

**Facing the Future:
Key Recommendations for
Rebuilding Trust in AISD**

**Report to the
Community Committee on Neighborhoods and Schools**

**Submitted by Liveable City
October 31, 2007**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The pressures on the Austin Independent School District (AISD) at this time are enormous: a growing population of high-needs students, lack of adequate public funding, unchecked new development that plays havoc with traditional enrollment predictions, and punitive state and federal mandates that often disregard the most basic realities of teaching and learning. In the face of such pressures, it is easy to fall into a desperate shell game, lurching from one crisis to the next. But it is now, when a defining vision may seem an unaffordable luxury, that we most need a solid foundation that reflects our core values as a community. Schools are the heart of our community and *every* child deserves a challenging, enriching education - we cannot risk losing sight of these basic tenets.

The Community Committee on Neighborhoods and Schools (CCNS) has been charged with creating process and policy recommendations for the AISD Board of Trustees about how best to deal with major decisions that affect our public schools, such as those triggered by failing TAKS scores or significant under- or over-enrollment. Liveable City submits this report to the committee as a synthesis of information gained during ongoing conversations with the community and our own personal experiences as parents, professionals and volunteers in AISD. The report provides a discussion of policy and process issues related to major decisions affecting Austin's public schools and offers the following proposed action items for AISD.

Policy Action Items (1-5)

1. Adopt a formal public policy that commits AISD to three fundamental goals as a foundation for decision-making:
 - To provide an equitable, enriched and challenging education for all of Austin's children;
 - To engage the community to ensure a true public voice in important decisions affecting our public schools; and
 - To act as a responsible partner in community planning by acknowledging the crucial role schools play in shaping our city, committing to reinvestment in our vital central city schools and recognizing that neighborhood schools should only be closed as an extreme last resort after all other options have been exhausted.
2. Commit to changing AISD's institutional culture to rebuild trust with the community, including a stated policy that district staff and elected representatives will communicate fully with community members by providing same information available to district decision-makers.
3. Re-evaluate standardized testing policies under district control, such as benchmarks and field testing, and partner with the community to work for positive change in state and national accountability testing systems.
4. Make middle school improvement an immediate priority, with an emphasis on strong community involvement, giving first priority to low-performing schools.
5. Support and empower AISD faculty and administrators in identifying and sharing effective, innovative approaches to teaching and learning, giving strongest consideration to the recommendations of those who are most actively involved in our classrooms.

Process Action Items (6-11)

6. Adopt an early notice policy to immediately communicate with families and school communities at first sign of trouble, such as a school failing to make Adequate Yearly Progress or experiencing significant over- or under-enrollment.
7. Develop a clearly-worded notice letter, including a distinctive banner on the envelope and letterhead designed to alert the recipient to the seriousness of the problem. The notice letter should state the nature of problem, explain any legal rights families may have, and set a date, time and location for the first community meeting on this issue.
8. Develop a list of key community partners to also receive the above-described early notice letter when a school is in trouble or facing major change.
9. Develop a clear time-line for decisions involving schools, with a minimum of three years for major decisions, noting that severe over-enrollment may require swifter action. Sufficient time must be allowed to work with the community to develop and consider alternatives, again recognizing that neighborhood schools should only be closed as an extreme last resort after all other options have been exhausted.
10. Identify clear lines of communication and accountability within AISD, particularly for issues concerning district employees, and provide this information annually to parents with their first-day packet. Information should provide appropriate steps for formally or informally appealing staff decisions, getting approval for proposed projects, seeking help with staff or leadership problems, and explaining the role and limitations of the district ombudsman.
11. Provide direct email communication between community and elected board officials.

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BACKGROUND

The pressures on the Austin Independent School District (AISD) at this time are enormous: a growing population of high-needs students, lack of adequate public funding, unchecked new development that plays havoc with traditional enrollment predictions, and punitive state and federal mandates that often disregard the most basic realities of teaching and learning. In the face of such pressures, it is easy to fall into a desperate shell game, lurching from one crisis to the next. But it is now, when a defining vision may seem an unaffordable luxury, that we most need a solid foundation that reflects our core values as a community. Schools are the heart of our community and *every* child deserves a challenging, enriching education - we cannot risk losing sight of these basic tenets.

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ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Liveable City presents the following issues and recommendations for consideration by the Community Committee on Neighborhoods and Schools. Issues are divided into two sections, one for policy and another for process, and are followed by a list of proposed actions items referencing each issue by number.

