



Austin ISD School Board Trustee Candidate Written Response Questions

Please write your response to each question below and submit by Wednesday September 30, 2020

Written Response Questions

1. What is one specific thing you would like to do differently to improve, create, build and maintain community trust and partnership with diverse families whose children receive special education services?

I support creating strong, family-centered, relational supports for parents of students receiving special education services – including a special education parent support specialist, a parent manual focused on helping parents truly understand and become partners in the system of special education, and the elevation of the special education director to a cabinet-level position in AISD. I have spoken with far too many families who say that special education services in AISD are focused on compliance rather than best practices like inclusion, that parents are too often treated as adversaries rather than partners, and that people have to look outside AISD – often to other parents of students receiving special education – to learn how the system works and how they can be effective advocates for their children. I support a focus on early detection of special education needs, and early and trusting engagement of all families. You build trust by creating systems that inspire trust – with transparency, clear communication, a lack of jargon, and a true interest in helping families understand the system so they can work with AISD to serve students.

2. What is your definition of meaningful inclusion of children of all abilities including those with intellectual disabilities and those working on prerequisite skills and what are the benefits of including those students?

Meaningful inclusion means seeking, supporting and truly valuing the least restrictive environment for every student who receives special education services. Where possible, students should have the opportunity to attend their home campus rather than a campus with a specific unit. Students should spend as much time as possible in a classroom with peers, facilitated by support from special education expert or a general education teacher with the skills and knowledge necessary to serve and support students of all abilities, with guidance from special education experts. Inclusion does not require that every student receiving special education services spend every minute of every day in a general education classroom. Sometimes students have needs that are best met with one-on-one supports or other services. But that should be done not as a default, but for a specific purpose that is aligned with a 504 plan and with the specific needs of a specific student at a specific point in that child's education and development.

The benefits of including students of all abilities in the classroom are clear – for all students. We share our schools, our city and our world with people of varying abilities. Differences in physical and intellectual abilities are part of the spectrum of humanity. It is simply wrong to isolate people based on ability. Rather, we must work to ensure that public spaces include space for all – with accommodations when needed, with time spent outside the general education classroom for specific purposes when that's necessary to benefit the student, and with the understanding that inclusion benefits all.

3. Do you believe children working on prerequisite skills and those multiple grade levels behind their peers can be included and educated in the general education classroom? How could this be accomplished?

I do believe this is possible. Students should not be expected to learn prerequisite skills in isolation. That is not a realistic model of the world, and it is not as meaningful as developing those skills in a community. Inclusion requires differentiated instruction, and that can include studying a subject at different levels within one classroom or working on prerequisite skills in a classroom setting, surrounded by peers.

That can be accomplished, in part, by ensuring that all teachers have a solid understanding of special education – not just the requirements, but also the methods. In the same way that AISD is supporting cultural competency work for teachers, and work on anti-racism, it would be valuable to offer opportunities centered on recognizing and unlearning ableism. Teachers who are comfortable with all students will be better able to serve all students.

For some students, inclusion can require an aide. For some, developing prerequisite skills or academic skills might be best supported with a mix of time both inside and outside a general education classroom. When that is done, it must be based on a plan and the needs of the student, with the goal of supporting inclusion wherever possible.

4. Why should the district properly fund an inclusion model to include co-teaching and providing resources to properly modify, adapt, and accommodate all learners including those working on prerequisite skills and multiple grade levels behind their peers? How can this funding be justified and accomplished?

A properly funded inclusion model is the right thing to do. I also believe it can bring cost savings – by avoiding costly lawsuits, by teaching skills as early as possible, and by reducing reliance on special units for students with learning differences. True inclusion should be the North Star and the goal for special education in AISD.

AISD recently added \$10 million to the special education budget – a significant investment that I hope helps to address some of the gaps and struggles that we have seen recently. We must also advocate for more special education funds at the Texas legislature. And we must recognize and remind people that students who receive special education services make up almost 12% of the students in AISD – not an afterthought or a tiny group, but more than one in ten AISD students.

5. What are your views on segregated placements like Life Skills, Social Behavioral Skills (SBS), Social Communication Resources and Services (SCORES), and Early Childhood

Special Education (ECSE) and the need to potentially, remove a child from the general education setting and/or their home school and community to be placed in these units?

The strong preference should always be a default to a student's home school. A campus is a community and a home – often a place where students have siblings or neighbors. Pusing students to special units denies them the right to be part of their home school's community, isolates students from peers with a diverse group of abilities, and often alienates families, who feel unwanted and unwelcomed by a neighborhood school.

Options like Life Skills can play a role in students' education – but not as the full-time default. For some students, there may be skills that are best taught in a segregated setting, or in a setting with more intense and focused attention than a general classroom can offer. When that is the case, the placement should be seen as a tool – not as the baseline.

I have heard families talk about the frustration of being told that a neighborhood school did not have services for a child with special needs, and being told to go to another campus with a specific unit. That can create a feeling of alienation, frustration and disconnection that can drive families out of AISD. I don't know enough to know if SCORES units should be eliminated completely. But I know that families should never be told that's the default, and students should never be pushed off a home campus and into a segregated situation. That is simply not right.

