



## 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.*

The role of a trustee is to set the vision and priorities for the district, and work with the superintendent and hold the superintendent accountable for meeting established objectives. Trustees are also responsible for approving the district's budget which should be aligned with the stated priorities --it is a moral document, and trustees must treat this responsibility with the utmost attention and care. Trustees are also responsible for reviewing policy and working with the district to close the gap between the district's vision, philosophy, policies and practices. Equally important, trustees are responsible for communicating with the community --we need trustees who will engage in candid and frequent conversations with all of Austin ISD.

As a mom of three children under 10, as an Indigenous Latina (Otomi & Mexican) and as someone with 20 years of public service focused on family-centered programs, I can bring my lived experience and my professional skills to the table and ensure that we consistently elevate the voices of historically marginalized communities --Black, Latino/a/x, immigrant, multilingual and low-income communities and special education families.

Austin ISD has a history of catering to communities that are resource-rich and have vast political or financial networks. This results in lopsided decisions that perpetuate educational inequities --everything from infrastructure to teacher recruitment, retention and support to student discipline and test-based exercises.

As a board member, I would work with Black and Brown communities, the district, Education Austin and my board colleagues to collaboratively develop a strategic plan to:

- Build upon and expand current efforts to recruit and retain Black and Latino/a/x/Hispanic teachers
- Ensure that cultural proficiency training is an on-going professional development requirement and is offered for free to educators and staff
- Communicate clearly and unequivocally with parents and explain how all students will benefit when educational opportunities are delivered equitably; this conversation is sorely needed with communities that have benefited from the current system and have not looked up to see how their advantages have left thousands upon thousands of students far behind
- Use evidence-based instructional strategies that are culturally relevant and engaging so that we offer teachers the opportunity to be the best intellectual guides and offer



students an opportunity at rich curricula --hands on projects, inclusive education and dual language programs that are faithful to effective DL models and other iterative learning practices.

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 the daughter of a postal service and food prep worker. I grew up in Houston and moved to Austin to attend college at the University of Texas where I obtained two undergraduate degrees in three years. I went on to earn a Master of Science in Social Work from the University of Texas. I then spent twenty years in public service, focused on lifting families out of poverty and working to shift state programs towards a more family-centered approach of service provision. I continue to work in public policy focused on improving operational effectiveness and performance of state and local governments that deliver child support services --with the overarching goal to improve the economic and emotional well-being of children and families.

I have built collaborative partnerships between individuals and organizations with different missions, sometimes opposing priorities but we shared a common vision for a more just world where children receive the emotional and financial support from the adults in their lives. What I learned during my career in public policy was that relationship building meant finding common ground and exploring differences so that we could arrive at more innovative solutions.

In addition to serving on my children's PTA as a member and Vice President, I also served as Parent Chair of the Campus Advisory Committee. I have also submitted requests to AISD to serve on district advisory committees and await their response. I organized with other elementary school families to build Save Austin Schools 2019. I was a founding member of AISD Equity Coalition. I'm also involved in other coalitions such as Reframe the Game, East Austin Coalition for Quality Education, HABLA, Coalition for Bilingual Education Equity in Austin, Coalition for Special Education Equity in AISD, and the Community Resilience Trust.

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

Leaders who understand that we must first see the humanity and dignity in each person we encounter are able to earn the respect and trust of the people who follow us, because we do not



demand respect, we give and command respect. There are several fundamental ways that AISD can demonstrate respect. Here are just a few of those ways.

a. Superintendent

I would like to see a quantitative and qualitative approach to evaluating superintendent, district, vertical team and campus level progress. I would like to see a simplified but targeted scorecard for the superintendent as well as for the board of trustees. We must be held accountable for the direction our district heads. I would also like to see the school board work with the community, union and district leadership to heal and rebuild trust that has been worn down over the years. Without trust, all good intentions are seen with suspicion.

b. Teachers

AISD should invest in an ombudsman program that offers employees a secure and confidential way to express concerns and to address employee concerns. AISD staff and educators should not have to fear retribution for speaking their truth. Formal leaders must be committed to fostering an organizational culture of respect --not with posters or sayings, but by encouraging divergent points of view, healthy disagreement and promoting individuals who consistently demonstrate the traits required to be a respectful and collaborative leader (formal or not).

c. Families/community

Families - AISD must meet families where they are rather than expect families to meet on AISD's terms. This includes proactively reaching parents and caregivers through community networks and trusted sources of information (e.g. religious organizations, nonprofit organizations, neighborhood groups), and reaching them in through various languages and modes of communication. A consistent message delivered through multimedia is critical. AISD must also ensure that when they propose community engagement meetings, that those meetings always end with a concrete report out and concrete next steps and follow through. Families stop showing up because it feels like a waste of their energy and time. AISD needs to earn trust back. It starts with respecting families time and respecting what they have to say --most especially, listening first to Black, Brown, immigrant and special education families.

