

# AUSTIN INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT

## Superintendent Search

### Survey and Stakeholder Meetings Report

#### October, 2008

**Overview:** The Board of Trustees of the Austin Independent School District in its search for a new superintendent sought input from interested members of the school community and the community at large through a series of small group meetings, interviews, forums and a survey. From mid-September through early October, the search consultants conducted forty seven (47) small group meetings and interviews and twelve (12) community forums, involving more than 460 people. The survey and the working draft of the position profile were distributed to the stakeholders at the meetings/interviews and forums and made available on the District's web site. The profile and survey were in both English and Spanish. The 489 responses to the survey included those from parents, grandparents and guardians of children in the district (31%); employees of the district, including teachers, principals, district-level administrators and support staff (33%); students in the district (5%); concerned members of the community, including business persons and residents who are active in a number of community-based organizations (31%) and Spanish-speaking constituents (20% of the total) who were predominately parents, grandparents or guardians of children in the school district.

The purpose of the survey was to gather information from respondents about the:

1. Greatest strengths of the Austin Independent School District
2. Most pressing concerns about the district
3. Most important issues the new superintendent needs to address
4. Most important characteristics of the next superintendent
5. Strategies for supporting the Board in hiring the best superintendent
6. Suggested questions for the Board to ask during candidate interviews
7. Other comments

**Survey** – A summary of the results of the survey is outlined below.

- 1. Greatest Strengths:** The question was open-ended: “Please think about what you consider the strengths of the Austin Independent School District. What are the words or phrases that come to mind when you think of the three greatest strengths?”

Overall, responses reflected dedication to and caring about the diverse district and its students. Specific examples included:

- Diversity of the community and student population
- Dedicated, committed, caring and loyal teachers, principals and support staff

- Strong support from parents and from the community; good community resources available to schools
- Strong tradition of high standards and excellence to build upon
- Current direction of Board to improve the district; strong Board
- Good nucleus of quality schools and programs to build upon
- Good potential for partnerships with community

The prevailing strengths cited by parents, grandparents and guardians were:

- Many excellent, dedicated teachers and principals committed to quality instruction
- Community pride in and support of the schools; strong tradition for excellence
- Diverse population in the schools and community
- Committed parents wanting the best for their children
- Many opportunities for advanced learning and other excellent programs
- Highly intelligent, educated and open-minded community
- Great potential for partnerships with many socially and ecologically-aware organizations and with higher learning institutions
- Great transportation system for students
- Good Board, dedicated to doing best for kids
- Appreciation of the role health plays in student success in schools

In review of comments from employees, which included teachers, principals, district-level administrators and support staff, the greatest strengths were:

- Professional, hardworking, dedicated, reliable, talented, competent teachers, principals and support staff who care about students and put them first
- Great students from a diverse population
- Strong parental and community support for schools; tradition of high standards
- Quality programs meeting the needs of students throughout the district, including excellent gifted programs.
- United, dedicated employees who are open to change
- Wealth of community resources to draw upon
- Focus on improvement and quality
- Good Board

In review of comments from students, the greatest strengths were:

- Diversity of student body
- Technology partnerships with business; good computers
- Great TAKS scores
- Good healthcare provided by schools
- Caring teachers and principals
- Good sports programs

Responses from the community and others affiliated with various organizations echoed those expressed by parents, staff and students, including:

- Dynamic, growing and diverse community
- Strong, functional and forward-thinking district with qualified and caring staff
- Proximity to universities and technical college campuses
- Outstanding magnet programs; excellent fine arts programs
- Broad public support of district
- Access to community resources and partnerships; great tax base
- Community that values education, health and diversity

**2. Greatest Concerns:** Again, the question was open-ended. “Now, think about the concerns you have about the school district. What are the words or phrases that come to mind when you think of the three most pressing concerns?”

