

## **2018 Austin Kids First PAC Candidate Questionnaire**

### **Section I: Brief Personal Profile**

**1. Tell us about yourself. Why are you personally motivated to improve public education?**

After my freshman year of college at UNC Chapel Hill, I decided it was time to spread my wings a bit. That summer, I signed up to volunteer building latrines in a Mexican village in called Tunagria (“bitter cactus fruit”). There, I befriended Luis, Eduardo, Sorjuano, and Lucia—all children of men who crossed the Rio Grande every year to pick crops in California and send money home. This experience was life-changing, and led to my first job as a bilingual fourth grade teacher in Donna Texas, which is about 10 miles from Mexico. All of my students were low-income, and many were children of migrant farmworkers like my friends in Mexico. Many lived in colonias, which are loose neighborhoods of tin roof huts, similar those you might see in developing countries. When I entered those tiny, tidy homes, I realized that my students’ parents were not so different from my own---they loved their children and wanted the best for them, just as mine did. I realized more than ever that that my students had every right to an excellent education, and that I would do my best to provide it.

My favorite teaching memory is starting a desktop publishing company with my students and raising money for Habitat for Humanity. My students were the cutest and most enthusiastic entrepreneurs ever—you should have seen them making designs on the computer (a novelty in 1995!), holding focus groups, taking orders, counting money, then proudly presenting the check to Habitat. Note that all of my students were recipients of public services, and this was the first time many of them had a chance to support a charitable cause.

Together, my students and I learned that OPPORTUNITY—not race or family income—determined my students' success.

This is why I am running, to make sure all of our Austin ISD students have unwavering access to amazing teachers, cutting-edge programs, and real community engagement so they can be successful—not just on tests—but in LIFE.

**2. What skills and experiences prepare you to serve as an AISD Trustee? If you are elected to the school board, what would be your greatest area of growth?**

) *Respect.* As a former bilingual 4th grade teacher, designer/evaluator of college access programs for low-income students, and a PTA president of a Title I school, I have the skills to make sure everyone, including low-income communities of color, have a seat at the decision-making table. In fact, under my presidency, Oak Hill Elementary became the first National PTA School of Excellence in Austin (one of 11 schools statewide) for engaging Spanish-speaking parents. We did this by launching a Ballet Folklorico club

and using a technique I call “befriend people who are different from you.” (See our interview on Educa Austin for more info: <https://vimeo.com/145173653> . Video in Spanish.)

- J *Innovation.* With 4 technology-related patents to my name, a decade of experience designing and evaluating National Science Foundation STEM/workforce projects for university-K12 partnerships, a Master’s degree in Curriculum & Instruction (Educational Technology) and founder of my own successful company ([www.raiseachievement.com](http://www.raiseachievement.com)), I bring the vision needed to prepare our students for 21<sup>st</sup> century careers.
- J *Relentlessness:* As the advocacy chair, I led the Austin Council of PTA’s efforts to pass the \$1 billion AISD bond last year. As an advocacy committee member for Texas PTA, I led presentations at schools and testified numerous times at the Texas capitol to advocate for school finance reform. You may see my advocacy work at [www.acptaadvocacy.org](http://www.acptaadvocacy.org). As a trustee, I will partner with districts across the state to continue fighting for equitable and adequate school funding.
- J *Transparent governance.* As a program evaluator for multi-million dollar college access and National Science Foundation education grants, I understand data (as well as the limitations of data), see the big picture, and make tough decisions based on solid criteria and consensus with community members. I will work with other trustees to develop a solid governance system that will help guide the tough financial decision-making that is heading our way.

I expect my greatest area of growth will be getting to know people in all parts of the district. As an at-large trustee, building authentic relationships with constituents, especially those who feel disenfranchised, is critical for success.