Policy Issues and Recommendations (1-8)

1. AISD SHOULD ADOPT A STRONG OVERARCHING POLICY THAT REFLECTS COMMUNITY VALUES AND PRIORITIES. Because of the continued challenges facing AISD, it is essential that we identify our core values as a community to provide a solid foundation for major decisions moving forward. Therefore, we strongly urge AISD to make a formal commitment to three fundamental goals:
 - To provide an equitable, enriched and challenging education for all of Austin's children;
 - To engage the community to ensure a true public voice in important decisions affecting our public schools; and

- To act as a responsible partner in community planning by acknowledging the crucial role schools play in shaping our city, committing to reinvestment in our vital central city schools and recognizing that neighborhood schools should only be closed as an extreme last resort after all other options have been exhausted.

With this solid framework in place, we can then begin to work together as a community to find solutions to the continuing challenges of educating our most precious natural resource – our kids.

2. **AISD SHOULD TAKE A LEAD ROLE IN RESPONSIBLE COMMUNITY PLANNING.** Few things drive the shape of our city more than the location and quality of its public schools. For this reason, it is critical that AISD recognize its responsibility and take an active role in future community planning. AISD's staff and board should build on existing partnerships with City of Austin staff, Planning Commission, City Council and other local governments to plan and maintain a community that is equitable, affordable and sustainable. Communications between city staff and AISD should be formalized to ensure that the district is regularly alerted to any project that will affect school enrollment. AISD staff must be encouraged to speak forthrightly at public hearings if a proposed project will place an undue burden on existing schools. The district should also be encouraged to give strong support to efforts to increase the availability of affordable housing for families and teachers, which will, in turn, ensure greater stability within our schools. Finally, AISD must recognize the importance of reinvesting in its older Central Austin schools as a key element in limiting suburban sprawl and in maintaining a healthy city core.
3. **AISD SHOULD PARTNER WITH COMMUNITY TO WORK FOR CHANGE IN ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEMS.** It is an open secret among parents, teachers and administrators that the current state accountability system is not working. In fact, as currently applied, it appears to be deadening the joy of learning for an entire generation and is driving some of our most talented educators out of the public school system. At the same time, many AISD families feel increasingly alienated by a district that claims to want parental involvement, while ignoring public input in favor of top-down directives. Current policies that require every school to march in lockstep, coupled with the overuse of standardized tests, are driving many middle-class and low-income families to consider private or charter schools as the only remaining sources for a creative, non-test-driven education. We strongly encourage the district to reevaluate testing mandates within its control, for example, field testing and benchmark tests, which many teachers report are upsetting to students, reduce class instruction time and do not provide useful information for teachers. We further encourage the Trustees to enlist community support - including that of AISD faculty and teacher organizations, as well as other like-minded Texas school boards - to work for much-needed legislative action at the state and federal levels. Our goal must be to create a more constructive, less punitive system that balances the need for accountability with the need to engage students in the joyful, creative process of learning.
4. **FOCUS ON MIDDLE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT SHOULD BE A PRIORITY.** It is widely acknowledged that the weakest link in the current AISD system is at the middle school level. AISD must immediately begin a serious focus on middle school improvement, with as much community involvement as possible. If there is insufficient funding for a district-wide middle school effort, the district should initially focus its resources on its low-performing schools.

5. **AISD SHOULD SUPPORT AND EMPOWER ITS FACULTY AND PRINCIPALS.** In the current AISD climate, teachers and principals routinely operate under intense pressure from numerous state and district mandates and often cite lack of support by the district for creative approaches to learning, even expressing fear of being discovered using innovative techniques. Sadly, many believe it is safer to avoid innovations that may call attention to their schools – even if it is positive attention for a creative new idea or an effective program. Teachers and principals sometimes cite the need to “fly under radar” with innovations that might otherwise serve as models for other schools. Many parents believe this stifling atmosphere creates an undesirable work climate and is at least partly responsible for AISD’s high turnover rate among talented faculty and administrators. Those who spend every day working and teaching in our schools have invaluable information to share and their ideas and recommendations should be given the strongest consideration. AISD should support and empower its faculty and administrators to identify and share innovative, creative and effective approaches to teaching and learning.
6. **AISD SHOULD ACTIVELY ENCOURAGE ONGOING COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT.** The district and its community partners should work together to actively encourage ongoing public involvement in our schools. As an example, leaders in the Webb Middle School area have recently created the Community School Alliance (CSA), focusing on the vertical team that includes Pickle and Brown Elementary schools, Webb Middle School and Reagan High School. The CSA meets monthly and is composed of school leaders and representatives of over two dozen community groups, neighborhood associations, churches and businesses. It is currently working to align communications and calendars between the four schools and is seeking grant funding for three pilot projects designed to strengthen and enrich educational opportunities for students. If successful, the CSA may provide a model to be replicated in other areas. Such programs would also benefit AISD by demonstrating compliance with Title I community and parent involvement requirements.
7. **AISD SHOULD RECOGNIZE THE IMPORTANCE OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS TO OUR COMMUNITY, INCLUDING THE VALUE OF SMALLER NEIGHBORHOOD SCHOOLS AND OF INDIVIDUAL SCHOOL CULTURES.** Many of Austin’s most heated public debates in recent years have been sparked by the threat of school closures in our close-in central city neighborhoods. The district should adopt a policy that formally recognizes the crucial role of our public schools in maintaining healthy neighborhoods and shaping the growth of our city, including a strong public commitment to maintaining, and reinvesting in, our vital central city schools. Neighborhood schools should not be closed, except as an extreme last resort, after an exhaustive process to identify alternatives to closure that includes strong involvement of community partners.
8. **AISD MUST CHANGE ITS INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE TO TRULY INVOLVE THE PUBLIC IN OUR PUBLIC SCHOOLS.** Regrettably, the relationship between AISD and the Austin community has been marked by past mistrust, at times becoming openly adversarial. Many feel the district administration views the public as a problem to be managed and is not interested in true public involvement in the policies and operations of our public school system. The district often appears to engage in self-protecting behavior, trying to enact major decisions quietly, apparently hoping that no one will notice in time to voice opposition. When the district does

