



**Austin ISD 2019 School Closures Proposal:**

# **Equity Analysis of Process, Principles & Practices**

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## AISD Board President Geronimo Rodriguez's Feb. 16, 2019, Equity Statement

The Austin ISD Board of Trustees is committed to seeing that all our students are nurtured in 21st-century learning spaces with high caliber educational offerings focused on student performance and well-being. During the coming months, the Board of Trustees will continue to work with the Superintendent to ensure we invest in our most important assets, our student's and their success.

An important part of our journey will be done through an equity lens and our working together to define what the word equity means to us as a district. We are committed to developing shared definitions and expectations of equity across Austin ISD consistent with our Board priorities, 1) student well-being and achievement/success, 2) Equity/needs of all students, 3) Teacher and employee well-being (financial, professional, physical, and mental), 4) Culture of respect/customer service, and 5) Fiscal stewardship and prioritization.

To that end and arising from these priorities, we have started conversations about the efficient and smart use of all AISD facilities. This will most likely include but is not limited to boundary changes, repurposing of facilities and school consolidations. We understand listening to our community will be essential and therefore, at the forefront of our intentions. We will work with the Superintendent to ensure the process is consistently applied across the district. Our goals are to have more students in modernized spaces sooner and benefiting from inspiring and future-ready educational programming. Our intention is to refine the process and timeline based on our community's needs.

Throughout the conversations, we will subscribe to the Mayor's Task Force on Institutional Racism & Systemic Inequities and the equity definition from the National Equity Project as we interrupt practices that negatively impact struggling students, especially if these struggles relate to a student's color, race, ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, sexual orientation or identification, national origin, language, religion, disability or any other protection under the law. To this end, we are excited to announce that the Superintendent will move forward with the hiring of an Equity Officer.

The following definition of equity from the National Equity Project will guide our transformational work: Equity is...

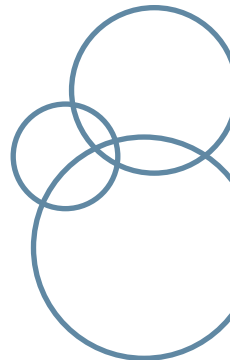
- Reducing the predictability of who succeeds and who fails
- Interrupting reproductive practices that negatively impact struggling students of color
- Cultivating the unique gifts and talents of every student

Our superintendent, Dr. Paul Cruz, served as one of the co-chairs for the Austin Mayor's Task Force on Institutional Racism & Systemic Inequities. The Task Force's "Education Working Group was charged with exploring and reporting back to [the community] on how institutional racism and systemic inequities manifests in Austin's education system, and who is affected by it.

Through a series of meetings, dialogues, data review and group presentations, [they] discovered that institutional racism and systemic inequities are present throughout our educational system; including the hiring and staffing practices; curriculum and instruction; the unveiled State's accountability measures; admission; access policies and practices; and the pathways and supports for leadership and capacity building for our educators and education leaders." (Mayors Task Force on Institutional Racism Report, page 6)

We continue to support mission inspired changes through a collaborative partnership with the Superintendent, alignment of our actions to our mission, vision, and values through the budget and strategic planning processes, support of the Superintendent's leadership and realization of the Board's expectations regarding community engagement, strategic communication, and excellent customer service.

Together, we are committed to a transparent process with our community and to do what is best for the students of Austin ISD. We look forward to continuing to engage the community for a better and stronger Austin ISD, drafting an equity policy and providing strategic direction in collaboration with the Superintendent and the new Equity Officer.



# Introduction

Since the release of School Changes Version 1.0, the district has begun to recognize the possibilities and infinite solutions in the collective wisdom of historically marginalized groups to solve entrenched systemic problems. District leaders are beginning to understand that financial solvency and social and racial equity are not either/or propositions, but a both/and approach. With a growth mindset and true equitable approach, decisions can be made for a win-win-win for vulnerable children and families, the district and the greater community. Those kinds of decisions require a transformation of leadership and a commitment to disrupting the status quo policies and habitual responses to financial and enrollment challenges that uphold racism in the system—predictable disproportionate harm and displacement of students of color.

The disruption of systemic racism in P–12 education is both a moral and ethical imperative for us as leaders of a system with a legacy of racism that undermines the well-being of children of color. District leaders are in a position to relinquish short-term school closure strategies that uphold the legacy of educational oppression that will not yield the funding needed to change the system for equitable outcomes. Together, with our communities, we must abandon the belief that it is acceptable or conceivable that our most vulnerable children and communities must once again bear the brunt of the district’s financial insolvency.

The Feb. 16, 2019, statement from Austin ISD Board of Trustees President Geronimo Rodriguez, demonstrates that the district is poised for individual and systemic transformation. Change is hard for us as educational leaders, however, we recognize that racial literacy is a required leadership competency to achieve equitable outcomes. As noted, the superintendent served as a co-chair on the Austin Mayor’s Task Force on Institutional Racism and Systemic Inequities. The task force’s final report [https://cityofaustin.github.io/institutional-racism/IRSI\\_Task\\_Force\\_Report-Updated-4-6-17.pdf](https://cityofaustin.github.io/institutional-racism/IRSI_Task_Force_Report-Updated-4-6-17.pdf) underscored “institutional racism and systemic inequity are present throughout our educational system, including access policies and practices.” Those practices are evident in AISD’s decision-making process for school closures.

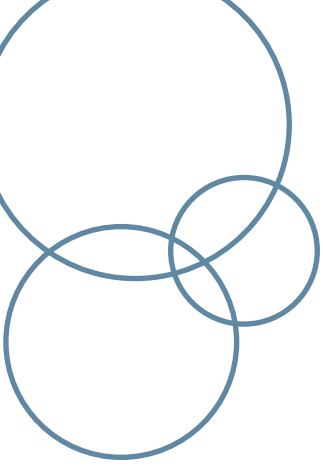
## Gratitude

As Austin ISD’s first equity officer, I have the privilege of conducting and sharing a research-based, student-, staff- and community-informed equity analysis of the school closures proposal process (August–November 2019) that helps reinforces President Rodriguez’s stated commitment “to a transparent process with our community and do what is best for the students of Austin ISD.” This analysis has been developed with the voices of the children and communities who are adversely affected by school closures and who know what is best for their well-being; with the observations, perspectives, perceptions and contributions of the School Changes steering committee members; and with teachers and staff from multiple departments and schools throughout the district.