## **Section II: District Overview**

### **3. Imagine you are holding a community meeting tomorrow to inform constituents on the state of Austin ISD. What successes and challenges would be important to share? What else would be on your agenda to share with the community?**

*Successes:*

- J Student outcomes:
  - o AISD exceeds state/national averages on the SAT/ACT
  - o AISD 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders rank in the top tier of urban school districts on NAEP
  - o AISD’s graduation rate is at an all-time high of 90.7%
- J AISD has more nationally board certified teachers than any other district in Texas
- J AISD is the largest “No Place for Hate” district in the US
- J AISD has the highest bond ratings
- J AISD has great programs, e.g., SEL, early college/workforce prep programs like Lanier P-TECH, dual language, and magnet schools.

*Challenges:*

- ) Budget: Increasing property values and declining enrollment (thanks to charters and a high cost of living) have caused our recapture bill to rise to \$670 million. We have a \$30 million shortfall. At this rate, if no changes are made, we will deplete our savings in 3 years, lower our bond rating, and open the door to state interventions.
- ) Equity: There are still opportunity gaps (such as unequal offerings of coursework, perceived teacher and principal quality) that lead to achievement gaps in our students. Moreover, there are gaps in our discipline rates; African American students get ISS at a rate 4 X higher than white students. Also, our schools are probably more economically segregated than they have ever been.
- ) Teacher recruitment and retention: Our experienced teachers get paid about \$5K per year below the state average. We need to continue finding ways, such as the PPFT, to close this gap.
- ) Accountability: We say AISD is re-inventing the urban education experience, yet our primary assessment tool, the scorecard, is heavily focused on test scores. We have got to expand our definition of accountability to include:
  - o More student outcomes, such as remediation rates in college (college-ready), student aspirations to pursue careers in high-need areas like computer science (career-ready), and voter registration rates (life-ready)
  - o More implementation factors, so we know if schools are offering the things they should be—like strong principals, positive campus climate, and developmentally-appropriate curriculum—to get to the desired student outcomes.

*Other:*

42% of new job postings relate to computer science, but only 5% of our high school students want to pursue computer science as a career. Let's continue partnering with industry to bring in revenue and prepare our students for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

- 4. According to the Strategic Plan Scorecard, 54% of students meet the grade-level standard in reading. Those numbers are 31% for African American students, 40% for Hispanic students, 33% for Economically Disadvantaged students and 80% for white students. What AISD practices and programs are contributing to this gap? What can be done to increase the number of students meeting grade-level reading standards and ensure equitable outcomes for all students?**

- ) We need to continue implementing and improving the AISD Literacy Plan, which focuses on frameworks/instructional norms, ensuring campus implementation, expanding book collections, and offering curriculum supports like exemplar lessons.

- ) We need to promote partnerships like the recently announced decision for Austin Public Library to give all students library cards.
- ) We need to find better ways to make sure teachers are following through and providing the necessary interventions and accommodations that are agreed upon in student IEPs, particularly for students with reading disabilities.
- ) We need to address root cause issues related to poverty, such as offering wraparound services, quality parent engagement to help empower families to support their children's learning.
- ) We need to address systemic inequities to ensure that our Title I schools have visionary and skilled principals and teachers who hold high expectations for all students.

**5. Assuming no financial relief from the legislature, how will you approach making difficult decisions about the budget? What should be the district's top budgeting priorities?**

First, the district needs to develop strong criteria to guide budget decisions. These criteria should include things like: size of positive impact (# of students), size of positive impact on low-income students, impact on college-readiness, impact on career-readiness (esp for high-need skill areas), impact on life-readiness, enrollment impact, impact on recruitment and retention of highly qualified staff, and feasibility. Having a set of clear criteria will help us make better decisions, defend decisions, and ensure that decisions are made with the best interest of the entire district—not just the wealthy families—in mind. (The budget stabilization task force is beginning to develop these criteria, which is a step in the right direction.)

Second, big budget decisions should not be made in a vacuum. For example, the board currently might look at mental health funding one month, and teacher benefits another month. We need to make efforts to look at the many programs we have together at the same time and weigh them against each other. This big picture approach may result in an uncomfortable process, but this approach is necessary to prioritize spending during tough financial times.