engage in public process, this is often viewed cynically, as window-dressing to support decisions that have already made by the central administration. A good working relationship requires more than just developing a timeline or process for major school decisions; it requires a change in AISD's institutional culture. The AISD Trustees and central administration should make a genuine effort to dedicate themselves to open, collaborative decision-making with the public -- to demonstrate that they *are on the same side* as the community. We can accomplish much more by trusting each other and working together to provide an excellent education for all students. By changing an institutional culture from one of fear and secrecy to one that values *and listens* to its community, we all win.

Process Issues and Recommendations (9 – 16)

9. **DISTRICT SHOULD PROVIDE EARLY NOTICE OF PROBLEMS TO FAMILIES AND COMMUNITY.** Families and school communities often say that they were not notified in time to effectively address problems in their neighborhood schools. Notice to families and school communities should begin immediately when the district first identifies a problem, such as failing to make Adequate Yearly Progress or experiencing significant over- or under-enrollment. Notice should occur early enough to allow sufficient time for the community to take an active role in working with the district toward a positive solution.
10. **COMMUNICATIONS SHOULD BE CLEARLY WORDED AND DESIGNED TO ALERT THE RECIPIENT TO THE SERIOUSNESS OF THE PROBLEM.** In the first stage of a problem, AISD should immediately notify the affected school's staff and families, as well as identified community partners, with a clearly-worded letter, written at the 4th grade reading level, in both English and Spanish, with additional languages where needed. The letter and envelope should be designed to alert the recipient that this is an urgent communication, by using a red banner headline, for example. The body of the letter should clearly state the nature of the problem, any legal rights families may have, and the expected timeline and process for any changes or decisions. It should also set a date, time and location for a community meeting to discuss the issue.
11. **NOTICE OF SCHOOL PROBLEMS SHOULD ALSO BE SENT TO IDENTIFIED COMMUNITY PARTNERS.** The district should work with community leaders to develop a list of citywide partners who will also receive the above-described notice letter when a school is at risk. Such a list might include, but not be limited to, the following: the Austin City Council, Austin Planning Commission, Zoning and Platting Commission, Urban Transportation Commission, Austin Neighborhoods Council, Austin Interfaith Alliance, Education Austin, Liveable City, LULAC, NAACP, Urban League, Austin Area Interreligious Ministries, St. John's Regular Baptist Association, Austin Latin Ministerial Association, Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce, Capital City African American Chamber of Commerce, Greater Austin Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, Asian Chamber of Commerce, E3 Alliance, local media and others. The list of community partners should be reviewed periodically to ensure full representation for all sectors of the community.
12. **AISD REPRESENTATIVES SHOULD COMMUNICATE FULLY AND LISTEN RECEPTIVELY.** In all dealings with the community, district representatives, including staff and elected trustees, should be prepared to explain the facts about a situation with complete candor and

should explain fully any plans or long-term goals the district may have for the school. Information presented to the community should be the same information provided to the district's decision-makers, absent any legal restrictions. District representatives should be willing to listen and learn from the community at the first stage of a problem, not simply try to sell top-down decisions when it is too late for a discussion of real alternatives.

