

2018 AISD Trustee Candidate Forum

sponsored by

The Liberal Arts and Science Academy Student Council

The Parents and Friends of the Liberal Arts and Science Academy

The Kealing Middle School Magnet Advisory Group

And

The Fulmore Middle School PTA

Candidate Written Responses

October 21st, 2018

Five of the nine seats on the Austin Independent School District school board are up for general election on Nov. 6, 2018.

- District 1 incumbent Edmund (Ted) Gordon and newcomer LaTisha Anderson
- District 4 newcomers Kristin Ashy and Zachary Price
- District 6 incumbent Geronimo Rodriguez Jr., running for re-election unopposed.
- District 7 incumbent Yasmin Wagner, running for re-election unopposed.
- District 9 newcomers, Sam Russo, Arati Singh, and Carmen Tilton

A runoff election will be held on December 11, 2018, if no candidate wins a majority of votes cast in the general election.

We are very fortunate to have these candidates attend our forum! However, we are limited in how many questions we can ask within a reasonable time frame.

In order to provide the most information to our community, we requested all candidates provide a brief biography and answer two questions. The following are their responses.

Written Questions

Biography. Please include a brief bio that we can include with the written questions below to be distributed at the forum to all attendees.

Question 1. AISD's Advanced Academic Programs strengthen and support the district by attracting and keeping students in the district, by allowing specialized classes, such as Multivariable Calculus, that would be impossible at other schools and by bringing recognition to AISD on the local, state and national level. As a board member, how will you support AISD's magnet programs? What do you believe is the role of magnet programs in the district?

Question 2.

With a current budget deficit of \$30 million dollars, in what areas do you prioritize funding?

Please note: All candidates were invited to participate. We did not receive submissions from LaTisha Anderson, Geronimo Rodriguez, Jr., and Yasmin Wagner. If additional submissions are received, they will be made available on our website: <http://aisdmagnetforum.pflasa.org> for public viewing.

Trustee District 1 – Ted Gordon

Edmund T. Gordon has resided in District 1 for almost 30 years. His children attended AISD schools including one who is a graduate of the LBJ Science Academy. His wife is a retired AISD bilingual elementary special education teacher. Gordon served as a PTA president and in a number of other capacities with AISD. He is currently District 1 Trustee. He is a faculty member of the University of Texas at Austin where he currently serves as Vice Provost.

Question 1

I believe that access to a quality education, one that facilitates the development of each person's intellect and/or artistry to the extent of their capability and desire, is a human right. As such our school district must provide the opportunity for rigorous education to all those students who are interested and able. This means that all students need to be afforded access to a sound educational foundation and that the district must have a sufficient number of rigorous programs accessible to its student population. The district should develop a robust number of such programs with a variety of specialties and distribute them around the district to make them accessible. The role of magnet programs is to help facilitate this mandate.

I will support AISD's magnet programs by being a strong advocate for the creation of a medical magnet at LBJ that is accessible to the students of Austin's Northeast quadrant and by insisting on the diversity of the student and staff at all magnet programs.

Question 2

The priority for both human and financial resources in our district should be academic achievement and particularly the reduction of achievement disparities. Administrative personnel and facilities should have the lowest priorities for funding. The budget should be rethought and reorganized to strictly reflect the priorities of the district with highest priorities fully funded and lowest priorities de-funded.

Trustee District 4 – Kristin Ashy

As a certified teacher, mother of two (one of whom is a student at LASA), past PTA

President of two schools, and member of the Facilities and Bond Planning Advisory Committee for the last three years, I have long been invested and involved in public education. As a trustee, I have four issues on which I would like to focus: 1) Making mindful budget cuts to the address the \$30 million shortfall while maintaining the high-quality and variety of academic programming available to students and families, 2) Providing Full-Day Pre-K to all AISD students and families which I believe will have a significant impact on student outcomes, 3) Focusing on quality community engagement with families and taxpayers that explains how their previous feedback informed District decisions, and 4) Fulfilling the promise of the Facility Master Plan to provide modernized learning spaces for all schools within AISD.

