Austin school board takes on persistent segregation problem

By [Melissa B. Taboada](#) - American-Statesman Staff

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Highlights

Austin school leaders want to better integrate schools and will start with a pilot program in District 1.

School board members plan to tie the goal to Superintendent Cruz's evaluation.

In more than half of the Austin district's schools, black and Hispanic children make up 90 percent or more of the student body. Fifty schools have 90 percent or more students who are low-income.

And while Austin's white students make up only a quarter of the total, they are the majority in the district's two most coveted magnet programs and at 30 other campuses, most of them on the city's more affluent west side.

A majority of the nine-member school board is now calling for the district's top administrator to do something to address those disparities, which linger more than 30 years after the district — forced to desegregate by a lawsuit — was declared integrated by the courts in 1983.

"We're faced with the same educational challenges that we had in terms of educating kids of color and kids of lower economic status that we had 50, 60, 80, 100 years ago in Austin, Texas," said Austin district Trustee Ted Gordon, who represents District 1 neighborhoods, in East and Northeast Austin, which have some of the highest concentrations of minority students. "To not take up this challenge condemns us to 50 more years of something which I know is morally unacceptable."

Trustees have said previous methods of busing students across town, or an overhaul of boundaries, won't be considered. But they have a few ideas, and are looking to Superintendent Paul Cruz to come up with some more.

While Blackshear Elementary remains underenrolled, the campus has become more diversified after launching a fine arts program in 2014. The student ... read more

An American-Statesman analysis of district demographics shows that:

• The majority of schools with the highest percentage of low-income, black and Latino students are east of Interstate 35.

• Fifty of the district's 116 traditional campuses have 90 percent or more students who are low-income.
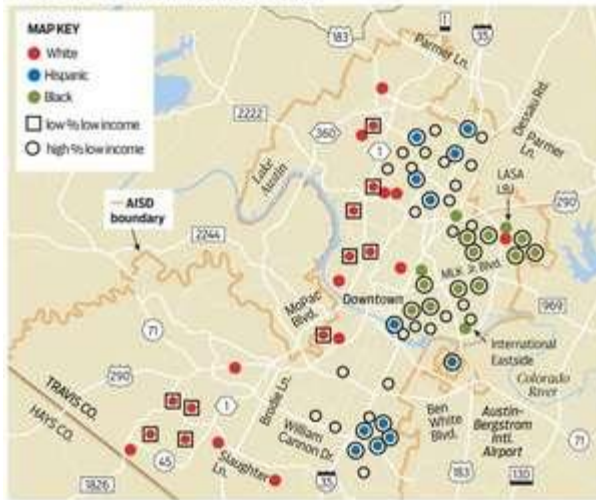
Ronan Henson-Weat, left, talks with Sa'meiyah Roberts and Emmet Villearreal, all third-graders, as they learn the H-E-B cash register at the ... read more

• In 64 schools, white students make up 10 percent or less of the student body.

• The district's prized magnet programs, including the Liberal Arts and Science Academy and Kealing Middle School, are mostly filled with white students from more affluent families. Black students make up just over 1 percent of the two schools.

Any solutions that Cruz and the board can come up with will start with a pilot program in Gordon's district. The trustees have included the goal in Cruz's proposed "scorecard," the measures for his annual performance evaluation in 2017. They will vote on the scorecard on Monday.

Segregation in Austin schools

The Austin school district hopes to tackle long-standing patterns of segregation in schools -- some campuses have more than 95 percent poor and minority students, while the population at other schools is majority white and has few low-income students.

Note: This map shows concentrations of black, Latino and white students in the Austin district. It highlights campuses with 16 percent or more black students (overall district average is 8 percent) or 50 percent or more white students (overall district average is about 25 percent) or more than 90 percent Latino students (overall district average is 59 percent). Campuses with especially high (90 percent or more) or low (10 percent or less) concentrations of poor students are also shown.

Source: Texas Education Agency, Austin school district — LINDA SCOTT / STAFF   Linda Scott

While 67 percent of the Austin district's students are Hispanic and black, there remains a largely east-west divide, for which some ... read more

"I can't support segregated schools," Trustee Gina Hinojosa said. "I can't let it go. I feel like it's a moral imperative. … I believe it is a statement of our values to say it's 2016 and to have segregated schools is not acceptable to this board."

Integration was slow in Austin, with the district reluctant to comply with the 1954 Supreme Court school desegregation decision Brown v. Board of Education. Volma Overton, then-president of the NAACP Austin branch, and the U.S. Justice Department prevailed against the Austin school district in a lawsuit that led to a court-ordered busing program that carried students to and from white and black neighborhoods.

Small steps so far

The racial and economic disparities affect students in a number of ways, big and small. For example, the Statesman recently revealed that the majority of the schools in Austin's low-income neighborhoods get little to no recess time, while the children at more than 80 percent of the district's more affluent elementary campuses get daily unstructured play time.

Trustees said the persisting segregation could possibly be addressed by placing high-demand academic programs into schools with high percentages of students who are poor, Latino or black, in hopes that more middle-class and white students will transfer into them.

The district has had some success already in diversifying campuses.

Five years ago, Blackshear Elementary had 236 students, with less than 1 percent white, 66 percent Hispanic and 31 percent black. About 98 percent of students were low-income. One year after launching a fine arts program there in 2014, the school grew by about 55 students, the percentage of low-income students dropped to 81 percent, and percentage of white students attending increased to nearly 10 percent.

At Becker Elementary, a dual language program helped boost enrollment as well as reducing the number of low-income students from 67 percent to 49 percent.

But district officials admit low enrollment is still a problem at both campuses, and programs at many other campuses haven't led to significant gains in diversity.

Warned of blowback

A few trustees have been reluctant to include the integration goal in the superintendent's evaluation**.**

"This is a very worthy goal that we should be pursuing, but it's a very complex measure to execute in that there are so many layers of transportation, funding, makeups of different districts, distance of traffic within our city," Trustee Yasmin Wagner said. "I think it begs some exploration before we codify it as a distinct goal."

Cruz said if the goal is adopted as part of his evaluation scorecard Monday, the first step will be to form a planning team of parents and staff.

"That team will gather data, conduct an analysis and develop a plan of action," he said. "We believe there are many issues impacting District 1 schools, including housing affordability, changing demographics and higher academic expectations."

Michael Casserly, executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools, a network of urban districts that advocates for inner-city students, has challenged the school board to consider whether the administration has the tools to make progress and whether trustees were prepared to withstand community pushback.

"I'm trying to be real about what it is you create," Casserly told board members. "I'd hate to see, even with a perfectly laudable goal and moral imperative, that you set your administration up where they couldn't make progress on it in a way the board could withstand politically. … I just want to make sure the question is on the table, either diplomatically or undiplomatically, that you think about what you're willing to put on the line for it."

Austin district demographics

Total students: 84,191

White: 25.8 percent

Hispanic: 59.6 percent

African-American: 8 percent

American Indian: 0.2 percent

Asian: 3.7 percent

Pacific Islander: 0.1 percent

Two or more races: 2.7 percent

Low income: 59.9 percent

Source: Texas Education Agency 2015 data