13. **AISD SHOULD DEVELOP A CLEAR TIMELINE FOR MAJOR DECISIONS.** In cases involving TAKS, state- and federally-mandated timelines for decisions already exist and these must be clearly communicated to affected schools and communities from the very first year a school fails to make Adequate Yearly Progress. If this information is conveyed through the Campus Advisory Council, the Council should be required to communicate this to the community immediately, in addition to the notice recommendations outlined above. In cases involving over- or under-enrollment, a similar timeline should be developed, allowing a minimum of three years for any major decisions or changes to a school. This timeline should include a well-defined process that allows for true public involvement and discussion, as well as a thorough exploration of alternatives.
14. **AISD SHOULD IDENTIFY CLEAR LINES FOR COMMUNICATIONS AND ACCOUNTABILITY WITHIN AISD.** Parents are often confused about how to deal with a problem at their child's school, particularly if it involves a staff member. At the start of each year, the district should provide parents with a clear flow chart, showing the appropriate steps for formally or informally appealing staff decisions, getting approval for proposed projects or seeking help with staff or leadership problems. This information should include contact information for the appropriate individuals and should be updated annually. Because the ombudsman does not deal with problems related to AISD employees, special care should be taken to provide specific information about the appropriate steps for parents experiencing problems with district personnel. Information should be available in English and Spanish, with additional languages if needed.
15. **AISD SHOULD CLEARLY DEFINE ROLE OF OMBUDSMAN.** Many parents do not understand the role of the district's ombudsman or the types of problems that the ombudsman may appropriately address. At the start of each school year, AISD should provide parents with information about the role of the district's ombudsman, including what kinds of issues the ombudsman does and does not handle. This information is currently available online, but is not included in the information guides distributed to parents. Information should be available in English and Spanish, with additional languages if needed.
16. **AISD SHOULD PROVIDE DIRECT COMMUNICATION BETWEEN COMMUNITY AND ELECTED SCHOOL BOARD REPRESENTATIVES.** The email address for elected AISD board representatives (trustees@austinisd.org) should be reconfigured to go directly to board representatives, without requiring a staff person to redirect these messages, as is currently the case. Direct distribution will prevent delays when staff is absent and will remove the current perception that some messages may be filtered, diverted or simply lost in transit. In addition, all incoming community communication should receive a response via e-mail, phone or mail in a timely fashion. At a minimum, the sender should receive a brief reply indicating the message has been received by its intended recipient.

ACTION ITEMS

Based on the issues explored in this report, Liveable City proposes the following action items, which it strongly urges AISD to consider for adoption. Each action item is followed by parentheses indicating, by number, the issues it is designed to address.

Policy Action Items (1-5)

1. Adopt a formal public policy that commits AISD to three fundamental goals as a foundation for decision-making:
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 - To act as a responsible partner in community planning by acknowledging the crucial role schools play in shaping our city, committing to reinvestment in our vital central city schools and recognizing that neighborhood schools should only be closed as an extreme last resort after all other options have been exhausted. (Issues: 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 8)
2. Commit to changing AISD’s institutional culture to rebuild trust with the community, including a stated policy that district staff and elected representatives will communicate fully with the public by providing same information available to district decision-makers. (Issues: 8, 12, 14, 16)
3. Re-evaluate standardized testing policies under district control, such as benchmark and field testing, and partner with the community to work for positive change in state and national accountability testing systems. (Issues: 3, 6)
4. Make middle school improvement an immediate priority, with an emphasis on strong community involvement, giving first priority to low-performing schools. (Issues: 4, 6, 7)
5. Support and empower AISD faculty and administrators in identifying and sharing effective, innovative approaches to teaching and learning, giving strongest consideration to the recommendations of those who are most actively involved in our classrooms. (Issues 3, 5).

Process Action Items (6-11)

6. Adopt an early notice policy to communicate with families and community partners at first sign of trouble, such as a school failing to make Adequate Yearly Progress or experiencing significant over- or under-enrollment. (Issues: 8, 9, 11)
7. Develop a clearly-worded notice letter, including a distinctive banner on the envelope and letterhead, designed to alert the recipient to the seriousness of the

- problem. The notice letter should state the nature of problem, explain any legal rights families may have, and set a date, time and location for the first community meeting on this issue. (Issues: 8, 9, 10, 11, 12)
8. Develop a list of key community partners to also receive the above-described early notice letter when a school is in trouble or facing major change. (Issues: 8, 11)
 9. Develop a clear time-line for decisions involving schools, with a minimum of three years for major decisions prompted by under-enrollment, noting that severe over-enrollment may require swifter action. Sufficient time must be allowed to work with the community to develop and consider alternatives, again recognizing that neighborhood schools should only be closed as an extreme last resort after all other options have been exhausted. (Issues: 8, 12, 13)
 10. Identify clear lines of communication and accountability within AISD, particularly for issues concerning district employees, and provide this information annually to parents with their first-day packet. Information should provide appropriate steps for formally or informally appealing staff decisions, getting approval for proposed projects, seeking help with staff or leadership problems, and explaining the role and limitations of the district ombudsman. (Issues: 8, 14, 15)
 11. Provide direct email communication between community members and elected board officials that does not require an intermediary staff person to forward communications. (Issues: 8, 16)

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