Thanks to our historically underserved students, families and staff who choose AISD—they continue to have faith in our ability to develop, grow and join with them in co-creation to disrupt our own mindsets, policies and practices that continue to adversely affect them. Kudos to our hard-working teachers, staff, School Changes steering committee members and hundreds of community partners and advocates who are committed to helping the district leverage our talents and expertise to support historically underserved groups and ensure our system works for all students. Thanks to AISD trustees who are taking on the difficult work of leadership transformation for antiracism to ensure equitable outcomes for all students.

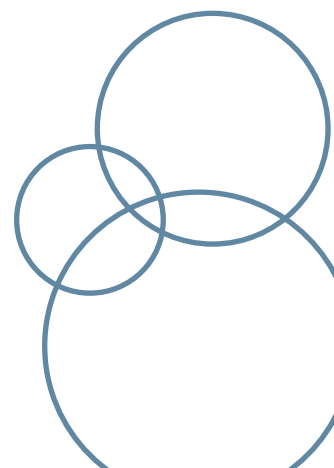
## Purpose

The initial purpose of this report was to provide families, staff, the community and the board of trustees with a summary of an equity analysis of Austin ISD’s school closure proposal and community engagement process since Aug. 1, 2019. The analysis also serves to document actions and strategies we, as leaders committed to as our own individual and collective transformation for equity, can employ. Included in this report are also research-based and community-informed recommendations and my recommendation for leadership transformation for racial equity before high-impact and historic decisions are made about the lives of historically underserved communities and students. The district’s programmatic equity analysis can be found in the appendices of Version 2.0 of the School Changes proposal. This document focuses exclusively on the proposal and community engagement process for school closures over the past three and a half months. This document does not address the proposals related to districtwide programming.



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# Executive Summary

School closures and consolidations are not equity strategies. They are short-term and often short-sighted approaches to cost savings that are seldom reinvested in programming in the very school communities that are displaced and dispossessed. (Green 2019; Olson 2019). National research indicates that this approach does not directly benefit the most vulnerable and historically underserved students and communities. Unfortunately, the school communities that are targeted have the least political and social capital, and students and their families leave unstable educational environments.

According to some AISD staff, the School Changes process began in January 2019. Many community members and many adversely affected communities were not actively involved in conversations about the district's specific financial problems and goals or the design of an inclusive problem-solving process.

A few Maplewood parents said they feel, in retrospect, that the closure process began in earnest for them shortly after the board drafted the guiding principles that would provide direction for the outcomes with racially disproportionate results. The proposed closures as drafted would extend the district's more-than-hundred-year history of racial and economic segregation and once again place the burden on the same communities in east Austin.

The district's financial insolvency, under- and overenrollment as the key problems the district is seeking to solve were not made clear in the early stages of the process, according to staff and community members. District officials conducted no root cause analysis with the school communities between August and November. The School Changes process itself revealed and magnified the lack of trust the community has for the district. School closure recommendations emerged through what some community members perceived as an "opaque process" without a clear methodology or the names of staff and personnel who made the decisions. This contrary to the board president's statement of transparency.

The guiding principles did not aim to address the years of the school to prison pipeline culture for children of color, inequitable disbursement of resources, deep segregation, and most importantly, the specific academic and social emotional needs of students, who have been systemically underserved.

After the release of the first proposal, affected students, families, community and staff were and remain vehemently opposed to both the closure of recommended schools and the lack of clarity about the paternalistic decision-making process. Families who supported the 2017 Bond continue to express dismay and mistrust of district feeling "tricked" into supporting the bond program to hear "in less than two years, my school is closing? That makes no sense." [Pecan Springs parent]. Many said they believed that the district had a growth mentality for east Austin.

The lack of clarity about the methodology used to identify schools for closure created anger and outrage after the release of Version 1.0 at many of the community engagement meetings. Consequently, district officials expended and continue to expend an inordinate amount of time answering basic questions, including but not limited to:

1. Why were these particular schools selected?
2. Who was involved in the selection process?
3. What data sources and points were used for decision-making?
4. How much money is the district trying to save?
5. Why are the schools disproportionately Hispanic and Black?
6. Why is the community given so little time to actually co-create to develop solutions that do not involve closures?
7. What happened to the implementation of both the 2013 and 2017 bond programs?
8. How was history used to make the decisions?
9. Why was the proposal rolled out in such a clandestine way in September 2019?
10. How are school closures equity?
11. Have you not helped our children for years so you could sell the land from under their school community?

Staff continue to struggle to answer the questions and challenges the public poses in open community engagement meetings, with email and phone calls.

Between the development of versions 1.0 and 2.0, the board engaged in six hours of introductory antiracist and cultural proficiency training and practiced applying an equity framework to policies they selected. The School Changes steering committee engaged in 12 hours of training. A toolkit was customized to help staff practice using an equity analysis for the evaluation of scenarios. Board members and staff were exposed to key concepts to promote shared language. The staff used one equity analysis tool to collectively analyze the non-closure related programs and initiatives. Staff were given a racial history in education timeline and multiple studies about the effects of closures on communities of color and the academic, social and emotional well-being of low-income and students of color in similar urban school districts.

## **District Learning Opportunities: Undoing AISD White Supremacy Culture through the School Closures Process**

The district, as a whole, is learning how to recognize many white supremacy cultural practices and unaddressed assumptions of superiority: the paternalism/know-it-allness of dominant culture leadership that upholds a belief that white people (and people of color) with systemic power have all the answers or the one right answer and know exactly what is best for economically disadvantaged families and poor people of color in east Austin. As a district, we are re-examining why the most historically undersupported and vulnerable student populations must predictably continue to bear the burden of decades of district neglect and lack of vision. A broad vision is necessary to implement multi-year strategies that increase enrollment and support multicultural environments that are proven to help students of all backgrounds.