Question 1

Magnet programs provide a more rigorous and/or challenging curriculum to our high-performing students within the district. At a time when our district commits itself to “Achieve excellence by delivering a high-quality education to every student,” magnet schools provide that opportunity to our students working above grade level. I support magnet schools in furthering this commitment to our students and families.

Question 2

The current financial position of Austin ISD is not an easy one any way you look at it.

The district has been making budget cuts for more than five years and has trimmed all the “low hanging fruit” it can find. I will work to make mindful decisions that take into consideration possible unintended consequences of potential cuts. I also believe it is a priority to maintain the high-quality and variety of academic programming available to students and families.

Trustee District 4 – Zachary Price

Zachary Price, a candidate for AISD School Board in District 4, is an education advocate who has worked for Communities in Schools and Austin Partners In Education. Price started his own nonprofit group, The Language Campaign, which helps English as a Second Language students in AISD high schools. A student at The University of Texas, Price has also worked for Texas Sen. Kirk Watson and Austin Mayor Steve Adler. The 20-year-old advocate served as president of TX Votes, a nonpartisan organization that’s registered thousands of voters and helped increase the number of polling places at the University of Texas.

Question 1

One of the greatest strengths we have as a district is the ability to specialize curriculum for students with different strengths. I grew up attending magnet schools and know how beneficial they can be as racially and socioeconomically diverse centers for learning. The role of magnet schools in AISD is to advance the level of learning and create opportunities for accelerated learning for students from every part of Austin. Without the help of magnet schools, we wouldn’t do nearly as good a job of preparing our students for college and advanced careers right out of high school.

Question 2

It’s important to be clear why we have a budget deficit in the first place – our state legislature refuses to take its share of the burden and adequately fund our public schools. We need a school board that will stand up to Dan Patrick and the Texas Senate and tell them to do their job. At the same time, we have some tough decisions to make as a district. The most important thing is making sure we’re adequately funding the things most central to the learning process – resources for students and teachers. I will add that I think mental health funding absolutely must be a priority for our district. When the school board considers cutting campus mental health centers but maintains dozens of six-figure administrative salaries, we aren’t prioritizing the needs of the students and teachers in our classrooms.

Trustee At-Large Position 9 – Sam Russo

Serving AISD for 15 years through APIE and CIS as a mentor, tutor, and liaison for campus projects and on our CAC and the DAC (Advisory Committees). The last 12 years I've worked with children and youth across greater Austin to see students graduate life ready. I am part of a network that is involved with 10 local school districts through education connection and worked on campaigns with over 600 Austin area non-profits to address community barriers. I have a B.S. in communication studies from UT and a Masters in leadership with certifications in business and mediation. My focus is customer service, climate, and consistency.

Question 1

As noted, magnet programs play a vital role in attracting and retaining students and differentiating AISD locally and nationally. Magnet programs aid in student engagement as students are able to advance in more specified areas of interest which in turn positively impacts enrollment and school climate. As trustee, I will work to promote consistency in our top programming which includes equitable access for all students. Equitable access means that all students not only have transportation to the top programs and schools but also awareness of those opportunities.

Awareness begins prior to elementary as AISD strategically markets to the community and should continue in elementary as a part of providing good customer service to all stakeholders within the district. As a substitute teacher at LASA and a mentor to former graduates, I have seen first hand the success and importance of the magnet school program.

Question 2

As trustee, I would analyze and utilize the extensive research offered by our districts budget stabilization committee, outside stakeholder's input, and recommendations from the superintendent regarding all major budgetary priorities. Programs such as dual language, full day pre-k, and career & technology education have proven ROI's and would remain within my top priorities for programming. Each of these programs fit into the overall priority of improving literacy with accountability on reading readiness and seeing achievement gaps decline. My 3 C's set me apart from my opponents and they reflect my personal commitment to ensure every recommendation improves Customer service, Climate, and Consistency across the district.

