

TOUGH TIMES/TOUGH CHOICES

 *Focus on Student Success*

The following comments were received from participants during Community Conversations held on March 24 and 31, 2011, at Reagan and Bowie High Schools.

REDUCTION IN FORCE

- Thank you for keeping teacher quality as a priority goal as you deal with all aspects of teacher RIF decisions.

TRANSPORTATION

- Do not build a school bus parking terminal in Southeast Austin. Use the bond money for facilities serving children (i.e. schools). Use the operating expenses to pay teachers. Allow voters to increase taxes. Close schools at less than 70% capacity. Stop unneeded spending on magnet schools (Pease, LASA) and require students to attend neighborhood schools.
- My son attends LASA. I am for no disproportionate cuts to Magnet School/Ann Richards School. They are already on a modified hub transportation system. Please keep these excellent schools open to all.

ATHLETICS

- I think the district needs to be looking at cutting administration costs first. Wrestling is my biggest concern. This is a growing UIL sport with dedicated athletes. It is not a large group, due to the lack of support they receive, but wrestling is one of the most character building sports out there. I would hate for a program with so much potential get cut before it really gets going.
- Please share publicly the possible budget savings resulting from partial and complete reduction in extracurricular activities.
- It would be sad for tennis and soccer to be cut at the middle school level. We seem to be losing individual sports. There are so many children who are not into team sports. As a district, it's a shame to always be discussing how overweight our students are, but cut activities that are healthy.

ATHLETICS (CON'T)

- I empathize with your budget situation. My comment feels fairly benign compared to the numbers I heard tonight, BUT our family does pay high taxes and we have 2 kids at AISD, hardly ever miss school, volunteer often... Our family does not want to lose our middle school soccer program. While that seems small – it is such a positive and physical stimulus for our kids. Pride in our school, an offer for kids that DO NOT do football, etc, AUD soccer is not the answer – it does not cost that much. I drove my son to every game – no buses. How about trimming football and basketball that only serve a few?
- I support the athletic programs and transparency in all financial information. Greater transparency in the area of athletic spending would decrease speculation and increase trust in the process.
- I am strongly opposed to language cuts, math cuts, and increased class size.

EQUITY

- I worry about what AISD is doing for the “average” kid and middle class families. More and more people of means are leaving AISD for private schools and many services are provided for low income students and families. The middle class parents support their PTAs and volunteer at their schools yet they sometimes get lost. Schools like Oak Hill Elementary who run at very efficient levels already are seemingly more affected because they were already working well at a low cost per student.
- There has to be a way to start or include in the conversation how the district has both responsibility and goals to serve the academic needs of a diverse population for students whose academic needs are not met in the traditional middle /high school model. This includes AISD’s ongoing responsibility to identify and support academically advanced children at an early age through GT testing and identification, and augmented education at the elementary level, through Magnet Middle Schools (Kealing and Fulmore) through to LASA. These programs offer courses not offered, and/or if they wouldn’t typically “fill” with enough students. In addition, these programs bring resources to the district through added resources from the State for GT – identified students, attractive families who would be home-schooling or sending their students to private schools, and attracting families in to the Austin taxpaying community from outside the city. In 2009 this financial gain to the district was \$800k to million. Given we have a cost-effective, reduced cost hub model in place and that no other middle/high schools are being asked to cut transportation. Please make sure these programs are not singled out for disproportionate cuts.

REVENUE GENERATION

- Please consider more ways to generate revenue such as leasing facilities, particularly market-rate pre-K programs. Also, it may be possible to reduce teaching assistants at elementary schools. Changes in educational philosophy may help reduce the impact of having fewer staff in classrooms, such as Montessori methods and materials. In the long term, please consider reducing, delaying, or eliminating the next bond program for new schools and facilities. However, I would support a small bond to increase energy efficiency to help reduce operating expenses over the long term. It is hard for me to support constructing new schools on the urban fringe when existing schools are underutilized.
- School districts surrounding AISD all have active foundations to fundraise in their communities. What are your plans for putting the Austin Public Education Foundation back into action to raise money- particularly useful for the critical budget increases on page 20 on tonight's handout?

SCHOOL CLOSURES

- You are avoiding the discussion about "accelerate closures – up to 3" on slide 43. Please be clear about what you are considering for 2011-2012 with closures.