Overall, respondents cited the following pressing concerns:

- Inadequate funding from the state; need for change in the funding formula
- Excessive emphasis on testing and test scores
- High drop-out rate
- Overcrowding in schools; class sizes too large
- Inequities in achievement and distribution of resources across the district
- Too many low-performing schools; closing of those schools

The prevailing concerns often cited by parents, grandparents and guardians were:

- Slow recognition to embrace and utilize the strengths of a diverse population and of the shifting demographics
- Inadequate facility planning for population growth
- Too much testing
- Unequal distribution of resources across the district
- Inadequate bilingual/ESL programs
- Under-funding of special education classes; unfair placements; lack of responsiveness to parents and their needs
- Overcrowding in schools; class sizes too high
- Need to improve school lunch program/food services
- Too many under-performing schools and drop-outs; closing of more schools

In review of comments from employees, which included teachers, principals, district-level administrators and support staff, the primary concerns were:

- Classes too large; teacher-student ratio too high
- Large number of “out-of-control” students
- Lack of counseling and support for students
- Large number of principals and teachers leaving the district every year
- Too much testing; too focused on test scores; administration focused more on data than students
- Insufficient number of bilingual teachers and support staff
- Inconsistency of program and service delivery across the district

- Inadequate professional development opportunities
- Not enough support at school level from central administration

In review of comments from students, the primary concerns were:

- Lack of sufficient help in learning/improving reading and writing
- Lack of sufficient help with special education students
- Exaggerated emphasis on standardized tests
- High drop-out rate
- Too many bullies in schools
- Need for improved school lunches
- Perceived segregation in the schools

Feedback on concerns from the community and others affiliated with various organizations stated the following concerns:

- Lack of teacher accountability for academic results
- Need for more collaborative partnerships with community
- High drop-out rate; too many low-performing schools
- Disparity and inequality of educational opportunities; need to bring all students up to an acceptable level of learning
- Recruitment and retention of talented teachers and administrators; need to prevent loss of good teachers and principals to surrounding school districts
- Inadequate funding; too many budget cuts
- Need to continue fine arts programs and extra curricular activities

**3. Issues:** This question identified specific issues and asked respondents to identify four top issues from the list or from their own observations. The issues most often cited were:

- (78 %) Recruiting, supporting and retaining a cadre of talented, high-performing principals, instructional leaders/classroom teachers and support staff
- (72 %) Raising academic achievement for all students
- (70 %) Meeting needs of diverse population
- (69%) Ensuring adequate school funding
- (68%) Eliminating the achievement gaps
- (65%) Building a stronger relationship between parent and teachers and school staff
- (62%) Developing a strong working relationship between the school district leadership and teachers/staff

Additional issues were written in by several responding groups. The list below reflects the comments mentioned the most:

- Expecting every child to graduate college ready

- Providing strong instructional support for teachers and principals through strong professional development that is teacher-driven and Level III research-based
- Providing equity for all campuses, especially Title I campuses
- Facilitating the development of plans for the Bilingual/ESL Department and the Special Education Department
- Ensuring appropriate advocacy, commitment and accountability for early childhood education
- Addressing a disparity in the provision of resources at elementary and secondary levels, and between newer and older schools
- Utilizing school personnel (such as counselors) appropriately
- Providing additional IT support and training; especially for teachers at all levels to utilize computers within content areas.
- Possessing awareness of and skill in navigating the highly-charged political atmosphere of Austin

#### **4. Most Important Characteristics of the Next Superintendent:**

This section provided a list of important characteristics of the future superintendent. Respondents were asked to rate each on a four-point scale. The attributes cited and in priority order were:

- (76%) Deep personal commitment to public education and conviction all children can learn
- (65%) Strong record in motivating teachers, administrators and other staff
- (64%) Demonstrated experience in working with culturally-diverse populations
- (62%) Ability to advocate for adequate school funding
- (53%) Strong interpersonal communication and political skills
- (53%) Up-to-date knowledge of educational reform, best practices and improvement strategies under state and federal accountability systems
- (52%) Ability to inspire public confidence
- (52%) Proven track record in improving student achievement
- (50%) Experience in hiring highly qualified staff
- (50%) Experience in developing an effective, high performing team
- (45%) Experience in developing and enhancing leadership among school principals
- (42%) Experience in turning around low-performing schools
- (41%) Experience driving major institutional change in a large organization
- (40%) Experience and ability to work with a Board of Trustees
- (39%) Strong track record in building partnerships and strategic alliances
- (30%) A demonstrated record of fiscal responsibility and data-driven decision-making
- (19%) Experience in working with employee associations
- (18%) Experience in facilities planning and management

**5. How can you and the community support the Board of Trustees in hiring the best superintendent possible for the school district?**

Respondents had many ideas and felt optimistic and positive about the process:

- Attend public forums and provide feedback
- Support the board on its selection as they are well-suited to selecting the best candidate
- Continue to communicate our priorities to the Board, encourage discussion and communication among a wide-range of citizens
- Provide neighborhood contacts and host meetings with neighborhood leaders
- Complete the superintendent search survey
- Adequately fund the hiring process
- Adequately fund the new superintendent's improvement plan
- Involve political movers and shakers
- Have Board describe how the community can assist in demonstrating the importance of the region, taxpayers and staff to the district
- Volunteer to assist the Board and new superintendent
- Consider the needs of the whole community when Board makes the decision; pay attention to the opinions of representatives from those communities; families without access to technology or those in low-literacy or non-English speaking households
- Establish teacher/principal recognition programs
- Show visible support of the district within the community
- Engage the community through the many organizations that represent the community; Austin Neighborhoods Council
- Support the tax increase initiative.
- Have criteria that ensures the next superintendent open to public involvement
- Reverse the question to read: "How can the Board of Trustees support the community and hire the best superintendent possible?"
- Learn more about the candidates and by meeting and hearing what the next superintendent is going to focus on and how they will implement change in the Austin ISD.

**6. Do you have any questions that you want the Board of Trustees to ask candidates during the interviews?**

- Why do you want this job...why Austin?
- How does your ethnic or cultural background influence your view of how to best educate our children?
- How can you support the unions and Board members to work together for all children?
- What agreements can the Board and Superintendent have to model protocols and respect for the rest of the organization.
- What steps can you take to increase the confidence level of the community and bring back segments of the lost middle class to our public school district?

- With student success being the goal, how will you encourage teachers and administrators to work more cooperatively with parents as a team?
- What experience have you had in addressing the academic and social needs of students of poverty?
- What data do you share that demonstrates your ability to eliminate low performing schools?
- What is your philosophy on public/parent involvement and how do you plan to get input and use the resources of the public and parents?
- How would you determine the make up of the district leadership team and their roles and responsibilities in order to access personnel talent that are beneficial to the district's mission?
- How will you balance the focus between low performing schools and high performing schools? Will the low performing schools get all of the attention/resources because they are on fire?
- Since the budget is not unlimited, are you prepared to prioritize money allocations to best benefit the children and to evaluate current programs/courses and combine similar ones under a single budget?
- Would you be willing to fight political and/or union representatives to help the students?
- What are your plans for closing the achievement gaps and increasing graduation rates?
- What knowledge do you have of career technology classes? How would you update or address the lack of technology in the district?
- What are your long term goals for the district?
- How can you make a difference in our school system?
- How will parents be involved in decision-making in schools?
- What do you feel can be done to increase academic achievement in our high schools?
- How will you ensure all teachers and administration focus on literacy throughout all schools and grade levels?
- What is your plan to improve graduation rates?
- What is your record of managing a majority Hispanic school district?
- How can we provide a more diverse teaching staff?
- How will you support the teachers in giving the resources (books, materials, and training) to successfully reach students?
- How will you meet AYP with special education students?
- How can you improve elementary reading skills?
- How can you motivate teachers/administrators to improve while weeding out uncaring and low performing staff?
- How would you handle a situation where a low performing school is forced to close?
- How do you feel about continuing support of the National Board candidate program?
- In what way will you communicate with parents and the community?
- To what degree will you communicate with the public?
- What is your stand on working with unionized teachers?