As leaders, we are eliminating white supremacy's either/or thinking, "We must close schools or do nothing." We are learning that communities are a vast source of viable solutions that support the district's goals. We are also relinquishing habits of toxic elitism that value hoarding information as we did with the rollout of Version 1.0, resulting in the exclusion of our key staff and historically underserved families. White supremacy culture avoids open conflict and we are learning how to civilly engage with communities who do not agree with our tactics and goals. Our families and communities are pushing us into an authentic growth mindset for greater vision.

## **Self-Reflection and a Growth Mindset**

Our community is our mirror to show us how they have experienced us over time and how they are currently experiencing us as an organization. We are an educational institution that is growing and learning and committed to antiracism—proactively disrupting individual and collective policies and practices that result in the same groups being harmed and the same groups benefiting. School closures are an opportunity for organizational self-examination and course correction to ensure the most historically underserved groups receive the support they deserve, particularly as the city of Austin is growing.

In addition to an equity analysis, I make recommendations for the way forward using tools from a seasoned social justice organization, and provide both community and research-informed recommendations to support more equity-focused approaches to the financial and enrollment deficits and challenges.

## **Why did the Steering Committee Engage in an Educational Equity Analysis of School Changes Version 1.0?**

*After the rollout of Version 1.0 and the resistance from communities who complained of inequitable, top-down and oppressive decision-making, the AISD team decided to analyze our work through an equity lens because of the reasons listed below and the need to develop our equity lens and humility:*

1. The social, emotional, physical and academic well-being of historically underserved students were not the articulated priorities of the Guiding Principles, the process and the proposal overall.
2. A research-focused equity framework did not inform the process.



3. The problems School Changes sought to “solve” were not clearly articulated beyond finances and facilities.
4. Measurable goals and strategies were not clearly defined within an antiracist, inclusive and equity framework with genuine co-creation with adversely affected school communities.
5. Proposed scenarios were not aimed at interrogating and disrupting the system’s current policies and practices that produce predictable inequities among multiple historically underserved student groups and their communities.
6. Shrinking enrollment in many East Austin schools did not allow the Target Utilization Plans to be fully realized, and while recruitment and marketing efforts exist, funding and support has wavered.
7. Achieving educational equity as defined by the board of trustees was not evident.
8. More than 100 years of the city of Austin and AISD systemic racism and current research were not discussed or factored into closure proposals.
9. AISD held districtwide meetings; however, the district did not intentionally, strategically and actively engage three of the most disproportionately affected communities: Black, Hispanic and immigrant communities, and the families of students receiving special education services.
10. Language diverse communities have not been well-served throughout the process, i.e. through engagement, event translation irregularities, document translation and distribution.
11. Diverse communities of all racial backgrounds helped to pass the 2017 Bond, and several parents expressed a lack of trust in the district because of the lack of follow-through on the bond and then the “clandestine” rollout of the School Changes document on back-to-school night for many schools.

## How Did We Prepare to Draft Version 2.0?

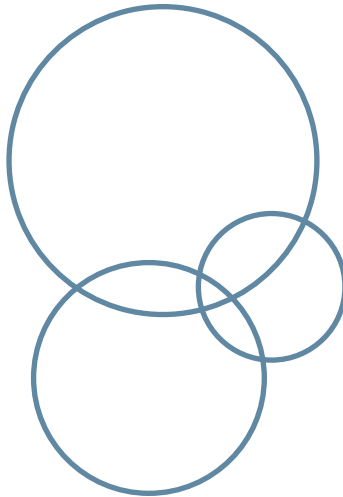
*As district leaders, we began learning how better to include many of our staff who had been originally excluded from the process. Among many activities, we read relevant research and further disaggregated student demographic data to learn about the students who would possibly experience closures. We studied the history of each of the schools slated for closure and, most importantly, identified the problems we were seeking to solve beyond finances and facilities.*

1. Actively engaged our principals and cabinet members.
2. Engaged our Cultural Proficiency and Inclusiveness office to research the district’s racial history and prepare the team to engage the community in non-hierarchical leadership approaches.
3. Engaged and listened to some of our affected school communities during times based on the principals’ recommendations.
4. Disaggregated outcomes data to identify historically underserved groups.
5. Identified and articulated specific problems we are seeking to solve.
6. Reviewed research from the University of Texas, University of Southern California and Columbia Teachers College researchers and others to learn about the effects of closures on student learning and student-teacher relationships.
7. Steering committee members participated in introductory equity development and training.
8. Engaged our board of trustees in an orientation to leadership for antiracism, inclusion, cultural proficiency, recognizing white supremacy culture traits and exploring equity at the policy level.
9. Analyzed the presence of white supremacy cultural traits in the School Changes process and AISD culture and communications at the senior level.
10. Analyzed the scenarios with a basic equity framework.
11. Analyzed proposed consolidations and closures with basic student and equity-centered framework.
12. Clearly identified the district’s problems that contribute to the loss of students.
  - a. Austin ISD has been failing to meet the social, emotional, physical and academic needs of historically underserved students for more than 50 years.
  - b. Discrimination and favoritism in the district have resulted in segregated schools that follow the pattern of a historically segregated city.
  - c. Limited funds restrict the district’s ability to invest in the academic core, developing leaders and teachers, and districtwide programming.

## Antiracist Leadership & Equity Development Concepts

The board of trustees and the staff were oriented and introduced to the concepts and frameworks listed below with opportunities to discuss and apply some of the instruments to the school consolidations and closures proposals.

1. Equity Leadership Inclusive Mental Model
2. Educational Equity Definition from the National Equity Project
3. Equity Principles from the Center for Urban Education, University of Southern California
4. Equity framework, strategies and actions
5. Antiracist principles and decision-making
6. Tools for talking about race
7. Implicit bias and assumptions
8. White supremacy cultural traits
9. Overview of national historical context of legalized systemic racism
10. Policy framework for racial and social equity
11. Basic toolkit for analysis of practices, policies and decisions
12. School closure and consolidation research





# Analysis Methods & Instruments

Over the past three months, I have observed and listened in on more than 30 community engagement conversations and spoken directly with a little more than 100 students, teachers, staff, AISD alumni, administrators, community leaders and local and national researchers to learn about their perspectives, expectations, experiences and studies with and about educational equity, inclusion and the effects of school closures on vulnerable children. I have learned so much as I've responded to dozens of phone calls, emails and letters expressing concern, confusion and a desire to co-create with the district to solve AISD's problems with more than school closures as the ultimate answer to financial challenges.