Specific budget priorities should include:

- ) high return on investment programs like Pre-K – some studies show that every \$1 invested in Pre-K has a \$7 return throughout a child's education
- ) strengthening programs in under-enrolled areas to a) keep those students from choosing charters, and b) attract students from other parts of town, which could help integrate our schools while increasing enrollment
- ) making sure we pay our employees fair wages so we can continue to attract the best and brightest
- ) continuing to pursue tax swaps and other ways to lower our recapture payments

- ) looking relentlessly for additional sources of revenue

### **Section III: Approach to Governance**

#### **6. Describe the specific role of the school board in improving education for Austin's students?**

- ) Make policies that ultimately put students' well-being first. School board trustees hear from all sorts of groups advocating for their very worthy priorities, such as dual language, special ed, or mental health. The school board is an entity that synthesizes all of the community input with existing data, policies, and trends to make decisions that benefit the entire district.
- ) Approve the budget in a way that ensures that we are getting the most bang for our buck for our students.
- ) Hire and evaluate the superintendent, who leads the district's vision and is responsible for the entire educational program.
- ) Build relationships with the community.

#### **7. Define student academic success. How do you know it is happening?**

State accountability relies heavily on tests that are taken one day out of the school year. We need to look at other outcome metrics that align with AISD's mission statement and demonstrate bigger trends, including:

- ) *College readiness*: enrollment in high level courses, graduation rates, remediation rates in the first year of college, college enrollment, aspirations for college, etc.
- ) *Career readiness*: # of students graduating with associate's degrees or professional certificates, # of internships available to students, exposure to curriculum in high-need workforce areas (such as computer science)
- ) *Life readiness*: students' SEL skills, discipline rates, civic engagement (volunteer hours and voter registration, for example), etc.

Finally, I would like to see AISD explore testing authentic assessments that rely on rubrics to grade student learning on tasks (such as planning a community garden or programming a robot) that are realistically contextualized.

#### **8. Identify an important issue affecting a specific district or vertical team within AISD. What priority should the district leadership place on resolving this issue? What trade-offs, regarding taking time or resources from other areas of need, will be required to adequately address this issue?**

One important issue in the modernization of Sanchez Elementary and the possible consolidation of Metz and Zavala into Sanchez. Understandably, this situation raises concern in the community. There are some things the district should prioritize to address community concerns, not only in these 3 schools, but in others that are facing under-enrollment. Examples include:

- ) Help communities better understand workforce needs, and how modernizing schools are an important step in preparing our students for the future workforce. Many of our families may not have not had the opportunity to be exposed to a wide variety of workforce opportunities. Because of this, the district should think about how to educate families so that when they are asked what programs and resources they want to see in their children’s school, they have a frame of reference.
- ) The school district can simultaneously educate and build trust with the community by bringing members along in the decision making process by, for example, asking them to weigh the pro’s and cons of different school building scenarios. Doing so helps make the decision-making more transparent.
- ) Acknowledge that many low-income communities are struggling with gentrification, rising property taxes, and even increased street noise and traffic. Before making decisions, the district should ask the community what they think should happen to under enrolled schools. Closure is not the only option. Some spaces can be repurposed to offer adult education, health clinics, or fill other community needs. Having honest conversations can raise the possibility of creative partnerships that will ultimately strengthen the community.

Investing in community relationships may not take more resources. However, it will require a more empathic and creative way of thinking, one that views families as a fonts of knowledge about their own communities.