- What is your commitment to retaining highly qualified teachers and administrators?
- How will you solve the shortage of effective substitute teachers in our schools?
- How will you exhibit fairness, care and concern for all employees during these tough financial times?
- How do you propose to increase attendance and lower discipline issues with the current resources?
- How can you increase the amount of funding for our schools?
- How will you motivate teachers?
- How will you hold parents accountable for discipline?
- How will you create a peaceful learning environment for all?
- Where do you see AISD in five years?
- What is your timeline for change?
- Define successful growth in test scores, attendance rates, and graduation rates and decreased drop out rates.
- What is your philosophy of leadership?
- Have you ever taught in a classroom?
- Do you think teachers/administrators should be compensated based on student performance?
- How committed are you to making AISD a stable, sensible entity that serves our families?
- How interested are you in becoming a part of our community?
- What would you do to address the constant interruptions of the “educational flow” currently happening in our classrooms?
- How do you use data-driven decision making?
- How have you supported teachers in their pursuit of excellence for students?
- How do you plan to address state funding inadequacies and advocate on behalf of AISD?

**7. Other Comments:** Respondents had the following comments:

- Find someone who can inspire confidence in the public and who can generate money for new schools and better pay for teachers
- Make sure the new superintendent has strong interpersonal skills and encourages strength-based leadership.
- Find someone who is creative, open-minded and willing to take risks in order to drive change.
- Will need to address the fact that the schools are woefully under-funded, offer poor food and not enough challenge.
- Must be able to communicate well with staff and community members to gain support and work productively with the Board.
- Find an articulate and dependable person who will be a highly visible and easily approachable leader
- Look for someone who is an open-minded, inclusive and a democratic decision-maker

- Find an experienced person with a proven record of success in diverse urban districts
- Find a person who will be a team member and will provide an environment that has the goal of delivering the best education to ALL of our children.
- Given the fact that Austin ISD is majority Hispanic, find someone who is Hispanic or has a strong background working with Hispanic communities.

### **Small Group Meetings, Interviews and Community Forums**

From September 16-October 16, 2008, forty seven (47) small group meetings and interviews and twelve (12) community forums were conducted, involving more than 460 people with representatives from the superintendent’s staff, district administrators, teachers, principals, support staff, parents and parent groups, social service agencies and non-profit groups, advocacy groups, employee associations, religious and community leaders, elected officials, chambers, business and foundation groups, among others. The forums were held in school and community-based facilities to reach out to the district’s stakeholders.

The working draft of the position profile and the survey were used at the small group meetings and forums, serving as the “agenda” for the meetings. People in attendance were asked to comment on the profile and on at least three questions on the survey. After an analysis of the comments, the following summarizes the most frequently made comments:

#### **1. What are the words or phrases that come to mind when you think of the three greatest strengths of the school district?**

- Diversity of students, staff and community
- Close-knit community with strong traditions, willing to support education
- Business community’s willingness and cooperation to work with the district in partnerships and support of initiatives and referenda
- Quality, dedication and effectiveness of many staff
- Committed and concerned parents who are interested in their children’s education
- Committed employee associations open to change and innovation
- Good access to community resources and foundation support
- Many staff members who demonstrate a long term commitment to the school district and to the community
- Excellent universities, colleges and community college system; good partnerships in place
- Professional, hardworking, dedicated, reliable, talented, competent teachers, principals and support staff who care about students and put them first
- Great slogan, “Keep Austin Weird”
- Growing, dynamic city with great people
- Good variety of programs offered to the students; good advanced placement courses, IB programs, magnet schools that are still effective
- Long tenure of current superintendent a big plus