Most importantly, the research, dialogue and interviews contributed to the development of a proposed equity and inclusion framework with specific research-based strategies to guide the equity officer in the development of an office that can help the entire district build its capacity.

Multiple research-based and research-informed instruments and questionnaires exist to assess and evaluate processes for equity. Frameworks and tools were selected that trustees and staff were exposed to during initial training sessions:

1. The working draft of the proposed AISD equity framework;
2. National Equity Project's educational equity definition;
3. Equity by Design planning process;
4. Five Equity by Design principles from the University of Southern California's Center for Urban Education; and
5. The role and presence of whiteness in the process.

## I. Proposed AISD Equity Framework

### A. Develop antiracist and culturally responsive leaders.

- Board members, senior leaders and steering committee participated in an orientation and introduction session to antiracist leadership and cultural proficiency and inclusiveness concepts development.
- Staff were able to practice applying equity analysis tools to Version 1.0 scenarios; board members were able to apply the framework to policies of their choosing.
- Steering committee and administrators were exposed to the following concepts: antiracism, educational equity definition, equity by design, white supremacy cultural traits.
- **Timeline did not allow for continued development before the Nov. 18, 2019, board vote.**

### B. Transparent communication with all stakeholders

- Between September and November, community engagement staff met with affected school communities.
- **During the rollout of Version 1.0, the proposed closures were not shared with principals, teachers and affected communities. Families and communities made discoveries about the proposal through media.**
- **According to staff, Version 1.0 of the document was oversimplified and did not include the specific problems the district was seeking to solve, did not discuss the root cause of the problems the district created over time in economically disadvantaged Black and Brown communities.**

### C. Data collection and use

- Twenty-eight points of data were used to determine the schools on the closure list.
- Disaggregated student demographic data were analyzed and discussed as a part of the development of Version 2.0.
- **Many community members expressed disagreements with sources, consistency and accuracy of the data used for decision-making.**

### D. Develop and implement antiracist policies and practices.

- Staff have begun designing the necessary long-range and inclusive planning for spring 2020 that will allow the strong implementation of antiracist interactions, broad inclusion, decision-making and practices to avoid either/or decision-making practices.

- **Time constraints and lack of access to leadership development for racial and social equity did not permit the team to develop and implement robust antiracist language, policies and decision-making to select schools for closures and to intentionally design an antiracist process for development and drafting of the proposal.**

**E. Engage students and families.**

- Families throughout the district were invited and engaged in the spring and summer community engagement series.
- Affected communities were invited for co-creation after the release of versions 1.0 and 2.0.
- **Students were minimally and not deliberately involved in the community engagement conversations.**
- **Families were not told about the specific data points that led to the identified problems and were not given the data.**
- **Students and families were not included in the development of closure proposals for Version 1.0.**

**F. Engage all communities, particularly historically underserved.**

- All the affected school communities were given opportunities to engage in dialogue about the proposed closures on a date and time determined by the principals
- **Spanish translations (and other language translations) of documents have not been readily available because of time constraints and limited personnel.**
- **Some Spanish-language fliers had some incorrect information.**
- **Asian immigrant families are being marginalized throughout the process and with day-to-day communications with their children’s teachers.**
- **Limited numbers of Black families were engaged during the community engagement process.**

**G. Apply research and evidence-based practices.**

- The team analyzed Version 1.0 scenarios through a research-based equity lens.
- **AISD did not use an equity-centered process to determine the closures.**
- **AISD did not conduct research on the history of inequities experienced by each of the selected school communities.**
- **Not in consideration: Most research on school closures has found that there is no substantial savings and that these strategies do not support student success.**

**H. Ensure pervasive CP&I development.**

- AISD has begun planning and budgeting, as a part of the School Changes process, to gradually increase the professional development opportunities throughout the district.
- **Decision-makers in the closures process were not and have not been engaged in ongoing Cultural Proficiency & Inclusiveness training.**

**I. Provide culturally responsive teaching.**

- **Students in the affected schools have not been engaged in culturally responsive teaching—or CRT—or culturally responsive engagement dialogues.**

**J. Ensure equity-focused assessment, strategic planning, evaluation and budget allocations.**

- As a part of the process to draft Version 2.0, the team analyzed demographic data, identifying historically underserved groups, including but not limited to, students identified as Asian/Asian Pacific Islander, Black, differently abled, economically disadvantaged, English learners, Hispanic, homeless, indigenous, LGBTQ and students receiving special education services.
- **Guiding principles were not focused on eliminating racial disparities in student outcomes or the increased racial and social integration of students.**
- **The closure proposals were developed with a financial and facility focus, and specifically consolidations, because of 8,000 empty seats.**
- **No root cause analysis of the district’s responsibility for enrollment shortfalls was conducted between September and November 2019.**

## AISD Equity Framework Analysis Summary

Board members and senior staff demonstrate a willingness to face the past and present effects of race and racism on our individual and collective mindsets and our decision-making. Many leaders have participated in and have reserved seats in the district's Cultural Proficiency and Inclusiveness office's learning experiences. The district is leaning forward to have crucial and courageous conversations. These conversations would help the district reckon with its past and make decisions that disrupt unconscious individual bias and refrain from upholding racist policies and practices.

Ongoing immersive leadership development of a racial and social equity lens is needed for antiracist decision-making. Despite great intentions, we decision-makers proposed closures that continue paternalistic and either/or thinking ("It's school closures or no change!") that history teaches us perpetuate racially and economically disparate outcomes that predictably harm and benefit the same groups.

Strong community engagement from predominantly white families with the agency and social capital to confront the district in multiple venues has been educational for us. As district leaders, we are still challenged to initiate, engage and sustain dialogue with Black and immigrant communities before and beyond School Changes.

The district is on its way to developing a race equity lens, and ongoing community engagement that dismantles hierarchy and promotes decision-making beyond either/or thinking.