Budget priorities regarding customer service means developing and implementing innovative systems and technology that ensure the district is more effective at communicating programs, changes, and information that directly impact all stakeholders. Budget priorities regarding climate mean implementing systems and tools that ensure the health and safety of all students. Budget priorities regarding consistency means ensuring equity in choice and accessibility of the districts top programming.

Trustee At-Large Position 9 – Arati Singh

Every child deserves access to an excellent education. Let's focus on the factors that give us the most bang for our buck and ensure equity. I am a/n:

- former (bilingual) teacher
- STEM and college access program evaluator
- PTA honorary life member for my legislative advocacy work
- LGBTQ+ ally
- inventor with 5 technology patents to my name

As the only progressive candidate who is an AISD parent, I'll hit the ground running! I will focus on equity, teachers, whole child, workforce innovation, and governance. I've earned every organizational endorsement in town, including Austin Kids First, Education Austin, and every Democratic club.

Question 1

I will support magnet programs and schools and schools/programs of choice by:

- Communicating to the public how these specialized programs help AISD financially because they attract and keep families in AISD, which increases our funding;
- Advocating that we continue providing transportation for magnet programs;
- Supporting efforts to expand the applicant pool to include more low-income, African-American, and Hispanic students; and
- Encouraging partnerships with local industry and foundations to supplement funding.

We live in a large diverse city with a wide range of students. It is important to offer unique programming that aligns with student interests and workforce needs not only for their own benefit, but for the economic benefit of the district, as these programs keep AISD students out of charter and private schools.

Question 2

I prioritize funding programs that:

- Promote equity
- Improve working conditions for teachers
- Address the whole child/social emotional learning
- Address career readiness and provide a viable pathway out of poverty
- Have a high return on academic investment, like full-day Pre-K, magnet programs, and dual language.

Trustee At-Large Position 9 – Carmen Tilton

I am a sixth generation Tejana, mother of a two-year-old, and former legislative policy analyst for Rep. Joaquin Castro and Sen. Wendy Davis. I believe a public education system should value all students and commit to educating the whole child. I am running for the Austin ISD Board of Trustees because I believe Austin ISD ought to reflect the progressive ideals of the generous community which supports it. With a background in public school finance, I bring a clear vision for stabilizing the district's finances, a passion for collaboration, and a desire for a school district which reflects Austin's beautiful diversity.

Question 1

I would support Austin ISD's magnet programs by working with parents, educators, and students at these campuses to identify challenges and develop strategies to address the program's needs. Education is constantly changing and evolving, and the district's magnet programs need to be provided the opportunities to grow and change as well.

Magnet programs provide families with the opportunity to create individualized educational experiences for their students without sacrificing the many, many benefits of attending city's public schools. They help students to pursue their passions, stay engaged in their academic journeys, and push students to grow academically. I see these programs as key to improving Austin's declining enrollment, but the school board needs to ensure that all students and families within the district have functional access to these programs. Supporting magnet programming must include committing to supporting student transportation, application assistance, early academic preparation, and parent outreach/communication. I want our magnet programs to thrive, and I want them to reflect the entire Austin community.

Question 2

My top three priorities are: establishing solid academic foundations for all students, supporting our communities through expansive education environments, and providing educators and staff with opportunities for career development. Early education supports, such as pre-K, specialized literacy interventions, and two-way dual language, should be available to every student in Austin. These early investments help to keep students from falling behind their peers, and they are integral to bringing families with young children back into the district. Our schools are more than buildings for academic studies; they are community hubs. I support the district's partnerships with the business, higher education, local government, non-profit, and health care communities to provide wraparound services to communities and families. Utilizing school campuses throughout the calendar year and beyond the school day makes it possible for other partners to provide families with the kinds of supports they need to withstand temporary crises and improve their long-term trajectories. Austin ISD owes its talented educators and administrators the opportunity to develop, grow, and improve in their fields. Professional stagnation breeds discontent and frustration. Developing good campus leaders and effective administrators requires a willingness to invest in people to help them to develop in their careers.