

Questions for School Board Candidates

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

Students in many Eastern Crescent schools are the most underserved in AISD. Those needs are exacerbated for students who are Black and Latino, for students with learning differences, and students who are emerging bilingual. The data are clear: AISD has vast disparities in discipline, in academic achievement and in post-secondary success. Too many of AISD's schools do not reflect Austin's progressive values. We can and must do better.

I believe that the solution starts with two things:

- We must have an equity audit that is thorough, thoughtful and brave. The equity audit must look at a wide variety of issues: discipline, school and district leadership, testing, academic equity, dual language, curriculum. It must also include qualitative data that honors lived experience. And it must measure the attitudes and practices of district and campus leaders, to capture what many families and students know: Too many AISD leaders begin with deficit thinking, assume some parents are not capable of being partners in their children's education, and see some students' potential as limited.
- We must invite our community into the process of identifying problems and seeking solutions. And we must elevate student voice.

This must not be offered for the sake of saying it has been done, but because we believe it truly matters. We must invite community groups to help lead these conversations. Too often, AISD communication and engagement feels like PR or marketing, not like a genuine conversation or collaboration. A successful conversation will honor the wisdom that exists. And it will focus on figuring this out WITH the communities most impacted, rather than for the communities that are impacted.

Students must be central to this process. Ultimately, what happens in our schools is primarily about students. AISD does not often invite students into the process as decisionmakers and sources of knowledge and wisdom. That is an oversight, and it's a loss. We must elevate student voice in all major decisions.

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?

We need to focus on :

- reliance on science and data

The science of Covid is evolving quickly – with stronger recognition of airborne transmission, growing understanding of immunity among people who have been infected, and growing data about infection rates in children and heightened risk among some groups. We must base decisions about what's safe and what is not in science.

We must also recognize that infection rates, preexisting conditions, access to health care and other resources differ dramatically from neighborhood to neighborhood. What might feel safe in one area can carry high risks in another. And the areas where risks are highest tend to be the areas where people have the least power and the least access to decisionmakers. That must be considered.

- awareness of what's being lost
We must also have an awareness of what's being lost – in learning opportunities, student mental health, limited access to technology and the chance to identify students at risk of abuse. Decisions must take that into account, and must balance risk with need. A system that offers greater access to in-person learning for students at the greatest risk is essential, if it is possible to learn in-person with smaller groups of students.
- stronger communication
Effective, empathetic, frequent and clear communication must be a priority – now more than ever. We must share information with families, staff, students and our community in ways that are more frequent and more accessible. AISD must also talk with students, teachers and families now and in the months ahead about what's working and what is not. They have valuable insights and perspectives that can help AISD do better in January.

Communication should also include outreach to other districts, so we can collaborate to share strong online lessons, best ideas, most effective tools and methods of returning in ways that are safe. Done well, this will help teachers use their time to focus building relationships, adapting lessons, meeting individually with students and families and other important work that supports student learning and mental health.

We must also find and talk with families who have chosen not to enroll. The loss of students is significant, and could have a long-term impact on the health of AISD. We must identify who has left, what they have chosen, and what they need to return – in January or in the future.

- collaboration and preparation

We must plan now for continued online learning. There is a strong likelihood that will be needed in the spring, and we must be prepared. This summer, in many ways, AISD waited too long to accept that reality, and preparation fell behind.

We must also work toward a broader civic response to the issues created by the pandemic. Schools serve as child care for many families, impacting employment. We need to work toward the goal of offering WiFi as a public utility, especially where access is limited. We must work together with not for profit groups, county and city government and large institutions like UT to solve shared problems. That should have happened in a stronger way beginning in March. There is some effort being made. But it is limited.

- advocacy

AISD must advocate with TEA and the State of Texas to change policies that are not serving our students, teachers and community. We must push back against STAAR testing – perhaps in collaboration with other districts – to ensure that high-stakes testing is waived for this year. I oppose high stakes testing in any year; in this year it's without question the wrong use of resources.