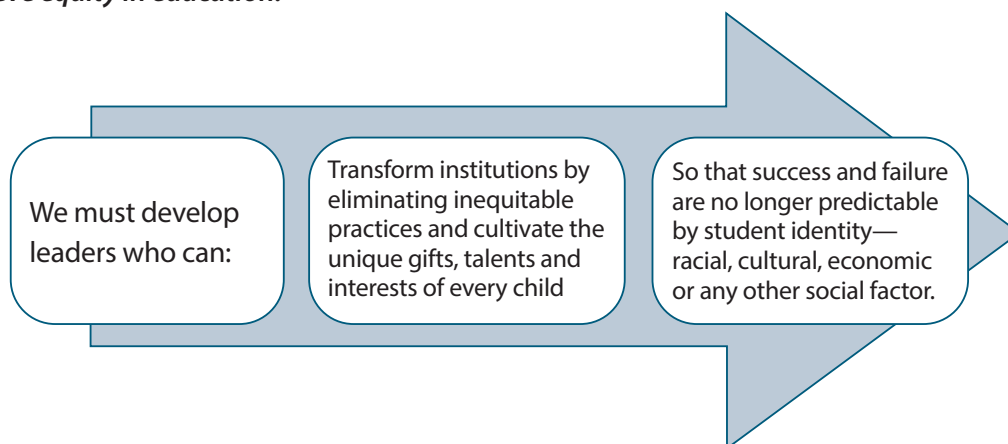
## II. Educational Equity Analysis

In 2016, the Cultural Proficiency & Inclusiveness office adopted the definition below and the AISD Board of Trustees president reiterated the district's adoption of the definition. The analysis below is an examination of the ways school closures support the necessary action for educational equity.

***Educational equity means that all children receive what they need to develop to their full academic and social potential. Working toward equity in schools involves:***

- ***Ensuring equally high outcomes for all participants in our educational system; removing the predictability of success or failures that currently correlates with any social or cultural factor;***
- ***Interrupting [Disrupting] inequitable practices, examining biases and creating inclusive multicultural school environments for adults and children; and***
- ***Discovering and cultivating the unique gifts, talents and interests that every human possesses.***

***To achieve equity in education:***



<https://nationalequityproject.org/>

## Key Questions & Reflections

1. **In what ways are school closures ensuring students are getting what they need to develop to their full academic and social potential?**

At this juncture, a specific analysis and plans have not been developed around the needs of students in schools proposed for closure. Schools were selected because of maintenance costs, physical conditions, enrollment and other financial and facilities-related factors. The rollout of the plan has reportedly had a detrimental effect on the academic, social and emotional well-being of children, families and teachers, some who have been repeatedly displaced by the district's proposed closures over several years.

2. **How are school closures ensuring equally high outcomes for all participants in our educational system; removing the predictability of success or failures that currently correlates with any social or cultural factor?**

School closures are not designed to ensure the establishment of equally high outcomes. Research by Green, Lowe and Olsen indicates that many students suffer academically for years after school closures.

3. **How are school closures interrupting [disrupting] inequitable practices, examining biases, and creating inclusive multicultural school environments for adults and children?**

School closures do not disrupt inequitable practices that created the conditions necessitating closures, and the district has not yet examined our individual collective biases through the decision-making process.

Paternalism remains a persistent attitude by leaders who "believe they know best" for communities of color and economically disadvantaged communities in order to realize cost savings to reinvest into programming. AISD's school closures are designed for cost savings, but not for multicultural or integrated school environments. Most, not all, proposed closures consolidate homogenous racial and socioeconomic groups.

4. **How do school closures develop leaders for institutional transformation for equitable outcomes?**

Closures do not develop leaders for institutional transformation. Closures of predominantly Black and Brown schools as the only strategy are perceived by many families and organizations as a reflection of the leadership's mindset and inability to collaborate for better solutions.

## Educational Equity Summary

Before embarking on School Changes, the leadership and key staff did not engage in the ongoing and intentional strategies to address race and racism. Assumptions of objectivity were made as the district used 28 data points to identify the schools recommended for closure to free up funds to reinvest in programs to support underserved students.

After-school programs, teacher development and others are beneficial to students who are actually able to access them. However, research by the Aspen Institute on Leading for Racial Equity, the Center for Urban Education, and the National Equity Project overwhelmingly find that systemic and cultural change, i.e. leadership development for equity, data collection and use, and culturally responsive teaching have more of an effect on educational equity systemwide than do special programs that take time to scale appropriately.

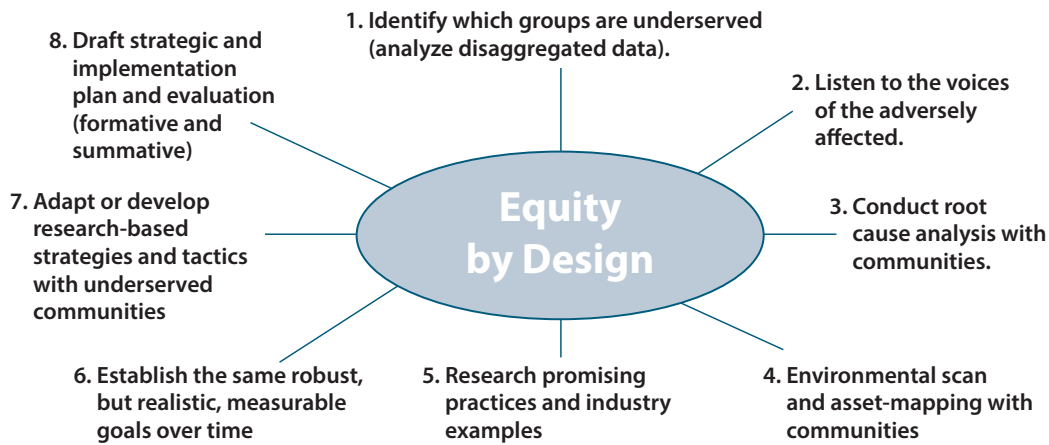
## III. Equity by Design

*"Equity lives in the details of execution."*

*—Dr. Louis Gomes,*

*University of Southern California, Center for Urban Education*

Throughout the process, leaders and staff were exposed to an Equity by Design approach and method for systemic problem-solving. The model has been developed over many years with educational equity researchers, families, students and nonprofit organizations in central Texas. It is a model that will be deliberately implemented in the appropriate decision-making processes in the future. The school closures process is also examined through the equity and inclusion process diagrammed on the following page.