CLASS SIZE/CAMPUS CAPACITY

- My children attend (or will attend) schools that have \$5,400 per student (elementary), \$6,279 per student (middle), and \$5,934 per student (high school) in operating expenditures. These schools are already operating efficiently and at full capacity; I am very concerned about how the budget cuts might disproportionately impact the schools that are already lean and mean. Further, I am worried about the long term impact of this budget nightmare as I will have a child in AISD until 2024. My kids are getting a good education in AISD right now, but drastic changes could make AISD like other large urban districts that become a "school of last resort." The future of the Central Texas workforce and economy is at stake. My children do not receive any special services (Special Ed, free lunch, pre-K, language, dyslexia, GT) and I volunteer countless hours for the PTA. What does this district offer "normal kids" like mine? We are the families who help the district succeed, yet it feels like we are at the back of the line behind all of the other "causes."

BUDGET SAVINGS

- Please stop spending money on AISD surveys. Let's hold off for a couple of years. I've received every year three different surveys for my children's schools. Trust me, AISD and the schools will hear from unhappy and happy parents. Also, I have responded to CAC surveys. Again, please save the money.
- Quit providing meals at meetings. While it's a nice gesture, it is not a necessity. We will all understand.
- Save \$40 million/school year by having students use textbooks rather than copying curriculum.
- If a lot of money goes toward the AISD Pre-K program, I am an advocate of doing away with this service. It takes up classroom space at full schools, which hinders the K-5th graders. They deserve the priority at Elementary Schools; it creates more work for principals and takes more manpower.
- How can we cut what we gave to Recapture? This was all news to me tonight and I am not happy. What is our obligation – our minimum obligation when times are tough? It seems other districts pay less.
- I would like to see some concern from the City of Austin to assist the educational faction if at all possible.

ATTENDANCE

- Secondary attendance solution: Reinstate HS students to exempt final exams(s) if meeting specified semester grade average AND attendance. In the past, final exemptions were offered for 90% average w/no more than 1 unexcused absence; 95% average w/no more than 2 unexcused absences.
- If we increase attendance by 1%, AISD will realize \$5 million. Focus on attendance campaign and get the message out. Create an incentive program to get teachers to work every day. South by Southwest brings in \$130 million and Austin City Limits brings in a lot of money. Where is the benefit to AISD? The District should have a discussion with the city about benefitting from these events.

FACILITIES

- Please consider the East Austin Prep Academy Lease Proposal of Eastside Memorial campus. Save \$8 million per year by leasing to EA Prep Academy and use moneys to keep our elementary schools open. This is a good way to keep Eastside Memorial open for East Austin.

ACADEMIC PROGRAMS

- Foreign language – Please don't limit our children to one or two choices. My children all take Spanish, but it is certainly not for everyone!
- Concerned about the 24:1 ratio for Special Ed/Autism students in full inclusion. Sp. Ed. Allocations are determined at the Central Office level and are driven by the need of the needs of student. 24:1 is for regular education, not Special Ed. Concerned about Occupational Therapists and the students they support. With budget cuts, they have to serve kids in 14 different schools.
- The German Program at Gorzycki MS and Bowie HS is highly successful. One teacher can keep this program alive at both schools. We (the parents and students) would like to do everything we can to try to save the German program, and are willing to work on solutions. Whom can we meet with and work with to achieve this goal?
- Concerned about the way budget cuts to foreign languages has been implemented. Options can include sharing teachers; also, do not eliminate award winning programs and maintain options for multiple languages.

MISCELLANEOUS

- Please do not request the federal government to pass legislation to opt out of Social Security. The state legislature is threatening to restructure/destroy the Teacher Retirement System and this will further de-stabilize the security of your employees.
- How did we get in this (financial) situation? Give us some directive to fight the legislature.
- Delete the budget line item on page 6, the historical property exemption.
- I have been asked by Linux against poverty to describe the money-saving and educational value of Linux and Free and Open-Source Software.
- Please, please, AISD, work on transfers. I see full schools to the West and weaker, lower capacity schools to the east. Let's slow down transfers, build up and improve a neighborhood school to keep local students there. Over time, transfers will start to drain a school and is a drain on the overall system. It seems that there has got to be a better way.