

University Democrats candidate questionnaire

Candidate: Piper Stege Nelson

Office sought: AISD Trustee, District 5

1) What population do you see as being most underserved in AISD at present? What do you intend to do about it?

The roots of inequity in AISD are steeped in the historical racism and oppression of black and brown folks that this country, this state and this city were built upon. White supremacy has led to centuries of inequitable housing, lending, education and employment practices that are alive and well today in “progressive” Austin. 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 most marginalized by our system.

Inequity is manifested in so many aspects in 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 still haven’t been (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 will always overshadow underprivileged parents which contributes to the cycle of inequity and oppression.

As a Trustee, I will center the voices of those most affected by structural racism. AISD absolutely needs an Equity Audit – 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.

2) A month after the school year has started, we've had an opportunity to see how our reopening strategy has worked here, and across the nation. Based on this information, what, if anything, do you think we need to do differently in January?

AISD did not make decisions quickly enough and failed in their pandemic communications. AISD needs to create a longer-term plan that builds in the positive actions during the pandemic (i.e. 1:1 devices for students), and allows families, students, teachers, and staff to better plan. I would have started planning earlier for the fall, knowing that we likely could not safely return to school, and would create a plan that takes into account the variety of individual and family needs throughout the spring of 2021.

Even in the spring, I will encourage students who can learn from home to do so. For students that can not learn from home (i.e. those with Special Education or language or technology needs), we will find spaces for them to safely learn in person - and we should pay a differential to those teachers and staff working in person.

I also would have vastly improved AISD's communications with families and teachers, i.e. providing surveys in different formats and languages. And I would have found creative ways to provide for the mental and physical health of our students, including more social emotional learning opportunities, addressing abuse at home, and providing teachers, staff and students with the trauma-informed support demanded by a global pandemic that is changing everything about the way we live and learn.

3) As you all know, the decision of the board to move forward with the school closures, principally in East Austin, has caused considerable controversy. If elected, how will you work to ensure the affected students have their social, emotional, and educational needs met?

Closing a school does not just mean shuttering a building, but rather impacting a community. Students from the closed schools are likely experiencing a strong sense of loss, as are their families and teachers. AISD has traditionally not worked hard enough to engage the communities, nor has it allowed for students to process change - whether we are talking about national disasters, or school name changes, or even a pandemic.

But coming from SAFE, I know the importance of addressing trauma and of the important healing that comes from talking about hurt and broken trust. I would like to see students at the closed schools empowered; by returning the power taken from them in the closures process, they can begin to heal. This empowerment can come through allowing them to choose their new school community, by asking them what could have been done differently in the process, by apologizing for dismissing their concerns and needs, and by truly listening to their experience.

When AISD decided to close Sims and consolidate that school with Norman, there was a great deal of heartache. But the Norman and the Sims communities came together and worked to create a unification plan that would work for the students in both communities. They advocated that the names of both schools be included in the new school name. They held meetings where the two school communities came together. And they advocated to have the Vice Principals from those two schools both stay on at the combined Norman-Sims, thereby creating a sense of continuity. All of these changes allowed the students and the communities to take a bit of control and make sure that the needs of the students were front and center. It is amazing that it happened, but it should not have been the responsibility of those communities; AISD should have been the one engaging the community and centering student needs.

But 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.

4) Everyone swears their oath before the school board intending to take action on a whole host of great things, but often new members are confronted with the perennially precarious position of the district's finances. What will you do to ensure our finances do not hinder our goals, but work in service of them?

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.

That said, AISD has a \$1.6 billion dollar budget. There are undoubtedly inefficiencies in that budget that can and should be addressed. To that end, a management review of the district budget would be helpful as well.