Community - AISD has a lot of work to do to rebuild trust and that starts with giving respect rather than upholding expectations that the community must give deference to AISD before earning respect. AISD must proactively seek out community voices who have historically been left out of meaningful decision-making processes. AISD must ensure the entire organization has the knowledge, skills and commitment to being culturally responsive, inclusive and respectful.

d. Other



Board Members - It concerns me deeply that the Texas Association of School Boards (TASB) greatly influences board members to approach board leadership from a “we must work towards unity at all cost”. Elected bodies should not feel compelled to arrive at consensus for consensus’ sake --this leads (and has lead) to ill-informed and biased decision making. I would like to see our school board trustees develop our individual and collective skill set in conducting crucial conversations in public, rather than the many closed door “executive sessions” that have become the norm of public board meetings. These executive sessions are neither broadcasted nor accessible to the community during in-person public board meetings. THis must change if we hope to rebuild trust through candid and open decision-making where trustees can discuss their reservations and hopes for district policies, practices and finances.

Students - AISD must include student voices during decision-making processes. We must shift our thinking so that we truly see students as active players in their own education rather than recipients of instruction. Even young students should be given opportunities to contribute to their learning environment.

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.*

Anti-racism is an every day, every moment act, and in my professional experience this has been one of the most challenging things to do within large bureaucratic systems that have been built on white supremacy. In my past work, I did not do as much as I could have to be an anti-racist. I often struggled to call out microaggressions when I saw them happening in the boardroom. Over time, however, I was able to speak out, but speaking up within a system that is blind to its own problems is very difficult even when you have alliances, because ultimately, if the top authority does not see a problem, then nothing changes. On the teams I lead, however, I was able to foster group norms where Black and Brown voices were centered, where we designed programs and policies that centered around low-income families first and where most of my team members were Black or Hispanic.

The roots of inequity are tied to racial and economic segregation. We can point back to the 1928 City Master Plan, but in truth, the systematic marginalization of Indigenous, Black and Brown peoples has existed since colonization. Our city’s housing segregation has fed and perpetuated disparities in economic mobility, social capital, mental and physical health care access and educational opportunity gaps. Oftentimes, well-meaning intentions to close “academic



achievement gaps” are aimed at “treating” low-income children with a series of interventions --some are effective but many leave children feeling disengaged and incapable of academic success. Low-income communities are disproportionately Black and Brown, we must see their strengths and identify community supports to address barriers that their families face. We must also work with, rather than micromanage, campuses that are facing the greatest challenges in helping their students academically progress year-over-year. Standardized tests do not measure capabilities --we need to stop punishing teachers, students and schools because of “low scores”. Instead, we must consult with those campuses and communities, building upon successful models that do exist within AISD and other evidence-based pedagogy and instructional methods that are inclusive (SpEd) and culturally relevant.

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 take very seriously the responsibility to serve as a good steward of public funds and to invest wisely and equitably the limited public education funding available. With this said, I do see opportunities to adjust where funds are allocated. I would like to see:

- Tighter controls over the use of contingency funds (unexpended bond dollars),
- Stricter contracting and procurement policies and practices to ensure we are entering into contracts that will best serve our district and the public,
- Creative partnerships with Austin’s business sector and philanthropic community to design, evaluate and implement sustainable educational offerings --starting first with students from low-income families, students from immigrant and emerging multilingual families, students with justice-involved or incarcerated parents, and students with learning disabilities, and
- We must take the step of investing in our Special Education department --this will require a fiscal investment but first the district must address the persistent low morale within the department and provide appropriate supports to the department leadership and staff. This may require restructuring the department within the



administrative organization layout --bringing the department closer to the superintendent.

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?

This is one area where I've heard directly from educators as I've worked at learning more about why Texas keeps us under high-stakes testing pressure. Informal observation of students during the school day along with more formalized teacher-student progress checks are a critical piece of measuring students' academic strengths and growth areas. Students of all ages can be consulted and asked what they see as their challenges, what they feel they need help with and how they would prefer to be supported. I know this tends to be something that more affluent schools offer their students, and I have experience with this as a parent whose two older children attended a private pre-school. I think adults rarely give young people opportunities to speak for themselves about themselves. So, self-assessments would be another way to check student progress.