1. The process began with an ongoing financial crisis, 8,000 empty seats, underenrolled schools on the east side of the district and overcrowding the west side of the district. The intense focus on the historically adversely affected students began after the schools were selected for closure, hence seeking caps on the percentage of students experiencing closures. The 28 points of data used by staff for decision-making are currently in dispute by many community groups because the district's methodology was not transparent.
2. The voices of the adversely affected school communities were intentionally engaged after the school closure list was publicized.
3. Root cause analysis was not conducted with the affected communities between September and November.
4. Environmental scans were not taken to determine which cultural and neighborhood assets and global businesses could partner with each of the schools on the list to avoid displacement and dispossession of historically underserved populations.
5. The district did not identify and use the practices of urban districts preparing for growth in the urban core.
6. No specific, measurable student outcomes or measurable goals were established for each of the closures.
7. No research-based strategies and tactics were adapted or adopted to deeply engage communities with authentic problem-solving around persistent financial and enrollment problems between September and November.
8. Multiple community groups are in the process of developing alternative plans, instead of co-creating with the district.

## IV. Five Principles for Creating Equity by Design

*During initial leadership for equity training, both the administrators and trustees were exposed to the University of Southern California's Center for Urban Education's equity design principle. **How were the equity principles evident in the school closure decision-making process?***

**Principle I: Clarity in language, goals and measures is vital to effective equitable practices.**

*Clear language, goals and measures were not evident in Version 1.0 of the School Changes document. In Version 2.0, staff included much of the demographic and disaggregated student outcomes data and multiple data points that informed decisions. Version 2.0 continues to lack the goals and measures needed for authentic and equitable practices.*

**Principle II: 'Equity-mindedness' should be the guiding paradigm for language and action.** Equity-mindedness refers to the perspective or mode of thinking exhibited by practitioners who call attention to patterns of inequity in student outcomes. These practitioners are willing to take personal and institutional responsibility for the success of their students and critically reassess their own practices. It also requires that practitioners are race-conscious and aware of the social and historical context of exclusionary practices in American education. (adapted from the University of Southern California's Center for Urban Education <https://cue.usc.edu/about/equity/equity-mindedness/>) *Throughout the process, the district has not had the time to critically reassess its own practices. As leaders, we have grown more race-conscious and able to begin to develop a common language around racial and social equity. Trustees and leaders*

have reviewed and begun putting the recommended school closures in the social and historical contexts needed for equity-mindedness and equitable outcomes for historically underserved groups.

**Principle III: Equitable practices and policies are designed to accommodate differences in the contexts of student treatment—not to treat all students the same.**

Throughout the school closure process, the accommodation of school differences and student needs has not been apparent. Education specifications (ed specs) appear to be applied regardless of the history, demographics and expressed needs of the different school communities.

**Principle IV: Enacting equity requires a continual process of learning, disaggregating data and questioning assumptions about relevance and effectiveness.**

The short timeline has not allowed district staff to learn from the community in meaningful ways. Because some staff have determined through either/or thinking that school closures are the one and only way to reach solvency, it has been difficult for us to question our assumptions and value alternative solutions that do not include closures

**Principle V: Equity must be enacted as a pervasive institution- and system-wide principle.**

School closure decision-makers had not been exposed to the concept of Equity by Design principles that require equity as a system-wide principle during the period recommendations were made for school closures. When equity becomes pervasive, leaders will naturally interrogate their own thinking and decisions.

## V. Examine the Presence & Role of Whiteness

National educational equity leader and author Glenn Singleton supports organizations and helps teachers and leaders examine the presence and role of whiteness through the Courageous Conversations protocol (Singleton 2015).

Without recognizing the organizational behaviors that uphold white dominance, educational leaders continue to solve problems from the same mindset. Staff and trustees learned the traits of white supremacy culture and the ways the behaviors uphold policies and practices that result in inequitable outcome. How have and are the traits of white culture affecting the school closure process?

<b>White Supremacy Characteristics of Organizations</b> <a href="http://www.dismantlingracism.org/uploads/4/3/5/7/43579015/whitesupcul13.pdf">www.dismantlingracism.org/uploads/4/3/5/7/43579015/whitesupcul13.pdf</a>	<b>Closures Process (Leadership, communications &amp; community engagement, pervasive messages)</b>
<b>Perfectionism</b>	People must perform without error; mistakes and scapegoating dampen creativity and risk-taking; point out inadequacies  <i>Community proposals have not been brought up for full team discussion, dismissed because they were not perfect</i>
<b>Sense of urgency</b>	Hurrying, rushing and excluding others, failing to set up reasonable deadlines, failure to plan, destructive to relationships, destructive to collective problem-solving; sacrifice allies  <i>Manufactured timelines of “having to close schools and vote by November” does not allow for co-creation or humane process for staff to do their best work; principals left out of decisions for Version 1.0; consistent inadvertent exclusion of talented staff with diverse perspectives</i>
<b>Defensiveness</b>	Organization spends energy protecting power; try to avoid being blamed, criticism of those in power seen as threatening; disagreement with majority not acceptable  <i>Community engagement meetings, demonstrations of frustrations and “victimhood” of those in power, criticism of those with no power</i>
<b>Quantity over quality</b>	Little or no value attached to process; discomfort with emotion, no recognition when conflicts with content and process  <i>Steering committee meeting agendas unclear, pop-up meetings, decisions made and relayed, but not explored and explained, exclusion of those with less organizational power, no time for “whole” adult in meetings; consistent exclusion</i>



