers are simply overwhelmed. The inadequate funding means that teachers, especially at predominantly Title 1 Schools, are paying out of their own pocket for supplies, taking their work home, and not getting the support they need. This means teachers tend to feel a great deal of professional instability, even as they try to teach children facing food, housing, and other basic needs.

I am currently looking at the hiring practices I use in my job, increasingly aware that there are components that are simply racist. When we require a bachelor's degree where it is not necessary, when we require that someone submit their web portfolio, when we assume that people will write thank you notes, we are perpetuating a system steeped in historical oppression. And that has got to change.

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.*

Every single parent and teacher that I have talked with over the last few months has mentioned the intense need for an improved system for addressing Special Education programs in the district. Parents repeatedly mention how wonderful their Special Education teachers are, and how hard all teachers are working with their children. But, whether they are talking about kids with learning difficulties, gifted and talented kids, or kids with more intense emotional needs, there seems to be enormous reservations about the Special Education system in AISD. There are so many stories of kids not receiving assessments for months at a time, or families having to transfer to another school to get their needs met, or teachers being reassigned and unable to continue working with the kids so dear to them. It seems as if the system is not set up to truly consider the needs of each child - or, frankly, of the caring teachers working with those students. We need a 3rd party audit of the AISD Special Education program, as well as a climate survey for parents and staff and teachers to voice their concerns. We also need to look at the exit surveys of staff who have left the Special Education program to see how we can better support our teachers and staff implementing this imperative work.

As discussed in responses above, there are so many disparities in disciplinary measures taken with Black and Brown children versus White children – enough that multiple entities have done studies and have indicated that our schools are very much part of the school to prison pipeline. As part of the historical racism inherent in our education system, disciplinary practices must be taken into account when measuring the “success” of a school; when racial disparities in discipline actions decrease, the school may be on the right track. In fact, a decrease in disciplinary measures overall may be an indicator of school improvement.

And for children with additional needs, I am a firm believer in expanding the Community School model. In my work at SAFE, I have seen the importance of ensuring that people get the resources they need all in one place.



People living at SAFE's Family Shelter are housed behind gates because they face danger from their abusive partner or family. They are working to heal from abuse and trauma and are frequently struggling to survive. For that reason, SAFE ensures that most – if not all – of their basic and support needs are met on campus.

Next to the Family Shelter, we have a warehouse and a food pantry for people to visit and shop. Down a walkway in the Resource Center people can meet with their counselors, their peer support team, their community resource advocates and their legal team. Their children can go to school at our onsite school. And, until recent budget cuts, they also had access to an online health clinic. The goal of having all of these services in one place is to remove the barriers to people's healing, to ensure that all they need is in one place. Healing is hard enough without having to take multiple buses to reach multiple services.

The same is true with community schools. For students and their families, having all the services necessary in one place and removing any barriers to accessing services is imperative to success.

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.*

Charters do not work for AISD.

First and foremost, if true public schools received the funding they deserved, all schools would have appropriate staffing and resources to meet the needs of their communities – we could see ALL of our schools as Champions and not choices. Charter schools have historically siphoned true public schools' funds, enacted private school practices such as deregulated admissions policies, and notoriously scratched the backs of, as well as have their backs scratched by, privatization legislators and political funders. The key is making sure that every family in AISD feels welcomed and supported at their public school so that we don't have to worry about charters. AISD schools, supports, and systems need to fit the needs of kids to prevent families from fleeing to the charter school system.

An 1882 partnership is a "deal with the devil." After reform legislators saw efforts like AISD's Eastside Memorial Vertical Team Community help get school board candidates elected and kick IDEA out of their in-district partnership in 2012, they went back to the drawing board with charter school lobbyists to craft another option, Section 1882 of the Education Code which basically says that schools might partner with a charter operator or privatization entity in an act of desperation. With 1882, the state government's reformers are saying: we're not going to fund true public schools in the way they deserve to be. If any of those schools come close to closing because of failing test scores, arguably because they weren't decently funded in the first place, they have an opportunity to partner with a charter school or a pre-approved reformer



entity. Whichever partner they choose would end up receiving the money that the true public school should have received in the first place. Basically they are saying a school can partner with the person or entity who will be paid by the money they stole out of your wallet – the public's wallet.

In-district charters and experimentation has been well-received by many families and seems to be a valuable way to provide choice for families and students. Looking at ways to expand and improve our in-district experimentation makes a great deal more sense than increasing the number of schools over which AISD has no say.

HB3, on the other hand, does provide some opportunities for AISD - although perhaps not as many as it does for other districts. While AISD was one of the biggest benefactors of House Bill 3, the district still faces huge challenges under the outdated school finance system. To that end, while AISD will certainly benefit from items in the bill like expanded early childhood education and teacher raises, the Trustees have a lot of work to do to find the innovative means to achieve financial stability in the District while ensuring that all of our students and families receive a quality and equitable education in the district.