**9. What expectations do you intend to set for the upcoming term? What will be your top goals and priorities?**

I am driven by this vision: Every child, despite their zip code, should have creative teachers, visionary principals, high expectations, and rich coursework that makes them want to learn deeply. An excellent school helps students develop not only the academic skills required for college and 21st century careers, but also the social-emotional skills and civic responsibilities that will help our democracy thrive for another generation. Our district has some phenomenal programs like dual language and Project Lead the Way, yet we have so many students who still need remedial education--or worse--drop out soon after entering college. We have got to understand why--is it because students don’t have equitable access to our signature programs? Have expectations been lowered somewhere? Are teachers not supported? We have got to understand the root cause of the problems and fix them. With this vision in mind, my priorities will be as follows:

- ) Improve our financial situation by: 1) developing strong budget decision-making criteria so our decisions are good for children and defensible to the community; 2) Increasing revenue via relationships with business community, 3) exploring tax swaps with the city and other ways to lower our tax burden, 4) having excellent programming and pipeline programs to increase our enrollment, particularly in areas threatened by

charter schools and private schools, 5) supporting the city's affordable housing bonds and other measures that will help AISD families stay in AISD.

- ) Make sure our employees are treated and paid fairly.
- ) Look at all decisions through an equity lens—be the voice of the parents who do not always speak up, as well as the parents who do. This lens encompasses not only making sure all students get what they need, but that we intentionally design our programs in a way that helps desegregate our schools.
- ) Support programs like social emotional learning and career and technology education that develop the whole child, so that students are prepared not just for tests, but for life.
- ) Expand our definition of accountability to focus on more student outcomes, as well as implementation of programs, as described in question #3.

**10. As a board member, one important responsibility will be to engage with parents and other members of the Austin Community. What will be your approach to weighing community concerns along with other data when making policy, budget and contractual decisions?**

Community concerns are one factor when considering what is best for the district as a whole. Other factors (as mentioned earlier), such as # of students impacted, # of low-income students impacted, impact on school desegregation, impact on college-readiness, impact on career-readiness (esp for high-need skill areas), impact on life-readiness, enrollment impact, impact on recruitment and retention of highly qualified staff, and feasibility—will be balanced with community input.

**11. What measures will you use to hold the Superintendent accountable for improvements in racial equity and outcomes?**

First, the superintendent is accountable for what is listed in the approved scorecard. The measures in that scorecard that relate to racial equity are:

- ) The percentage of African American students in grades KG-2 who are reading on or above grade level as measured by Istation's Indicators of Progress (ISIP) end-of-year assessment will increase from X to Y by SY 21/22.
- ) The percentage of Hispanic students in grades KG-2 who are reading on or above grade level as measured by Istation's Indicators of Progress (ISIP) end-of-year assessment will increase from X to Y by SY 21/22.
- ) The percentage of economically disadvantaged students in grades KG-2 who are reading on or above grade level as measured by Istation's Indicators of Progress (ISIP) end-of-year assessment will increase from 50% to 61% by SY 21/22.
- ) African American enrollment in magnet schools will reach X by SY 21/22.
- ) Hispanic enrollment in magnet schools will reach X by SY 21/22.

- ) 8% of African American students will be enrolled in the Gifted and Talented program by SY 21/22.
- ) 8% of Hispanic students will be enrolled in the Gifted and Talented program by SY 21/22.

I would like to see additional equity metrics in the scorecard related to outcomes such as:

- ) Closing gaps on all test scores (not just lower grades) by demographic subgroup
- ) Postsecondary enrollment by demographic subgroup
- ) Aspirations for college by demographic subgroup
- ) Remediation in college by demographic subgroup
- ) Disciplinary action by demographic subgroup

In addition, I would like to see additional equity metrics on the scorecard related to program elements (which would lead to outcomes), such as:

- ) Access to high level coursework
- ) Access to mental health and other wraparound services that address root cause issues
- ) TELL survey data to shed light on school climate
- ) Access to materials such as books and lab equipment
- ) Industry partnerships
- ) Student: counselor ratio
- ) Implementation of restorative justice and SEL programs that ameliorate discipline inequities
- ) Percent of national board certified teachers per campus
- ) Level of implementation of dual language
- ) Developmental appropriateness of curriculum