We must also advocate with TEA and the State of Texas to protect school funding this year, and to create policies that allow local districts to make decisions that are best for each community – based on science and local conditions rather than politics, and not decided at the state level.

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?

AISD must begin by acknowledging the pain, disruption and damaged trust that the closures and the process that led to them created for many students, families and staff. The disruption is major, and it is ongoing. A school is not just a building, and not just a system for delivering education. It is a community, a home, a network, and a place of belonging and security. AISD has dismissed that pain and the damage that closures have done to campus communities, to people's jobs and to student relationships and learning. We also must recognize that closures created specific social, emotional and educational needs – needs that AISD has an obligation to address. That should begin with hiring a dedicated staff person to support families and staff.

We must look at promises made, and take an honest look at what has been honored and what has not. That must include an honest look at which students remained in AISD and which left. I recognize that any data is muddled by COVID. But that is not a reason to avoid studying longitudinal data of individual students impacted by closure. It must include an honest look at whether promised savings have been realized, and a careful and honest analysis of how any money saved is being used – as AISD promised or in other ways. AISD must also pause all closures until that information can be gathered, studied and discussed, and until we are through the pandemic. And AISD must look at

the list of schools that remain on the list of potential closures, engaging the community now to find solutions to prevent closure.

I also believe that we must elect school board members who did not support closures. Doing otherwise ignores the will of the community and continues to erode trust.

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?

Ensuring that finances work in service of goals requires two things: work to increase funds available, and better care of the funds that we have.

- Increase funds available

This begins with advocacy at the state level for more funding for all Texas public schools. I have a strong history of doing this work, helping to create a lead group called Just Fund It TX which brings public school advocates from throughout Texas together to advocate for more school funding. The group includes people from big cities, small towns and suburbs. We include people from liberal areas and conservative ones. And all are on the same page: Our schools need more funding. In the last legislative session, we delivered more than 25,000 postcards to Texas legislators and supported HB3. During Covid, we have advocated for steady funding for schools statewide – sending a petition to Governor Abbott and publishing an editorial explaining the need and goals.

We must also advocate for reduced recapture. Austin sends more than \$600 million dollars to the state each year – vastly more than any other district. I support the recapture system to create more equitable funding. But it is not equitable to take so much from AISD, where more than half of students are economically disadvantaged and almost a third are English Language Learners. The formula was written when Austin was a very different city. It must be adjusted – for AISD and other districts that educate large numbers of students with deep need.

We also must increase funds by addressing the reasons students leave AISD. It is an issue, in part, of affordability – something that we can address by partnering with the city and not-for-profits to increase the amount of affordable housing available in Austin. We must also address the reasons families leave AISD. That starts with honoring and valuing all families and students, and with addressing the inequities that AISD has allowed for far too long. It also requires giving families a reason to come back to AISD – with strong schools that celebrate students and offer a rich curriculum, with community schools that offer wraparound services and childcare for working families, by recognizing campus

leaders that build community and emphasize relationships, and by involving families as partners and leaders on every campus.

- better care of the funds we have

We must address unnecessary expenses – high teacher turnover that disrupts relationships and brings added costs, a bloated and ever-growing central office staff at AISD, and other policies and expenses that take money out of the classroom where it benefits students the most.

We also need to focus on programs that work: strong early childhood and Pre-K programs that help prepare students for success, strong and data-driven support of emerging bilingual students from the moment they enter our schools, early identification of learning differences and strong support for their needs, and programs that ensure all families are valued and supported as partners in their children's education.

We need to focus on building more partnerships between community not for profits and companies that share AISD's interest in the success of all students. AISD will do best if everyone in Austin can see the success of our schools as essential to the success of our city.

We also need to see transportation and options for special programs as a tool. Programs like Early College High School, magnets, dual language, career and technical ed and others keep families in AISD and attract students from neighboring district. To be meaningful, that must include transportation for students who need it.

Above all, funding depends on students choosing AISD. Stronger and more equitable schools will lead to more families choosing AISD, more families remaining in AISD, and more funds to serve all students and educators.