In my profession as a public policy consultant, part of what I do is design and deliver professional learning opportunities to adult learners. Rather than resorting to only one form of skill checks, I use a variety of methods: oral discussion in small and large groups, written assignments that require reflection and integration of the content, exercises that offer hands-on practice and only rarely a multiple choice quiz. These methods offer the instructor an opportunity to provide immediate feedback and the student has an opportunity to check their own understanding and receive meaningful intellectual coaching. The goal is not to see if the adults have memorized content verbatim, it's to see if they understand the foundational concepts and understand how to apply that learning to real-world scenarios. Although children, teens and adults do need different instructional methods, I think at the core, what would serve us all much better than standardized testing as the gold standard (according to test advocates) is to do a mix of qualitative and quantitative assessments.

### **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?



The most immediate priority is to ensure that we have a safe and equitable approach to re-opening schools this fall. Virtual learning is not ideal but it is the option that protects public health, the health of our staff, educators and AISD families. We've seen moms step up this summer and work with district, city and non-governmental groups in an attempt to design a solution that many families, including educators' families, are facing: how do you ensure students have the at-home tech and educational support necessary to get the most out of this incredibly unusual and stressful time. As trustee, I would work proactively with my colleagues, the district, Education Austin, local government and nonprofits to implement creative solutions to challenges and inequities. We can do this, but we need to be proactive and collaborative.

I support HERO Pay for public school educators and staff.

Ideally, families with children who require face-to-face education (e.g. special education IEPs or children of frontline/essential workers) should be prioritized in returning back to in-person instruction. We must also work with various partners and stakeholders to create solutions for families who don't fall into either of the above categories but who need educational support during virtual learning.

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.*

Yes, this issue is close to my heart and hearth, because we were one of the Latino families impacted by Pease's closure. I joined families from other impacted schools and we tried so many different ways to grab the attention of trustees and others. We were able to hold a press conference led by Representative Gina Hinajosa and other county and city officials. We pointed out the data discrepancies --the inflated estimates of cost savings that were based on teacher & staff salaries not just Maintenance costs (in other words, closures was a reduction in force plan). We pointed out the inaccuracies about "under-enrollment" and we advocated for community-designed solutions that would increase enrollment --bringing more students to AISD and thereby more funds (AISD gets paid for 'butts in the seat' attendance). As a co-founder of Save Austin Schools, I organized a community meeting with Dr. Hawley and she shared her findings about the "school changes plan" (school closure plan) and she did not hold back on exposing the underlying white supremacy and racist outcomes that would result. Trustees were at that meeting. Yet, AISD ignored all of those facts and all of our input. This is not surprising but it is disappointing and we must change the school board's support of outdated, bad policies. As trustee, I would work with my colleagues, the district and the community to implement several strategies including Undoing Racism and on-going anti-racist learning opportunities, proactively meeting with Black community leaders and Latino/Hispanic community members to collaboratively design solutions and ensure that we invest first in under-resourced areas and I





would work towards more strategic and aggressive recruitment of Black and Hispanic educators --and putting supports in place to retain and grow those educators within our district.

In terms of the families who were impacted by school closures, AISD and the school board needs to collaborate with those communities and implement community-designed solutions. Sims families will be attending the soon to be modernized Norman-Sims campus. Half of Brooke families will be attending the modernized Govalle campus. Metz families will eventually attend the modernized Sanchez campus. The Brooke families that are rezoned to Linder and the Pease families that were told that AISD may end up closing Zavala (that no promises could be made to keep Zavala open) --these families are left to fend for themselves. So, we need to hear from Sims, Metz & Brooke families who feel that they are being left with little hope for an equitable education for their children.

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?

As a school board trustee, I would first work with others (e.g. colleagues, district leaders, staff, classroom educators, community) to understand what issues have been raised and unaddressed and what strategies have been most effective and how we can expand or enhance those strategies of recruitment and retention. I know that AISD has financial and career development incentives, but I would like to have a deeper understanding of how those strategies play out for teachers --what they like and don't like, what they wish they could receive instead or in addition to current retention and professional development and campus support. AISD should enhance its partnerships with HBCUs to recruit Black teachers, ensure that service scholarship and loan forgiveness programs are well promoted and accessible, and continue improving the district's program to encourage AISD students to return to AISD as educators. At every turn, we must all demonstrate how we value the role educators play (e.g. teachers are the superstars & influencers, not the latest TikTok flash in the pan) and to ensure that global majority (Black & Brown) students see a career in education as attainable. I, myself, thought about a career in education when I was in my 20s but I didn't know how to close the gap between my aspiration to be a classroom teacher and the practical steps of becoming a certified teacher --I had no educator friends and didn't know anyone who was a teacher. All I heard was that being a teacher would cost me more than what I would stand to earn. I was discouraged from pursuing a career in education. So, we must also work to increase public education funding and investments in public education career pathways.

