



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?

The board must set the expectation that Special Education be moved closer to the superintendent within the organizational hierarchy. We do not need more administrative layers between the superintendent and the Special Education department. We must elevate the importance of SpEd by bringing more attention to what the department needs and ensuring meaningful participation by SpEd leaders and educators when the district is making decisions about instructional designs, academic offerings and teacher recruitment and retention, for example. Virtual learning was not designed *with Special Education* in mind, it was punted to Special Education *after* virtual learning was designed.

I would also ask that the district budget include funds for an ombudsman's office that is staffed with at least two ombudspople -- one for staff, and one for families.

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?

Special Education students should spend most of their instructional time in class with their General Education classmates. I believe Special Education should be a service, not just a place students are sent to. All teachers and staff members should be trained on Positive Behavior Interventions and Trauma Informed Care. The district can do more to include Universal Design for Instruction and LRI --and providing campuses and teachers with the training and supports needed to implement both faithfully and consistently for all students. This would help both Special Education and General Education students reach greater academic success, improved SEL skills and understand how to navigate the world after high school. Our society has become more comfortable confronting racism and other prejudices, but we have a long way to go before we adequately address systemic ableism. If we commit to greater inclusion in pK-12, this generation of students

and those who come after will be much better equipped to set aside the ablist lens with which all our public and private systems are built upon.

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?
Yes

How could this be accomplished?

We can do a better job of developing and rolling out accommodations and modifications so that Special Education students are included in General Education classes. This includes training general education teachers, not just Special Education educators and staff, but it also includes having aides or co-teachers involved in the classroom. It is my understanding that most aides are assigned to students with physical needs. I would want to know how the board can support the district in rethinking/redesigning how co-teachers or aides are incorporated into the Gen Ed classroom. I am sure there are fiscal constraints that we must overcome, but if we set the expectation that our district will be more inclusive and then hold the superintendent and ourselves (board) to that goal, we can move with purpose towards increased inclusive education.

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?

This could be a real win for students, teachers and families. I would very much like to work with my board colleagues to identify and overcome the structural constraints and fiscal barriers that have kept AISD from providing inclusive education.

We can justify proper funding because having the support already in the classroom allows all students to receive a review of the material in an another manner that does not require the teacher to reteach the material or else that student gets left behind for not following at a general pace. Oftentimes, you hear teachers apologize for the speed of the class, and material is required to be reviewed at home or it is not retained. The inclusion model can be anything from added visuals while the material is being verbally presented or slower pace and simplified instructions to allow for more student/teacher questions. An inclusion model allows the district to be proactive when presenting the material to multiple style learners rather than lacking the resources to aid a child once they have fallen below grade level. The inclusion model provides assistance from the start.

I think AISD needs to join with other districts to more assertively advocate for adequate funding for Special Education. TEA will not do this on their own, we must collectively and strategically demand it.

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?

A support model should be offered on every campus for those families wanting to stay in their community. Transferring for segregated placement programs should be the exceptional choice sought out by the families.

Even though AISD offers transportation (bussing) students within a certain radius, the current system (segregated education) does not recognize the overcrowding that happens by having a limited number of designated campuses offer specific (and sought-after) SpEd programs. If the nearest program in a busing radius is full, not every family has the option to drive further for services. For some SpEd families, it makes much more SEL sense for a student to remain at the 'home' campus because switching campuses would be more detrimental than trying to tailor a program within the student's school community. The district can strategically plan to make this option accessible to more families (perhaps a 5 year strategic plan, carefully designed and closely monitored and dedicated funding and leadership support to ensure implementation is successful).

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

Segregated placement causes a loss of connection, friendships and shared-learning and experiences --everyone loses out on the benefits of inclusive education. Segregated placement on the same campus gives gen ed peers less of an understanding and acceptance of differences.

The end goal should be that SpEd students can benefit from the least restrictive, most inclusive instructional setting as possible. This will require general education teachers to receive training, classroom aides to be available (as needed) and the board should adopt clear expectations that our district will be an inclusive one (this will require a budget that reflects this commitment to inclusive ed).

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?

A direct source of leadership on Special Education should come directly from the Associate Superintendent, at the very least, or Superintendent. Communities and families should still be able to voice their concerns. The district should model accessibility and transparency through this process.

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?

Every campus should ensure that when additional supervision is needed with a Special Education student, a trained staff member deescalates the situation - not an SRO. Also, staff should be trained on Positive Behavior Interventions and Trauma Informed Care.

There should also be support as students transition into middle and high school. Overall, additional support from staff and smaller class sizes could lead to less disciplinary issues.

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

I would like to see more specific recommendations regarding anti-ableist learning opportunities for AISD executives, staff, educators and school board trustees. I'd like to see increased collaboration with VELA so that AISD families receive information before they enter one of our AISD campuses --help families advocate, but also ensure that campuses will welcome all students and work diligently to provide inclusive education.

While I whole-heartedly appreciate the efforts in developing the equity plan, I want to see more SpEd specific challenges, strategies and policy & budget implications laid out in the plan.

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, this should either be part of the district-wide, comprehensive equity assessment or as a separate program evaluation. Probably the latter would be better.

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

Yes, and we should join other school districts in advocating for education funding reform and increased SpEd funding.

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

I will remain involved with coalitions and advocates such as CSEE and VELA, but also proactively seek opportunities to continue to undo my own ablist blindspots. I would like to see CP&I and the Equity Office work with disability rights advocates to bring anti-ablist learning opportunities to the board and district executive leadership, first, and then determine how best to offer opportunities to all staff. It's not a one-time training, it's ongoing work.

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