- Strong neighborhood associations to support schools
- Recognition of the strong connection between the health needs of students and their academic achievement
- Supportive Board of Trustees doing what is best for kids
- Strong faith community with churches/temples teaming up with schools
- Strong tradition of high standards and high expectations to build upon
- Committed foundation community willing to support innovation and reform efforts

**2. What are the words or phrases that come to mind when you think of the three most pressing concerns?**

- No facilities master plan since 1996; no collaborative planning with city, region or local citizens and groups for future growth of district
- Need to build more collaborative relationships and foster new partnerships; need for district staff to listen more to parents and community
- Need to make principals, teachers and other staff a part of the “team;” more support for principals and schools; more collaboration
- Need for more proactive planning to deal with shifting demographics and growth patterns of the district
- Need for the superintendent to be out in all parts of the Austin community building relationships; especially in East Austin
- Need for the district and its many constituencies/stakeholders to be on the same page and work collaboratively for the best interest of students
- Student behavior and disciplinary practices must improve and be consistent; too many out-of-control students
- High drop-out rates
- Board meetings that last too long with tedious detail; need for a better Board decision-making process
- Current special education program not in compliance with state or federal standards and accountability; unfair and inconsistent placements; underfunding
- Need for better and more technology in the classrooms; more technology support people needed to help schools
- Lack of counseling and support for students
- Need for a consistent curriculum and set of programs; can’t keep shifting
- Large number of principals and teachers leaving the district every year
- Need for better “real time” data to drive decisions
- Inadequate funding from the State; Robin Hood has to go!!
- Divide between East and West Austin hurting district and community
- Inconsistency and inequality of program and service delivery across the district
- Excessive testing and over reliance on test scores
- Under-performing schools that will be slated for closure; need more proactive planning to re-organize or re-constitute schools

### 3. What are the qualities and characteristics necessary in the new superintendent?

- Good communicator; someone who guides, inspires, oversees and directs the course of action and keeps stakeholders informed
- Someone who is highly visible in schools and community, accessible and easily approachable
- Someone who believes in educating each and every child
- A practitioner; someone who has been a teacher, principal, central office administrator and/or K-12 superintendent
- Person who will make the Austin area his or her home
- Someone who is culturally-competent
- Someone who is fiscally-responsible; utilizing resources effectively, efficiently and transparently
- Someone with a highly collaborative management style
- A delegator who holds others accountable for results
- A better listener than talker
- Leader who understands diversity and is skilled at working with students, teachers and parents from diverse backgrounds
- Someone with great fortitude, diplomatic, with outstanding collaboration skills
- A collaborator who involves staff and the school community in decision-making and priority-setting
- Person who can be “the face of the school district”
- Honest person who has true appreciation for teachers and their value to students and community
- Person who is sincere, dependable and flexible
- Leader who has high expectations for staff, students, parents and all employees in the district
- Someone who values parent participation and input
- Leader who supports and understands diversity within the staff and students
- Someone who will be “very” involved with students and will make regular school and classroom visitations
- High energy; enthusiastic, optimistic and a proven track record
- Charismatic; strong role model
- Morale builder and a consensus builder
- Risk taker who is successful professionally and is committed to stay
- Someone who understands special education; can be accountable for it and be responsive to parents of special needs children
- Someone who is willing to be visible in and engaged in the community and is “community-minded,” who helps us “Keep Austin Weird”
- Business person; a person who believes each child can learn
- Person who is persistent and consistent
- Person who can bring East and West Austin together as one district; not two
- Someone who is relational, not transactional
- Person who understands employee associations and can productively work with the leadership and be adept in labor relations

- Someone who is “politically-savvy” and who is able to communicate with business groups, elected officials at local and state levels, university/college leaders, community leaders and organizations and parents
- Someone who has experiences with high-need students in high-need schools
- Someone who will bring transparency to decision-making
- Someone who can relate to people of all walks of life, diverse groups and can deal with the media
- Leader who is creative, with the ability “to step outside of the box and create the new box”

Prepared by PROACT Search, Inc., Milwaukee, Wisconsin – October, 2008.