The school board must provide guardrails for the superintendent and hold the superintendent accountable for meeting high expectations of proactively recruiting Black & Brown teachers, but also for cultivating an organizational culture from the ground up that is truly collaborative,





respectful and inclusive. Part of that culture should include having a district ombudsman program with the funding and support needed to be effective, and providing mental health resources to staff and educators. Working inside the classroom, especially in schools where students are coming from homes where basic needs aren't being met or where students are experiencing adverse childhood stress, is incredibly challenging. Teachers can often feel like they are never enough or like the task is Sisphyeen. AISD can increase the strategic planning and invest of time, energy and funds to ensure that Black and Brown educators are onboarded, welcomed and supported most intensely and effectively during the first three years of their classroom experience. That onboarding period would include matching new teachers for peer support and new & seasoned teachers for mentoring & reverse mentoring.

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.*

**Special education** - Austin ISD's Special Education department has struggled for years. Unfortunately, we continue to see a heavy strain and worsening morale within the organization. Most parents are unsure how to advocate for their child. For some students, this means an undiagnosed learning disability, such as dyslexia or dysgraphia, persists for years and only the 'lucky ones' are diagnosed at some point. This is a grave disservice to our community and society. We are leaving children behind.

In my professional line of work (public policy focused on family-centered and two generation initiatives), I find that program improvement must be grounded in the lived realities of those we serve and the service providers on the front lines. So, before developing recommendations, I would first, take a closer look at how individual campuses are responding to their special education students --what's working, what could work better, what do they need and not need in order to better serve students & families.

### **Bilingual and emerging bilingual students**

I would very much love to see a 50/50 dual language model provided through AISD schools and as part of that, I would want to ensure that dual language programming does not end up leaving Hispanic or immigrant students behind as sometimes happens when DL programs are gentrified. Texas has always been a multilingual state. It is past time that public school students in Texas access dual-language education pK - 12. The benefits are innumerable, but include: multiculturalism, appreciation of racial, ethnic and linguistic diversity, competitiveness in the job



market, and retention of one's home/native culture (e.g. for students whose home language is Spanish, for example).

**Low income students** - I have spent my professional career focused on lifting families out of poverty, strengthening the economic stability of low-income men (most of whom are Black and Hispanic fathers) and working with organizations that directly serve low-income children and youth. I believe Austin ISD is primed to be the kind of school district that levels the playing field for our children by providing rich educational experiences and work with community-based organizations to provide ancillary services and support to low-income students and families during the school year and summer. We can enhance and expand community school models that AISD currently has in place, and continue investing in community-designed solutions.

**Black & Brown, Indigenous, students of color** - We need on-going anti-racism and cultural proficiency professional development for school board trustees, district administration, educators and staff, PTA executive board members and any professional or volunteer who comes into contact with students at our campuses. We can ensure that AISD students graduate with a master of academic skills without using subtractive instructional techniques that send an underlying message to students of color that they must cast off their culture or heritage in order to be seen as successful. We must confront with vulnerability and courage the many pervasive ways that we participate in systems founded on a white supremacy perspective.

**Homelessness, Foster Care and Immigrant Issues** - As an executive board member of the Texas Network of Youth Services (TNOYS), we have a membership base of youth-serving organizations across the state. Children from immigrant families, children in foster care and children living with housing instability are in our public schools but need much more high-touch and longitudinal support. Friends of the Children, Austin Voices for Youth & Education, Seedling and other groups can be sources of enhanced and expanded collaboration with AISD. These children have the potential to benefit the most from a more equitable public education system.

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.*

I would not support Austin AISD seeking additional SB 1882 agreements that push charters at the expense of our traditional neighborhood public schools. Additionally, while I am extremely supportive of the additional funding (and reduced recapture) that resulted from HB3 for Austin ISD, I would not push a standardized test-based strategy to increase funding. I support policies that are in the best interest of our students and developing them as life-long learners.