<b>White Supremacy Characteristics of Orgs., cont.</b> <a href="http://www.dismantlingracism.org/uploads/4/3/5/7/43579015/whitesupcul13.pdf">www.dismantlingracism.org/uploads/4/3/5/7/43579015/whitesupcul13.pdf</a>	<b>Closures Process (Leadership, communications &amp; community engagement, pervasive messages)</b>
<b>Worship of the written word</b>	<p>Organization only values written word, only one right way, something is wrong with those who don't adapt to written mode.</p> <p><i>Community alternatives must be written; no opportunities for face-to-face co-creation to avoid closures; communities without time, social capital have less access to power.</i></p>
<b>Paternalism</b>	<p>Decision-making is clear to those in power and unclear to those without power, those with power think they know best for those without power</p> <p><i>Community does not know what methods were used to select schools for closure; leaders insist schools "have" to close; leaders insist they know best and change is hard (for the same groups of people for decades)</i></p>
<b>Either/or thinking</b>	<p>No sense that things can be "both, and," win-win, difficult to learn from mistakes, simplify complex things</p> <p><i>Leaders believe closing schools is the only answer; not closing school means no change; cannot see a "third" way of problem-solving with communities over time</i></p>
<b>Power hoarding</b>	<p>No sharing of power, those in power threatened by changes for shared power, those in power don't see themselves as power- and information-hoarders, make secretive decisions, ambush those with less power, assume they have the best interest of people with less power or people of color</p> <p><i>Proposals for closures were "dropped" on families with the least amount of power via the media; principals and staff with limited to no power discover district's proposals for closures; perceived "false" empathy, listening with no intention to change as leaders</i></p>
<b>Fear of open conflict</b>	<p>People in power scared of conflict; people are blamed for raising uncomfortable issues, emphasis on being polite</p> <p><i>Some leaders didn't attend meetings or became uncomfortable, defensive and argumentative with those who have no power; leaders are perceived as "nice,"—not listening or seeking alternatives, merely listening with no intention to co-create</i></p>
<b>Individualism</b>	<p>Little comfort working as a team, decisions made by one person or a limited number of people</p> <p><i>Perpetual patterns in meetings indicate some have power and information. District gives options to principals for meeting times instead of vice versa; need more team meetings with school communities beyond district-controlled events</i></p>
<b>Progress</b>	<p>Bigger, more, constant expansion, accumulation overlooks quality and humanity in daily processes; organization wants credit for expansion without adding value to those with limited or no power</p> <p><i>Building new schools for people who value the school community; new buildings are more valued by administrators; need "both, and," school communities and new buildings</i></p> <p><i>Decision-makers cannot see the racism in decision-making, may believe in objective decisions or "we're doing something good for historically underserved children."</i></p>
<b>Right to comfort</b>	<p>Scapegoating those perceived to cause discomfort, equating individual acts of kindness to whites as the equivalent of systemic racism, afraid of the discomfort of growth</p> <p><i>Persistent questions from community members and staff are not addressed or included when leaders are made uncomfortable by subjects and topics; leaders who do not want to discuss the lack of racial and social equity in school closures decisions.</i></p>



## Toward Equity AND Financial Solvency

The AISD Board of Trustees' president noted in his Feb. 16, 2019, statement that the district would follow the Mayor's Task Force on Institutional Racism and Systemic Inequities report that underscores the importance of the development of strong, culturally conscious and collaborative leaders. The mayor's task force report has informed the work of AISD's equity office. Racial literacy is a competency that is crucial to antiracist decision-making.

### **The district must consider and support actually co-creating solutions with the goal of eliminating school closures as an option for the city's most vulnerable communities and a means to short-term financial health.**

As the district's equity officer, I recommend that *before any* closures are considered as the *only* means to financial solvency, board members, staff and all district advisory committee members participate in 24–36 hours of racial and social equity training. This training would specifically include Undoing Racism sessions to understand how socialization, schooling, beliefs, patterns and behaviors result in the predictable detrimental effects on students and communities of color in Austin.

This ongoing training and development would be conducted to help the district as a whole develop the necessary capacity, equity-mindedness and skills crucial to disrupting systemic racism and individual implicit bias that always disproportionately harms and affects students who are Black, Brown, low-income, placed in Special Education, immigrants and marginalized groups who we have underserved over time.

With the continual transformation of the unconscious bias to which all leaders—regardless of race and socioeconomic background—have been socialized, we will be better prepared to make life-altering and historic decisions to support the well-being of the most vulnerable students and communities. We will be ready to develop a growth mindset and a culture of visioning *with* the community that ensures that more than 8,000 seats are filled year after year as the city of Austin's urban population increases as projected. Most importantly, we will be prepared to rebuild the trust that we need to serve all our students, families and the community.

## Possible Solutions Beyond 'To Close or Not to Close'

Currently, our individual and collective mindsets as leaders allow us to see school closures as the only solution to financial insolvency and inefficiency. In some ways, decision-makers appear to believe it is time to close schools no matter what additional information, research, data, evidence and ideas from the community are presented to the contrary.

It may be through leadership development for racial and social equity, servant leadership and adaptive leadership, that leaders see the possibilities beyond either/or thinking. We may be able to solve social justice *and* financial issues. It is possible that we do not have to choose one or the other. Developing hearts and minds for authentic collaboration may help us to identify better solutions than the top-down, white supremacy culture to which we have all been socialized. We will have to eliminate the constant urgency, paternalism—we always know best and there is only one right way—and other characteristics of white supremacy.

## Community & Research-Informed Recommendations & Considerations for Closures

1. To establish a basic understanding of how equity affects the district's decision-making and policy development, it is recommended that an equity audit be conducted of academics, finance, facilities and all bond projects in the past decade. The assessment should be conducted by an external auditor.
2. Develop leadership with a growth mindset and long-term thinking to deliberately and intentionally partner with communities to increase enrollment. Develop multi-year, strategic, measurable, aggressive and equitable goals for enrollment and student success.
3. Ensure all proposals are informed by community, history and appropriate and current research that promote supporting the physical, social and emotional health and academic achievement of all students, particularly

the most underserved and vulnerable populations that have been displaced and dispossessed by other systems for a century.