6. How do segregated placements affect the ability of students to benefit from SEL and other programs with their peers?

Campuses offer a rich array of resources – SEL, extracurricular activities, performances, author visits, field trips, social events... It's a place to find and create community – with teachers, with other families, and with students' peers. Inclusion benefits students of all abilities – normalizing a community with people of differing abilities. Special units focused on special education do not often have the same rich array of options. Even if that is available on a campus, students who are segregated do not have a shared sense of belonging, and their peers are less likely to see that as well. Minimizing or eliminating segregated placements helps to ensure that students of all abilities have what we all want and need – the chance to be part of a community, the chance to have a full spectrum of experience, and the chance to belong.

7. AISD has long given tremendous amounts of discretion to principals with vastly different levels of knowledge about disabilities, or none, to make decisions about the education and inclusion of students at their campuses. This has resulted in vast differences in the treatment of students with disabilities across AISD. This "local control" has forced parents to wage individual battles for services and inclusion on a campus by campus and one student at a time basis. How will you address the fact that local control hinders students with disabilities and leads to inequities across the district?

Local control has a place in AISD – to allow each campus to have its own sense of community, its own traditions and its own feel. Local control can also create major inequities – with different levels of communication, different attitudes toward parents and families, and different approaches to essential programs like dual language education or special education services. One thing that must be addressed is the knowledge that

principals have about special education. It is simply unacceptable for principals NOT to have knowledge of something that impacts more than one in ten students in AISD, and something that has both legal and personal consequences. Basic working knowledge of special education must be a requirement for all principals. That should be a baseline. And it should be non-negotiable. Austin ISD has a program for developing new leaders. They can add professional development programs for any teacher and for people interested in becoming principals who want to learn about special education. Offering that PD for free would be a modest investment with a big payoff.

The process of navigating special education should be standardized. And decisions about services must be transparent and fair – not based on who knows how the system works, or who has fought to gain that knowledge. The process of establishing student needs and accommodations is not a game to be won by one side or the other. It is a duty to students and to our society. And we will be served best if everyone understands how it works, plays by the same set of rules, and sees that the best outcomes happen if all are seen as partners with the same broad goals for students. It's possible that can be accomplished with a stronger set of expectations and more support and training for campus leaders. If that is not possible, then it's possible that a centralized system might be required.

8. There is overrepresentation in disciplinary removals of students with disabilities and a great deal of intersection between disability and ethnicity, with Latino and black boys being vastly overrepresented in disciplinary removals. How will you ensure that policies are in place and monitored across the district to ensure equity and reduce the numbers of disciplinary removals for students with disabilities and students of color?

We must start with clear data – disaggregated by race, by gender, by ability and by campus. We must also create metrics that state clearly that disparities of that sort are not accepted. Schools must have a strong set of tools for avoiding referrals, and for addressing behavior with empathy and creativity. We must also look deeply and critically at the underlying sources of behaviors that lead to referrals. Are students acting out because they can't read? Are students meeting the low expectations of the adults on campus? Finally, we must also create policies, expectations, metrics and fidelity measurements to be sure we achieve the results that we expect. To do anything else is to fail our students and our community.

9. What do you see as the role of the district's Equity Office and its evolving Equity Plan and Special Education?

Differing abilities should be an essential part of the equity plan and the work of the equity office – as central as race, sexual orientation and other types of difference. The work of ensuring equity is a matter of culture and of resources. We must work on both with students receiving special education in AISD, in the same way that work is focusing on issues of race. We have seen quite clearly this year that special education teachers and other workers, students who receive special education services and the families of those students are often deeply frustrated with AISD. Too many students are not receiving what they need to succeed and reach their potential. And that is even more true for students whose abilities and race intersect. The equity office is discussing special education, and it must continue to discuss that and include it in analyses, discussions and plans.

Commitment Questions, if no, please explain

1. Will you commit to making special education students everyone's responsibility to educate, including general education teachers, administrators, and central leadership and not just special education staff? Will you commit to providing meaningful education on inclusion for special education students and on disabilities and behavioral support training to all AISD staff?

YES

2. Are you committed to funding training in best practices for students with disabilities and not training primarily focused on the district's compliance?

YES

3. Will you commit to ensure that the district studies whether access to segregated units leads to better outcomes for students?

YES

4. Are you committed to supporting legislative action to reform and increase special education funding in Texas?

YES

5. How do you commit to educating yourself about our disability community and how will you advocate to combat ableism in AISD?

YES

6. Are you committed to including in the Superintendent Scorecard metrics around disability to include literacy levels, outcomes such as post-secondary program participation, meaningful employment, and independence, amount of legal expenditures, family satisfaction, inclusion time by PIEMS code, and disciplinary measures for students receiving special education?

YES

7. Will you commit to a third-party audit of special education in AISD?

YES

8. Will you commit to a third-party survey to include teachers/staff and also families of children receiving special education?

YES

9. As you committed to increasing transparency with respect to special education expenditures (publicly sharing information on the budget with respect to special

education income and expenditures, including how much is spent on attorney's fees, mediation, due process, litigation, how much is recovered from software that bills Medicaid)?

YES

10. Will you commit to pushing for the improvement of the working environment for special education educators to include increasing pay for Teaching Assistants, providing teachers with dedicated case management time and manageable caseloads, and improving communications between the special education administration and special education staff?

YES

11. Will you commit to improving communications with and support of families of students receiving special education by working on reinstating the Special Education Parent Support Specialist and related programs, strengthening the SEAC and ensuring that it has a role in providing guidance to the Superintendent and board, and pushing for honest/open/transparent communications from the district?

YES