4. Ensure historically underserved students and ALL students receive instruction and support from highly qualified and culturally proficient teachers and staff throughout and after any consolidation and closure process.
5. Eliminate disruption or destabilization of learning environments for the most vulnerable students, including but not limited to students identified as economically disadvantaged, English learners, students placed in Special Education and students who are differently abled.
6. Ensure boundaries and feeder patterns are first changed to alleviate any issues with underenrollment and overcrowding to minimize consolidations and closures that adversely affect historically underserved groups.
7. Redirect bond funding as necessary to ensure the repair, restoration or modernization of the facilities that support disproportionate numbers of historically underserved groups.
8. Partner with vertical teams and campus advisory councils to determine how disparities in enrollment, academic achievement, facilities and finances can be addressed or mitigated.
9. Keep all stakeholders involved and apprised of the process, decision-making methodology, emerging strategies, proposals and recommendations throughout the process with transparent communication.
10. Show the community what multiple, community-informed alternatives were sought if consolidations and closures are deemed necessary.

## Many Ways Forward: Building Relationships with an Antiracist Lens

While there are no recipes or algorithms to achieve equitable outcomes in education, the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, a 35-year-old organization, has pointed the way for organizational change through proven antiracist practices.

### Undoing Racism Principles

[www.pisab.org/our-principles](http://www.pisab.org/our-principles)

Racism is the single most critical barrier to building effective coalitions for social change. Racism has been consciously and systematically erected, and it can be undone only if people understand what it is, where it comes from, how it functions and why it is perpetuated.

#### Analyzing Power

As a society, we often believe that individuals and/or their communities are solely responsible for their conditions. Through the analysis of institutional power, we can identify and unpack the systems external to the community that create the internal realities that many people experience daily.

#### Developing Leadership

Anti-racist leadership needs to be developed intentionally and systematically within local communities and organizations.

#### Gatekeeping

People who work in institutions often function as gatekeepers to ensure that the institution perpetuates itself. By operating with anti-racist values and networking with those who share those values, and by maintaining accountability in the community, the gatekeeper becomes an agent of institutional transformation.

#### Identifying and Analyzing Manifestations of Racism

Individual acts of racism are supported by institutions and are nurtured by the societal practices such as militarism and cultural racism, which reinforce and perpetuate racism.

#### Learning from History

History is a tool for effective organizing. Understanding the lessons of history allows us to create a more humane future.

#### Maintaining Accountability

To organize with integrity requires that we be accountable to the communities struggling with racist oppression.

## Sharing Culture

Culture is the life support system of a community. If a community's culture is respected and nurtured, the community's power will grow.

## Undoing Internalized Racial Oppression

Internalized racial oppression manifests itself in two forms:

- **Internalized Racial Inferiority**

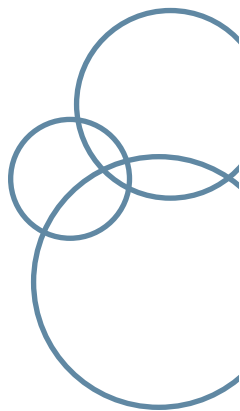
The acceptance of and acting out of an inferior definition of self, given by the oppressor, is rooted in the historical designation of one's race. Over many generations, this process of disempowerment and disenfranchisement expresses itself in self-defeating behaviors.

- **Internalized Racial Superiority**

The acceptance of and acting out of a superior definition is rooted in the historical designation of one's race. Over many generations, this process of empowerment and access expresses itself as unearned privileges, access to institutional power and invisible advantages based upon race.

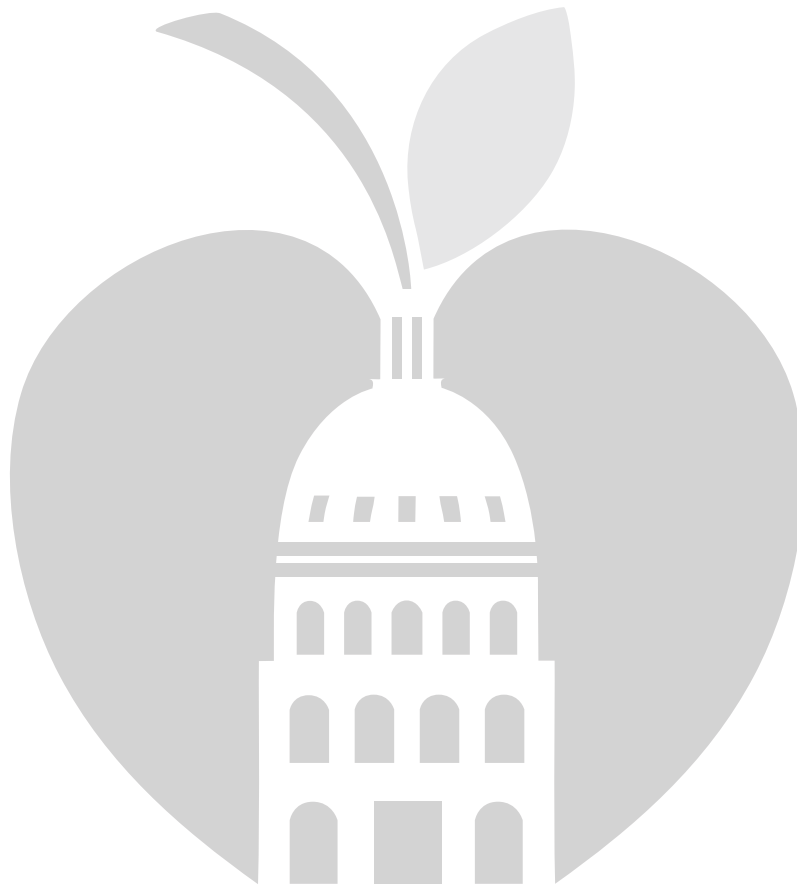
These practices aim to change hearts, minds and behaviors that promote the both/and thinking required for serving as racial and social equity leaders who disrupt the constant violence of disparities in learning outcomes, community displacement and dispossession of the school as a community center. AISD and its diverse communities now have the ability, the political will and a historic opportunity to solve centuries of educational oppression.

The district leadership will make all the difference in whether lessons learned about equity, race, racism and antiracism during the school closures process will lead to equitable outcomes for Austin's historically underserved children.



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**Austin ISD 2019 School Closures Proposal:  
Equity Analysis of  
Process, Principles & Practices**

Chief Equity Officer Stephanie Hawley, Ph.D. | Nov. 14, 2019